

(In)Security: From Thick Signifier to Empty Signifier

Written by Ana Isabel Rodríguez Iglesias

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This article departs from the ontological proposal of Jef Huysmans[1] around the meaning of security, focusing not in the concept or the conceptual analysis of 'security' but rather approaching it as a 'thick signifier' that searches for the political work of security, i.e. how it determines social relations. Huysmans proposes to look into the meaning of security as a research agenda itself. Departing from his account, this paper aims at expanding the reflection about the construction of the meaning of security from a poststructuralist approach and for that it draws from the discourse theory and the concept of 'empty signifier' developed by Laclau and Mouffe.[2] An empty signifier is a signifier whose meaning is temporarily fixed, and continuously contested and rearticulated, in a political setting determined by power struggles.[3]

To illustrate the theoretical reflection, the paper uses the case study of the humanitarian crisis of the unaccompanied children, mainly from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, increasingly arriving in the US in the last few years. These minors have declared to be fleeing both from the violence of organized crime in their home countries and the lack of economic opportunities, as well as their desire of reunification with their families in some cases. In contrast, the US has portrayed the upsurge of migrants arriving into its territory as a national security issue. As a response to the humanitarian crisis, the US has approved an economic package to back up a series of economic, institutional, and security reforms in the Northern Triangle, known as the Alliance for Prosperity, which has been criticized by local NGOs, US think tanks, experts in the region and human rights activists for being considered a neoliberal package.[4] The meaning that these children grant to '(in)security' through their statements and practices will be briefly contrasted with the discourses and practices of the US by analyzing the discourse formation of the different meanings and the power relations at play. Therefore, the case study will serve as an illustration of the political and practical implications of the indetermination of the signifier '(in)security'.

The argument thus follows that the signifier '(in)security' is a contested concept subject to continuous re-articulation in a power dynamic in which hegemonic actors have the capacity to fix particular meanings that respond to a particular political agenda and which have real impact on the determination of social relations. In this particular case, the US seems to use the insecurity experienced by the Northern Triangle's migrants to expand the counter-narcotic policies already in place and more neoliberal reforms to Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador through an emergency aid package.

Theoretical Framework: From a 'Thick' to an 'Empty' Signifier

The meaning of security has been weakly developed and has been deemed a "contested concept".[5] From the 1980s onwards, many scholars have worked on the expansion and deepening of the field of Security Studies arguing that the focus on the military issues and the state-centric approach was deemed inadequate and limited.[6] Many authors advocated for an expansion of the concept and one of the leading scholars in conducting this task was Barry Buzan who proposed to expand the range of threats – broadening the agenda.[7] In particular Buzan expanded the number of security sectors to five, adding the political, economic, societal, and environmental to the traditional military sector.[8] Buzan still kept the state-centric approach, referring to the state as the main actor to deal with security at the intra-state, state, and international levels. Many others scholars expanded the variety of referent objects to include other non-state actors and place the individual as the minimum unit of analysis – deepening the agenda.[9] In particular, Ken Booth and the School of Critical Security Studies have tried to re-conceptualize security

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and delve into human emancipation from security as the focal point of the discipline. Yet, despite the expansion of the conceptualization of security in terms of sectors and referent objects, Jef Huysmans called the attention to the underdevelopment of the meaning of security and the need to move from a focus on the definition and its conceptual analysis – the general essence of a category and the common denominator that gives sense to a particular research agenda[10] – to an approach focused on the meaning *per se*, understanding security as a ‘thick signifier’.

Huysmans introduces the idea of ‘thick signifier’ to reflect on the non-essentialist character of the term. He draws from Saussure’s notion of the contingent attachment between the signifier (the word, the term) and the signified (the image, the content it evokes). That attachment is constructed through social relations; thus, security is a relational and contingent concept and does not describe an external reality but it interprets it, and by doing it, it constructs reality. For him and the poststructuralist approach, security is a discursive formation (in Foucauldian terms) with a performative character; therefore, uttering security has implications in the social life and constructs meanings. He refers to that operation as ‘thickness’, understood as the performative meaning of security. In particular, he asserts that a thick signifier approach explores “how security language implies a specific metaphysics of life,” “how it organizes particular forms of life” and “how it mediates the relation between life and death”. [11] In that sense, security is self-referential because it does not refer to an external reality but it constitutes that reality itself.

From the thick signifier approach, Huysmans expands the debate on the political work of the signifier “security”. In his book *The Politics of Insecurity. Fear, migration and asylum in the EU*, Huysmans elaborates on the political character of security departing from the Copenhagen School and their interpretation of security as a linguistic act – that securitizes an issue by uttering security statements about it – and from the Paris School and their interpretation of security as a domain of practice – “that is produced and reproduced through socially and politically investing security rationality in policy areas.” [12] From this combination, he argues that security practice is a technique of government in Foucauldian terms. In particular, his approach:

“[...] uses the concept of ‘security technique’ to differentiate [it] from the more linguistic readings that emphasize discourses of danger, speech acts of security, or language games of insecurity. Technique refers simultaneously to (1) a particular method of doing an activity which usually involves practical skills that are developed through training and practice, (2) a mode of procedure in an activity, and (3) the disposition of things according to a regular plan or design [...]” [13]

Huysmans is here trying to distance himself from the linguistic understandings of security; he instead privileges the notion of ‘security practices’, understood as the political product of a ‘security rationality’, which is a frame that invests “a politically and socially instituted historical structure of security meanings”; or in other words:

“[...] the concept refers to the Foucauldian notion of inherited governmental rationalities that are embedded in governmental knowledge, skills, technologies, etc. As a result the focus shifts from language to categories of intelligibility – or logics of practice – that traverses both linguistic and non-linguistic non-governmental practices as well as artifacts”. [14]

Therefore, in this second account on security Huysmans delves into the conceptual analysis of security rather than into the meaning of the signifier. Yet, bringing in the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe, [15] this paper highlights how both the meaning and the conceptual approach are completely interrelated and one cannot be understood without the other: in other words, the ontology and epistemology of security feed each other.

Laclau and Mouffe contributed to the development of the concept of ‘discourse’ from a poststructuralist, Lacanian and de-constructivist approach. According to them, ‘discourse’ refers to the fact that everything in social reality, from an object to a practice, has a meaning and that meaning is the result of a relation with others, articulated within a structure of differences. In Laclau’s words: “Discourse is not essentially restricted to the areas of speech and writing, but any complex of elements in which relations play the constitutive role. This means that elements do not pre-exist the relational complex but are constituted through it.” [16] Therefore, language, materiality, and practices are mutually constitutive, and not exclusionary. In this sense, both Huysmans and Laclau draw from Wittgenstein’s notion of the indissoluble totality of both language and the actions interconnected with it, i.e. the performative character of

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language.[17]

Given the openness of the meanings, its non-essentialist character and the impossibility of a complete undecidability, for Laclau and Mouffe, the articulation of meanings then consists on a hegemonic practice by which the hegemonic actors and the counter-hegemonic actors struggle to fix a particular meaning to a signifier. In this case, the signifier 'security' is then filled by a hegemonic operation whereby a particular interpretation takes up a hegemonic position and tries to represent the totality. Yet, that totality will not ever be fully complete and stable because that fixation is always temporal and subject to contestation and re-articulation. The openness of the meanings is what explains political change, and in that sense Laclau and Mouffe's approach is very close to Huysmans' understanding of 'security' as a political practice to administer social relations: there is always a political or social relation behind the prioritization of a particular meaning. In addition, the prioritization of a meaning over others will have politico-security implications in social reality: a particular logic of security is imbued in the technocratic and governmental security practices that Huysmans refers to, and in turn that the techniques and security practices also shape the ontological dimension of security.

The discourse theory also implies that the articulation of meanings builds up a chain of equivalence, i.e. that many particular positions come together under the same discourse fixing a web of meanings. The chain of equivalence is constituted as opposed to a chain of difference. According to Laclau, there is an antagonistic frontier that articulates the logic of equivalence and the logic of difference. That frontier is also flexible and subject to change as part of the political process. For instance, migrants could sometimes be considered illegal people but in different circumstances they are deemed necessary workforce. Thus, the empty signifier refers to the idea of fixing a frontier between a particular meaning base on a chain of equivalence and its difference. As the signifier takes up the meaning of a particularity that aims to represent the totality, that implies that the particularity loses part of its individualism to represent the others, i.e. it works as an empty signifier that gets filled and partially fixed in relation to a particular frontier. However, as that frontier may change, Laclau introduces a second concept, that of 'floating signifier' to "conceptually apprehend the logic of displacements of that frontier".[18] Consequently, as the frontier suffers changes, the meaning of the signifier does as well, and those changes thus have impact on the play of the signifier in social relations, in this particular case in the security practices. In brief, the security practices cannot escape to the articulation of meanings and in turn those practices, seen as discourses in Laclau and Mouffe's theory, impact the ongoing articulation of the meaning of security. Again, those are co-constitutive.

An illustration of the ontology of (in)security: Unaccompanied minors, economic migrants and/or refugees?

Migration has been continuously an object of discussion within the field of Security Studies, sometimes as a referent object when talking about the insecurity of migrants, sometimes as a threat provoking societal, economic and even national insecurity.[19] The discourses on migration clearly show how an antagonistic frontier exists between those who belong to somewhere and those who are foreigners and lack citizenship. So what does (in)security mean in the context of the upsurge of migration from the Northern Triangle into the US? The arrival of unaccompanied children from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador that flee to the United States has been a persistent phenomenon that dramatically increased in 2014 and the following years.[20] In those circumstances, the government of the US deemed the situation as an "urgent humanitarian situation requiring a unified and coordinated Federal response"[21] and the Congress approved an economic and counternarcotic package of \$750 million. In line with the US commitment, the Northern Triangle governments also committed themselves to a plan of reforms called the Alliance for Prosperity to be implemented along with the Inter-American Development Bank.[22] The Vice President of the US Joseph Biden summarized the importance of the Plan in three points: the rendering of security, good governance, and international and private investment to boost the economy.[23] In that regard, Biden emphasized that "the security and prosperity of Central America are inextricably linked with our own", [24] linking the security of the US to that of the neighboring countries. Along with the new aid package, the US intensified its counter-migratory efforts by opening refugee-offices in those countries, accelerating the procedures to repatriate undocumented migrants, and pushing for legal reforms that would allow a quicker screening of the migrants coming from non-contiguous countries, as it happens with Mexican children, according to the US-Mexican bilateral agreements.[25]

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On their part, children continue to flee to the US, and even also to other neighboring countries such as Costa Rica, Mexico, Nicaragua or Panama, which highlights the fact that many of these minors are seeking protection rather than economic opportunities.[26] Of those interviewed by several organizations, more than half report to flee from violence in their countries and at home. Thus, the humanitarian agencies and human rights organizations are claiming the need to screen all children for international protection.[27] The conditions of detention in the US and the living conditions in their home countries when they are returned do not always meet the international requirements for the protection of minors.[28] Additionally, in many cases the minors do not have access to an attorney and are not informed of their rights to claim asylum status. In their countries of origin, the government does not provide the minimum social services needed for their reintegration and in many cases they report to be subject of harassment and violence by the smuggling organizations and the gangs of the neighborhoods.[29] Therefore, those fleeing from insecurity are encountering more insecurity when facing migratory and security practices, policies and rationalities.

These broad strokes of the situation illustrate the power struggle at play in determining the content or meaning of the empty signifier (in)security and the floating signifier 'unaccompanied children'. The hegemonic operation to attach a particular meaning to these terms has profound implications in the administration of the social relations involving the minors, as well as in the design and implementation of migration and security policies. Thus, security as an empty signifier gets a partial meaning in its discursive formation both through a combination of linguistic and non-linguistic elements, including official declarations, policy documents, policy implementation, migratory official's practices, everyday practices of the minors in their home countries, in their transit to the US, in the US and Mexico detention facilities, or in their return to their countries of origin. Despite that the origin of insecurity seems to come from the daily violence in the Northern Triangle countries, the US priority is to repatriate them to their home countries and in addition manages to temporarily fix the meaning of the unaccompanied minors in a logic of equivalence that includes other terms such as migrants, economic insecurity, corruption, impunity, lack of justice, bad governance, poverty, economic challenges, and violence. For many others, among them the children, NGOs, the UNHCR, think tanks and universities, the term 'unaccompanied minors' is linked, in a logic of equivalence, to human insecurity, gang violence, domestic violence, refugee and asylum status, vulnerability, and human trafficking. Although both sides claim to worry for the wellbeing of the children, their priorities are different and they are contested in a power struggle.

Concluding Remarks

This article aimed at deepening the ontological debate around the meaning of the signifier 'security' by departing from the notion of 'thick signifier' introduced by Huysmans and complementing it with that of 'empty signifier' developed by Laclau and Mouffe within the poststructuralist theoretical framework. Huysman's ontological understanding of security through the thick signifier approach highlights "how the category 'security' articulates a particular way of organizing forms of life".[30] And complementing it with the notion of the empty signifier, that performative character of security takes form according to who determines the content of security in a hegemonic operation and how it is contested by counterhegemonic meanings. Likewise, the incorporation of the discourse theory into the discussion shows the interrelations between logics of security and security techniques and practices, given that discourses theory understands both linguistic and non-linguistic elements as constitutive of the discourse; both shape the meaning of 'security' in a power relation struggle. Therefore, an in-depth exploration of those power dynamics helps to bring light on the hidden interests behind the fixation of particular meanings and the rejection of others in particular junctures of time. In the specific crisis of the unaccompanied children, the in(security) of the minors is at stake in a semantic and practical power struggle among different actors such as the US, the UN, NGOs, countries of origin, and the minors themselves. Their consideration as economic migrants or refugees has enormous implications for their wellbeing as well as for the political realities of the state actors involved.

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