

## Excluding Agency

### Infrastructural and Interactional Practices of Exclusion in the National Socialist *Dispositif* of Field Post

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#### Introduction

*Nun habe ich Euch genug geschrieben, diesen Brief wenn sei [sic] lesen würden, dann würde ich den Genickschuß bekommen.*

*Now I have written you enough, this letter if they would read it, I would get the neck shot.* (M., all translations from German sources and quotations by the author)

When the German soldier Otto M. wrote these lines from Russia to his family on 3 September 1943 during the Second World War, he knew that his war letter would not be subject to the National Socialist censorship apparatus. The letter contains, *inter alia*, detailed information about the course of the war on the front, troop locations, and warnings about the Nazi regime. M., as he wrote in the letter, smuggled it past the censorship via a “comrade”. As a German soldier, M. was a member of the *Volksgemeinschaft*—a National Socialist concept that drew a “racist and anti-Semitic borderline” (Wildt 48)—and was thus not socially excluded due to his status. Nevertheless, in the sentence quoted above, M. anticipates possible future consequences of his deviant actions, which would be carried out by “them”—potentially leading to his violent death.

This article investigates how social and societal exclusion is brought forth by everyday media practices such as writing letters. After an introduction to the thesis under discussion, I will briefly outline the linguistic research on National Socialism that underlies the approach presented. In the second section, the key concepts of *agency* and *dispositif* applied in this work are discussed. This is followed by two sections in which infrastructural and interactional practices of exclusion are analysed. The article closes with some concluding remarks.

During the Second World War, *Wehrmacht* soldiers and their relatives could not write and receive letters that were not potentially subject to controls. Therefore, the blunt openness with which M. anticipated the brutal sanctions of behavioural deviations in the correspondence quoted above was an exception in the everyday practice of war letter communication. This article will thus pursue the following thesis: private communication in war letters was subject to specific discourse conditions under National Socialism, and this brought forth *excluding agency*, which has two intertwined readings. Firstly, “excluding” is to be understood as an attribute of “agency” in the sense of an acting entity that either is included and potentially excludes or is excluded due to its ascribed agency. For example, German soldiers who actively participated in patriotic service were included in the *Volksgemeinschaft*. By contrast, Jews or Communists, to name but a few groups that, from the perspective of racist Nazi ideology, did not contribute to the community, were excluded from it. Such excluding agencies are based on specific practices of dispositional arrangement, which I refer to as *infrastructural exclusion of agency*. Secondly, excluding agency describes a linguistic practice that developed under National Socialism and has an equally stabilising effect on it.

Excluding agency means that agents, and hence protagonists, are excluded by means of linguistic mitigation and omission. This second reading emphasises practices of linguistic construction of agency in interaction, which is described as *interactional exclusion of agency*. In either sense, exclusion is inextricably tied to the notion of agency, which is illustrated in this article by using data from field post letters of the Second World War.

Social exclusion, along with its most extreme manifestations under fascism, is both legitimised and carried out predominantly through discursive practices. This includes for the public domain, on the one hand, executive language use such as in laws, decrees, orders, court hearings, and verdicts, and on the other hand, texts such as ideological writings, speeches, radio addresses, folk literature, etc. Linguistic research on National Socialism and its mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion has long focussed on the power of a regulated public use of language that seemed to be shaped by a few protagonists, most notably Hitler and Goebbels (Schlosser; Scholl). More recent works, however, are increasingly devoted to the differentiation of heterogeneous communities of practice, which were primarily established through discursive practices and are manifested accordingly in texts of that time (Horan, *Practice*). Contrary to a justifiably criticised “exculpation of the speakers” (Sauer 975) by linguistic research, which focusses on language but not on situated, interactional language use, such a perspective is increasingly interested in “*discourse* in National Socialism, with a particular emphasis on language use in context as a shared, communicative phenomenon” (Horan, *Letter* 45). To understand the phenomenon of social and societal exclusion, which was constitutive for National Socialism, it is also necessary to analyse those discursive practices of inclusion and exclusion through which the speakers co-constitute everyday life. I will do this by relating the discourse conditions, based on Foucault’s concept of *dispositif* (*Confessions* 194), to the agency of the correspondents of war letters, i.e. field post letters.

## **On Agency and *Dispositif***

*Agency* and *dispositif* are key concepts for the analysis of social exclusion, because they can be applied to analyse the situated practices of exclusion both in terms of the different capacities for action of various agents, i.e. acting entities, and the inevitably asymmetrical arrangement within which actions are performed. Let me first, very briefly, outline some linguistic conceptions of agency. While Ahearn states that “agency refers to the socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (28) and thus conceives agency as a potential, Duranti understands agency “as the property of those entities (i) that have some degree of control over their own behavior, (ii) whose actions in the world affect other entities’ (and sometimes their own), and (iii) whose actions are the object of evaluation (e.g. in terms of their responsibility for a given outcome)” (453). Deppermann considers agency to be a means of social and situational positioning: “‘agency’ is to capture properties of the subject as agent, that is, its role with respect to the events in which it is involved” (429–30). This is done by linguistic attribution. Following Duranti, this analysis is based on the understanding that agency is established by the ascription of action to an entity which is thereby made or considered accountable for the action. This allows a practice-theoretical reference to Garfinkel’s concept of accountability and identifies agentive practices as “visibly-rational-and-reportable-for-all-practical purposes” (7). The writing of letters in wartime is one such reflexive discursive practice through which agents constitute social reality by means of ascribing agency.

The concept of semantic roles (Fillmore; von Polenz), offers another, distinctly linguistic access to agency. By semantic roles, agency in situated interaction is established syntactically and semantically. Put simply, a distinction is made between an Agent, as someone who

performs an action, and a Patient, as someone to whom an action occurs (von Polenz 170; semantic roles such as Agent, Patient, Experiencer, etc. are capitalised by convention). Using linguistic data from war letters, this concept is discussed in more detail below.

In the following, “field post” is considered as *dispositif*, by which Foucault means

*a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus [dispositif]. The apparatus [dispositif] itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements. (Foucault, Confessions 194)*

The English translation of the French “dispositif” as “apparatus” encourages an understanding of *dispositif* as a rather rigid structure. In contrast, the field post service of the Second World War will be used here to show how such *dispositifs* enable practices of exclusion or restrict access to practices of inclusion, while these characteristics themselves are in turn established by practices or, as Foucault calls them, procedures (Foucault, *Discourse*).

An important and potentially enlightening notion related to *dispositif* is that of *agencement*, which in turn is borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari and was further developed in particular in actor-network theory (Çalışkan and Callon; Gherardi). What Çalışkan and Callon state about markets serves as a general description of *agencement*, which can be defined as an “arrangement of heterogeneous constituents that deploys the following: rules and conventions; technical devices; metrological systems; logistical infrastructures; texts, discourses and narratives ...; technical and scientific knowledge (including social scientific methods), as well as the competencies and skills embodied in living beings” (3). This resembles Foucault’s concept of *dispositif* (Foucault, *Confessions*; see above), which “denotes a heterogeneous ensemble of discursive and nondiscursive elements with neither an originary subject nor [sic] a determinant causality” (Coté 384). Considered morphosemantically, *agencement* expresses an important interrelation: in that it is derived from both the French *agencer* (to construct; to arrange) and *agence* (agency; cf. Hardie and MacKenzie 58) and is concretised and nominalised by the suffix *-ment*, *agencement* elegantly integrates structure and action according to Giddens’s ‘duality of structure’. While this tying aspect certainly contributes to a better understanding of dispositional arrangements and should therefore be considered, *agencement*, as applied in actor-network theory, emphasises above all “the fact that agencies and arrangements are not separate” (Çalışkan and Callon) and is, moreover, often employed to ascribe agency to material objects, things, media, etc. This approach has proven to be very fruitful for analyses of socio-technical arrangements in actor-network theory and practice theory (Çalışkan and Callon; Gherardi). However, within the presented discourse-oriented study on letter writing and field post in National Socialism, a clear analytical differentiation between agency and arrangement, precisely in order to point out their interrelation, is essential to analyse practices of exclusion. This is why I prefer *dispositif* to *agencement* as the analytical concept here.

## **Infrastructural Exclusion of Agency in Field Post Letters**

In the Second World War, writing letters between the “homeland” and the “frontline” was a fundamental everyday media practice with an estimated total of 30 to 40 billion letters in Germany (Kilian 97). War letters were known as field post (*Feldpost*), which was processed by the field post service. The *dispositif* “field post” was, in opposition to the traditional postal

service, subject to specific conditions regarding charges, transport, and above all censorship. No transportation costs arose for field post letters up to a weight of 250 grams. Letters could only be sent by or to soldiers with a field post number that encoded the addresses of the field post offices. Only soldiers who were deployed outside the Reich's borders received a field post number (Kilian 114). Thus, the soldiers were socially included as interactants due to their military status. The entire organisation of the field post was geared towards enabling members of the *Volksgemeinschaft* to communicatively shape, maintain, and continue their social relationships during the war (Bergerson *et al.*).

Applying Foucault, the *dispositif* “field post” establishes selection and exclusion mechanisms in which “procedures of exclusion” (*Discourse* 52) become manifest, two of which are to be related to the field post: “exclusion from discourse” and “scarcity of speaking subjects” (Spitzmüller and Warnke 73). Firstly, “procedures of exclusion ensure that only certain statements can be made in discourse” (Spitzmüller and Warnke 73). This exclusion procedure ought to be implemented by controlling and, ultimately, censoring field post letters. Reviews were carried out by censorship offices (*Feldpostprüfstellen*), which were military units independent of the field post offices responsible for delivery. Censorship initially focussed on military information. However, “in the course of the war, censorship shifted from a control measure aimed at defence towards a political-ideological review” (Kilian 101). Critical remarks could be legally prosecuted and punished with prison, penitentiary, or death (Kilian 99). Hence, it is assumed that self-censorship played a role not only for public media, such as newspapers, but also for writing private letters (Dodd). As the introductory quotation from Otto M. shows, writers who spread undesirable information in their letters anticipated the harshest consequences. In this respect, randomised censorship—although only a very small proportion of the high volume of mail was actually opened by censors (Kilian)—established a permanent disposition of control that resulted in a potentially discourse-excluding social stratification of private communication.

Secondly, the *dispositif* “field post” was inherently exclusive and excluding, as those who did not belong to the *Volksgemeinschaft* could not use the service and thus could not acquire agentive capacity. The “scarcity of speaking subjects” (Spitzmüller and Warnke 73) was achieved by restricting participation in the field post system to members of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Since agency is based on the most basic prerequisite, namely the ability to act linguistically at all, the mere possibility of exercising agency was infrastructurally restricted by the field post system. Excluding people from “agency-through-language” means excluding them from an “agency of an existential sort” (Duranti 455), which is described here, regarding the field post system, as *infrastructural exclusion of agency*.

## **Interactional Exclusion of Agency in Field Post Letters**

In this section, I will elaborate how agency is brought forth interactionally through linguistic means on the basis of data from a field post corpus that was compiled in the project “Linguistic Social History 1933 to 1945” (Kämper). The aim of the project is an actor-based description of discursive practices and patterns at the time of National Socialism, which takes into account the fact that society in the years 1933 to 1945 consisted of heterogeneous communities of practice (Horan, *Practice*). Letter communication is considered to be an interaction that is characterised by mediated indexicality, accountability, reflexivity, sequentiality, and reciprocity (Dang-Anh) and is performed as situated social practice (Barton and Hall). The corpus of field letters examined here provides access to the everyday communication of members of the ‘integrated society’, i.e. those who were neither high-ranking members of the Nazi apparatus nor exposed to the repressions of the fascist

dictatorship. The corpus consists of about 3,500 letters and about 2.5 million tokens. The data were obtained by digitising letter editions using OCR scans and in cooperation with the field post archive of the Museum for Communication Berlin (cf. sources below). We combine qualitative and quantitative methods, the latter providing heuristic indicators for in-depth hermeneutical analysis (Felder; Teubert). We apply corpus linguistic methods such as keyword, collocation and concordance analysis to the digitised full texts in order to analyse the data intersubjectively by means of corpus-based hermeneutic discourse analysis (Dang-Anh and Scholl). However, the selected excerpts of the corpus do not comprise larger data sets or complete sequences, but isolated fragments. Nevertheless, they illustrate the linguistic (non-)constitution of agency and thus distinctively exemplify exclusionary practices in field post letter writing.

From a linguistic point of view, the exclusion of actors from action is achieved syntactically and semantically by *deagentivisation* (Bernárdez; von Polenz 186), as will be shown below. The following lines were written by Albert N. to his sister Johanna S. and are dated 25 June 1941, shortly after the beginning of the German *Wehrmacht's* military campaign in Russia (*Russlandfeldzug*) a few days earlier.

*Vor den russ. Gefangenen bekommt man einen Ekel, d.h. viele Gefangene werden nicht gemacht.*

*One gets disgusted by the Russian prisoners, i.e. many prisoners are not made. (N.)*

In the first part of the utterance, “mitigation of agency” (Duranti 465) is carried out using the impersonal pronoun “man” (“one”) which does not specify its referent. Instead, by means of deagentivisation, the scope of the utterance is generalised to an indefinite in-group of speakers, whereby the use of the impersonal pronoun implies that the proposition is valid or generally accepted. Moreover, the use of “one” generalises the emotional expression “disgust”, thus suggesting that the aversive emotion is a self-evident affect experienced by everyone who can be subsumed under “one”. In particular, this includes the author, who is implicitly displayed as primarily perceiving the emotion in question. This reveals a fundamental practice of inclusion and exclusion, the separating distinction between “us”/“we” and “them”/“the others” (Wodak). In terms of semantic roles, the inclusive and generalised formal Experiencer “one” is opposed to the Causative “Russian prisoner” in an exclusionary manner, implicitly indicating the prisoners as the cause of disgust.

The subsequent utterance is introduced by “i.e.,” which marks the causal link between the two phrases. The wording “many prisoners are not made” strongly suggests that it refers to homicides, i.e. executions carried out at the beginning of the military campaign in Russia by German troops (Reddemann 222). The depiction of a quasi-universal disgust in the first part establishes a “negative characterization of the out-group” (Wodak 33) which, in the expressed causal relation with the second phrase, seems to morally legitimise or at least somehow justify the implied killings. The passive form entirely omits an acting entity. Here, deagentivisation obscures the agency of the perpetrators. However, this is not the only line between acting and non-acting entities the author draws. The omission of an agent, even the impersonal “one”, in the second part, and the fact that there is no talk of self-experienceable emotions, but war crimes are hinted at in a passive sentence, suggest the exclusion of oneself as a joint agent of the indicated actions. As further data from the corpus indicate, war crimes are usually not ascribed to the writer or his own unit as the agents but are usually attributed to “others” or not at all.

*Was Du von Juden schreibst, ist uns schon länger bekannt. Sie werden im Osten angesiedelt.*

*What you write about Jews is already known to us for some time. They are being settled in the East. (G.)*

In this excerpt from a letter, which Ernst G. wrote to his wife on 22 February 1942, knowledge about the situation of the Jews in the war zone is discussed. The passage appears quite isolated with its cotext in the letter revolving around quite different, trivial, everyday topics. Apparently, G. refers in his utterance to an earlier letter from his wife, which has not been preserved and is therefore not part of the corpus. “Jews” are those about whom the two agents, the soldier and his wife, write, whereas “us” refers to the soldiers at the front. In the second part, agency is again obscured by deagentivisation. While “they” anaphorically refers to “Jews” as Patients, the agents of their alleged resettlement remain unnamed in this “agent-less passive construction” (Duranti 466). Jews are depicted here as objects being handled—without any agency of their own. The persecution of the Jews and the executions carried out on the Russian front (Reddemann 222), including those of Jews, are euphemistically played down here as “settlements”. “Trivialization” and “denial” are two common discursive practices of exclusion (Wodak 134) and emerge here, as *interactional exclusion of agency*, in one of their most severe manifestations.

## Conclusion

Social and societal exclusion, as has been shown, are predominantly legitimised as well as constituted, maintained, and perpetuated by discursive practices. Field post letters can be analysed both in terms of the infrastructure—which is itself constituted by infrastructuring practices and is thus not rigid but dynamic—that underlies excluding letter-writing practices in times of war, and the extent to which linguistic excluding practices are performed in the letters. It has been shown that agency, which is established by the ascription of action to an entity, is a central concept for the analysis of practices of exclusion. While I propose the division into *infrastructural* and *interactional exclusion of agency*, it must be pointed out that this can only be an analytical distinction and both bundles of practices, that of infrastructuring and that of interacting, are intertwined and are to be thought of in relation to each other. Bringing together the two concepts of *agency* and *dispositif*, despite the fact that they are of quite different origins, allows an analysis of exclusionary practices, which I hope does justice to the relation of interaction and infrastructure. By definition, exclusion occurs against the background of an asymmetrical arrangement within which exclusionary practices are carried out. Thus, *dispositif* is understood as an arranged but flexible condition, wherein agency, as a discursively ascribed or infrastructurally arranged property, unfolds.

Social and societal exclusion, which were constitutive for National Socialism, were accomplished not only in public media but also in field post letters. Writing letters was a fundamental everyday media practice and the field post was a central social medium during the National Socialist era. However, exclusion occurred on different infrastructural and interactional levels. As shown, it was possible to be *excluded by agency*, which means exclusion by societal status and role. People could linguistically *perform an excluding agency* by constituting a division between “us” and “them”. Also, specific discourses were excluded by the potential control and censorship of communication by the authorities, and those who did not *suppress agency*, for example by self-censoring, feared prosecution.

Moreover, the purely linguistic practices of exclusion not only constituted or legitimised the occasionally fatal demarcations drawn under National Socialism, but also concealed and

trivialised them. As discussed, it was the perpetrators whose *agency was excluded* in war letters, which led to a mitigation of their actions. In addition, social actors were depreciated and ostracised through deagentivisation, mitigation and omission of agency. In extreme cases of social exclusion, linguistic deagentivisation even prepared or resulted in the revocation of the right to exist of entire social groups.

The German soldier Otto M. feared fatal punishment because he did not communicatively act according to the social stratification of the then regime towards a *Volksgemeinschaft* in a field post letter. This demonstrates how thin the line is between inclusion and exclusion in a fascist dictatorship. I hope to have shown that the notion of *excluding agency* can provide an approach to identifying and analytically understanding such inclusion and exclusion practices in everyday interactions in media as dispositional arrangements. However, more research needs to be done on the vast yet unresearched sources of everyday communication in the National Socialist era, in particular by applying digital means to discourse analysis (Dang-Anh and Scholl).

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