

A Critical Discourse Analysis of News Reporting on Traffic Crashes  
Against the Background of the System of Automobility

Tom Steckelbruck

29.06.2022

Public Governance Across Borders

University of Twente

Westfälisch Wilhelms-Universität Münster

Bachelor Thesis

Prof. Dr. Antonia Graf and Asst. Prof. Dr. Veronica Junjan

Word count: 10741

### **Abstract**

The annual deaths among vulnerable road users such as cyclists and pedestrians have remained almost unchanged for years. Despite the high number of traffic death worldwide, the topic receives relatively little attention. The lack of attention could be due to the normalization of traffic crashes in a society where cars have become the common-sensical means of everyday mobility. Thus, this study examines how news media reports on traffic crashes between cyclists and motorists against the background of the system of automobility using critical discourse analysis. Results indicate that news media discourse tends to background drivers and trivialize their actions in traffic crashes involving cyclists. However, evidence suggests a shift towards a more critical perspective on the risks of automobility and an increased influence of cycling advocacy groups in the news media discourse.

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## 1 Introduction

According to the United Nations (2021), about 1.3 million people die, and another estimated 50 million people get injured annually in traffic crashes worldwide. This makes road traffic death the eighth leading cause of death globally and the main cause of death among young people aged 15-29 years (World Health Organization, n.d.). The numbers have remained almost unchanged over the past 20 years. If the current traffic system persists, it is estimated that another 13 million people will die and 500 million injured over the decade. Initiatives such as Vision Zero are advocating for increasing road safety. However, while many countries have officially claimed to incorporate Vision Zero into their policies and make zero road traffic deaths a priority, the number of road crashes remains unchanged high (United Nations, 2021). Considering the scope of the problem, road safety and the reduction of road traffic deaths have received relatively little attention in media, the public, and academia.

However, scholars from transport studies (te Brömmelstroet, 2020) and critical human geography (Culver, 2018) have recently raised the issue of traffic deaths, their presentation, and reception in different publications. Researchers such as Gössling (2016) highlight the injustice of car-centered transport systems. He claims that the risks and dangers of everyday mobility are not distributed equally. They differ among modes of transport, and they affect different groups in society to varying degrees (Gössling, 2016). Traffic participants in new, bulky Sport Utility Vehicles or drivers of trucks have a significantly smaller risk of getting injured or killed in a traffic crash than vulnerable road users such as cyclists or pedestrians. Culver (2018) adds that all mobile bodies can potentially cause harm, but the car is disproportionately harmful given its speed and mass. The mode of transport people choose also depends on their personal economic situation, which determines where they live, whether they can afford a car, and what kind of car they can afford. People with no or a low income are often unable to afford a car or can only afford an older car with fewer safety features (Schwedede,

2021). Thus, the risks of everyday mobility are distributed unequally among the society and put vulnerable groups at more risk more often.

The lack of attention to traffic-related injuries and deaths may partly be due to the dominance of the system of automobility in most societies of the Global North and, increasingly, the Global South. The system of automobility describes the complex system the automobile has created. The sociologist John Urry constructs the system of automobility from six components, the “[...] manufactured object, individual consumption, machinic complex, quasi-private mobility, culture, and environmental resource-use.” (Urry, 1999, p. 14).

Automobility has heavily influenced and shaped many facets of society and the built environment<sup>1</sup>, such as city design (urban sprawl), mass production (Fordism), mass consumption, and the dependency on fossil fuels (Urry, 2004). He argues that the unique combination of these parts creates the dominant system of automobility. However, he acknowledges that no system is locked in eternally and claims that change is possible, referring to changes in society and urban planning that he has already observed (Urry, 2004).

Proof that the hegemony of the system of automobility is under threat can be observed worldwide, but most notably in the Global North. Car sales are declining (Scotiabank, 2022), driver licensing is declining among young adults in much of the Global North (Delbosc & Currie, 2013), and a concurring discourse of putting people instead of cars first in city planning is picking up speed (Canzler et al., 2018).

Several scholars emphasize the importance of language and the way of communication about mobility, cars, road users, and deaths related to road traffic crashes (Goddard et al., 2019; Magusin, 2017; Scheffels et al., 2019; te Brömmelstroet, 2020). A study by Goddard et al. (2019) suggests that editorial patterns of newspaper articles affect the perception of blame and the preferred solution to improve road safety. The study shows that even a slight difference in

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<sup>1</sup> Built environment describes all human-made environment such as buildings or roads

editorial patterns could alter the perception on almost every measure (Goddard et al., 2019). Given the strong influence that language appears to have on the perception of blame in traffic crashes and thus the choice of road safety measures, this study examines news reporting on traffic crashes involving cyclists and motorists in the German capital Berlin. The city ranks low in the cycling-friendliness survey of the German National Cyclists' Association (ADFC) (Allgemeiner Deutscher Fahrrad-Club, 2021) but has recently increased efforts to develop new cycling infrastructure and has seen an increase in bicycle use (Rode et al., 2015). In conclusion, the study aims to answer the following research question:

*How are traffic crashes between cyclists and motorists reported in the news against the background of the system of automobility?*

In addition, the to the main research question, the study aims to answer the following sub question:

*What differences and similarities are observable between the reporting in 2000 and 2020 in Berlin?*

This study adds a European perspective to the currently very North American-focused research on news reporting on traffic crashes involving vulnerable road users. One of the few European perspectives is the study by te Brömmelstroet (2020). He analyzed newspaper coverage of traffic crashes involving cyclists in the Netherlands. The Dutch traffic system differs in many ways from the German system, and cycling culture is deeply embedded in Dutch society. Thus, this study offers a new and possibly different perspective on a country that is not as car-centric as many places in North America but also not as bike-friendly as the Netherlands. In addition, Germany has a strong car culture and an automotive industry, one of the most important sectors of the German economy.

Considering the importance of improving road safety and language's influence in media discourse, this study could contribute to more accurate news reporting and increased awareness

of the systemic violence caused by motor vehicles. Moreover, the increased awareness could lead to more rigorous road safety measures and a less car-dependent and hence more sustainable society. Furthermore, this study is relevant because the system of automobility is increasingly under pressure, alternative mobilities are gaining traction, and the days of the petroleum car are numbered, according to Urry (2004). Therefore, it is worth investigating whether this change is observable in news reporting on traffic crashes involving cyclists.

## **2 Theory**

This chapter provides a discussion of the theoretical underpinnings of this study by introducing the system of automobility, describing changes in (urban) mobility, and explaining how discourse theory helps to investigate the hegemony of automobility and changes in the news media discourse.

### **2.1 The System of Automobility**

Civil societies of the west are societies of automobility. Automobility has seen a rapid expansion in the Global North in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and increasingly in the Global South. It affects almost all aspects of modern life, from the way cities are designed to wars over fossil resources. However, it is not merely the car that has led to this dominance but rather what the British sociologist John Urry calls the “system of automobility” (Urry, 2004). The system consists of six different components: manufactured object, individual consumption, machinic complex, quasi-private mobility, culture, and environmental resource-use. Together these components form the “system of automobility” and lead to the specific character of domination that automobility exerts on most societies worldwide (Urry, 1999). Automobility has created a powerful complex consisting of many social and technical linkages (Urry, 2004). These linkages include other industries such as car parts or petrol companies, but also urban design and planning, creating a complex web of interconnections.

One aspect of the domination of automobility is observable in the built environment, especially in urban areas. While the classical urban architecture was designed from the perspective of the pedestrian, postmodern architecture takes the perspective of a driver (Sheller & Urry, 2000). It, therefore, creates a built environment conducive to motorists, with large roads and legible signs, and excludes other road users from using large parts of the built environment. The city space is dominated by signs of automobility such as parking spaces, city highways, large roads, and architecture that should stop other forms of mobility, such as pedestrian bridges and tunnels, fences, or other architecture restricting access to roads, from interfering with car traffic.

Urry (2004) further describes the effects automobility had and has on society and claims that automobility has significantly changed the time-space relation. The flexibility of automobility forces people to coordinate their mobilities and social life in a complex system that has spread out life across significant distances (Urry, 2004). The urban environment has historically been a place of many activities, including work, leisure, and social practices. Due to the system of automobility and its spatial and time flexibility, it has been spread across larger distances. In order to improve connections between places for motor traffic, the roads had to be adapted to the purpose of high-speed traffic. Thus, over time and through active re-framing by different actors, roads changed from being perceived as an open public space where people walk, meet, or play to being perceived as a space for high-speed automobile flow (Culver, 2018). This change of perception and language has ultimately caused the change in laws and societal norms to privilege cars over people (Culver, 2018). Urry (2004) claims that the car as the norm of everyday mobility has long been locked in and thus is perceived as almost natural. This also means that it is next to impossible for a large portion of society to imagine a world where everyday mobility does not depend on their own cars. Because the car is perceived as

the natural means of everyday mobility, the manufactured risks of car traffic are socially reconstructed as an expected and natural part of everyday mobility (Culver, 2018).

According to Vardi (2014), supporters of the car framed public outcries over traffic fatalities as emotional and argued that emotions should not influence policymaking. One of his main arguments is that the development of the use of statistics and general technocratization has helped to reconstruct traffic deaths as accidents and normality of the system (Vardi, 2014). Because of automobility and the fact that it affects almost every aspect of life, car dominance becomes unquestioned.

However, the system of automobility, like any other locked-in system, is not fixed indefinitely, and change is certainly possible. Urry (2004) refers to sharing schemes and a changing attitude in planning and the public when he claims that it is not a question of whether a post-car system emerges but when. In addition to Urry's examples, his claim can be supported by the declining number of car-ownership in large cities and growing demand, particularly in urban areas, for cycling infrastructure and removing cars from city centers (Canzler et al., 2018)

## **2.2 Automobility - A Corroding System?**

Criticizing Urry's system of automobility, Böhm et al. (2006) argue that "the notion of system tends to underplay collective human agency in the production of automobility and to avoid the political questions about the shaping of the automobile 'system'." (Böhm et al., 2006). The authors argue that the notion of a system is too closed off and implies that change can only come from within the system (Böhm et al., 2006). The following section focuses on mostly external factors which are slowly reshaping (urban) mobility.

The number of new cars sold annually worldwide has declined from 78,9 million cars in 2018 to 63,8 million cars in 2020 (Scotiabank, 2022). In addition, several industrialized countries in the Global North are experiencing a decline in driver licensing, while driver licensing remains relatively stable in Germany (Delbosc & Currie, 2013). However,

Kuhnimhof et al. (2012) found a decrease in car use among young Germans and increased use of alternative modes of travel since the beginning of the millennium, thus, signaling a change away from the automobile regardless of the stable driver licensing levels.

For decades, the German car industry and its suppliers were considered the backbone of the German economy. Employing hundreds of thousands of people, the car industry is still one of the most influential industries in Germany (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2022). However, in recent years the car industry has lost much of its public trust and reputation due to several scandals, most notably Diesel Gate<sup>2</sup> and false car exhaust emission and fuel consumption information. Besides the trust crisis at car producers, the product itself has become more contested, particularly in urban areas. Growing metropolitan areas are reaching their limits of individual motorized traffic capacities. Cities lack space to accommodate the growing number of cars, while issues such as air pollution and noise pollution are gaining more attention (Canzler et al., 2018). Furthermore, the allocated space for cars in cities, where space is generally scarce, is increasingly contested (Canzler et al., 2018). Therefore, many cities such as Paris, Lyon, and Barcelona, among others, are taking active measures to discourage car use and foster alternative modes of transport.

Besides spatial and environmental reasons, health is an essential motivation for increased support of alternative travel modes. Active modes of transportation such as walking and cycling can improve the health of city inhabitants (Bassett et al., 2008). However, in a system created for motorized mobility, other traffic participants are exposed to serious risks by motorized vehicles. Cyclists are particularly affected as they often share the road with fast motorized vehicles. The violent interactions between cyclists and motorists are subjects of this study.

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<sup>2</sup> German car manufacturers used a software to detect official emission and fuel consumption testing station environments. When such an environment was detected, the vehicle entered a mode designed to undercut exhaust limits (Canzler et al., 2018).

### 2.3 The Concept of Discourse

The following section provides an introduction to discourse and critical discourse analysis closely related to the discourse understanding of Norman Fairclough, as his framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is utilized in this study.

Fairclough describes discourse as the social practice of language use (Fairclough, 2009). Language and society are not two separate entities. Instead, language is part of society, and society is part of language. Their dialectic relationship means that social phenomena can be found in linguistic phenomena, and linguistic phenomena are social phenomena and cannot be separated (Fairclough, 2001).

Language and its use are, according to Fairclough, always embedded into a social context. Accordingly, when people use language, whether in an intimate relationship, in the workplace, or at home, the use of language is guided by social conventions, and language use has (immediate) social effects on maintaining or changing the relationships with others (Fairclough, 2001). On the other hand, social phenomena are linguistic in the sense that language activity in social contexts does not only reflect social practice or social processes but is part of it. Language shapes society and is shaped by society. It has the power to maintain or change social practices and social realities.

However, the relationship between language and society is not symmetrical. Instead, language is only one element of the social of society. Thus, not all social phenomena are linguistic, but all linguistic phenomena are social (Fairclough, 2001).

Fairclough (2009) explains the dialectic relationship between discourse and social structure by drawing a general relationship between social practice and social structure. He regards social structure as a force that shapes social practice while simultaneously being shaped by it (Fairclough, 2009). The social structure shapes and constrains discourse through social relations on the societal level, such as class, while simultaneously, discourse is socially

constitutive in a Foucauldian understanding (Fairclough, 2009). He draws upon the discussion of the discursive formation of objects, subjects, and concepts by Foucault. Fairclough (2009), establishes three constructive effects of discourse. Discourse contributes to the construction of social subjects, social relationships between subjects, and the systems of knowledge and belief (Fairclough, 2009). Since discourse is constantly (re-)shaping society, it carries power. This power may either manifest the status quo or initiate change. In conclusion, discourse is the social practice of language which is shaped by society while shaping society.

The focus of this study lies in news media and its discursive practice. News media plays an essential role in shaping public opinion while simultaneously being shaped by public opinion<sup>3</sup>. The text producers are not understood as isolated individuals but instead as individuals embedded in a social context that influences text production. Further, by using data, statistics, and (opinion) polls, the media not only informs the public but also helps to establish a normalization of events and form opinions (Jäger et al., 2019). Moreover, news reports present events as facts, as categorical truths, making news reports an interesting entity to examine in the context of a CDA to explore underlying power structures and ideology (Fairclough, 2001). Lastly, the mass media represent an interesting unit of analysis because they are interdiscursive, in the sense that they incorporate parts of other levels of discourse, such as politics or science (Jäger et al., 2019).

Related to the topic of traffic crashes, reporting on crashes can support the normalization of traffic deaths and thus the hegemony of the car as a mode of transportation. On the other hand, editorial patterns can also draw attention to the endemic nature of traffic fatalities and thus counteract the hegemonic discourse. Evidence from a study by Goddard et al. (2019) suggests that the way traffic crashes are described in news articles has a serious

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<sup>3</sup> For a more sophisticated and detailed analysis of the relationship between public opinion and news, see McCombs et al. (2011)

impact on our perception of traffic crashes, the perception of blame, and consequently, the preferred solution to increase road safety. Their study shows that even a slight difference in the editorial pattern could alter the perception on almost every measure (Goddard et al., 2019)

## **2.4 Conclusion**

The system of automobility is a complex web of interconnections that includes the automotive industry, petroleum companies, and urban planning, among others. It has reshaped society. Streets have been transformed from a public space into a space for the automobile. The automobile has become the common sensical mode of transportation. Manufactured risks such as traffic crashes and fatalities are perceived as accidents and a natural part of mobility. Nevertheless, the hegemonic position of automobility is threatened. A loss of trust in car companies, a worldwide decline in car sales and driver's license acquisition among young adults in the Global North, and a renewed focus on people-centric planning in urban planning are indicators of a shift away from automobility.

## **3 Methods**

This chapter aims to clarify and justify the research methods used to answer the research question of this study. First, the research design is presented, followed by the case selection and data collection. Finally, the operationalization and data analysis are explained before the chapter is concluded.

### **3.1 Research design**

This interpretive study analyses the news reporting on traffic crashes between cyclists and motorists. The news reporting on the crashes provides the unit of analysis. To analyze the reporting, articles of the Berlin-based newspaper Tagesspiegel that report traffic crashes between cyclists and motorists in Berlin in 2000 and 2020 are examined using CDA. These articles provide the unit of observation. To investigate the news reporting on traffic crashes, it is sufficient to analyze only one Berlin-based newspaper, the Tagesspiegel. The study aims to

investigate the news reporting on traffic crashes against the backdrop of the system of automobility and whether changing dynamics of the public discourse over time have influenced the news reporting, rather than minor editorial differences between different news outlets. The Tagesspiegel was chosen for this analysis because it is the newspaper with the highest volume in Berlin, reaching the highest number of people (MEEDIA, 2018). Hence, it is the local newspaper with the most significant impact in Berlin.

Investigating news reporting is particularly interesting because news is regarded as an objective representation of the social and natural world. Fairclough notes that news is presented as categorical truth, disguising the messy process of gathering and interpreting in the production (Fairclough, 2001). CDA has the ambition to uncover the ideology the bias in the seemingly normal and objective world and is thus a useful method to investigate news. Its basic assumption that the world is socially constructed implies that there is no neutral, objective outlook on the world. Hence, every person producing text produces it from their perspective with all values, ideas, and social norms which they possess. Therefore, the product is not a neutral text but a description of the perception of reality, shaped by reality and shaping reality. This study aims at uncovering underlying power structures and ideological underpinnings in news reporting on traffic crashes involving cyclists in Berlin in 2000 and 2020. Because the automobile is seen as the norm, the most natural mode of transportation, journalists who report on traffic crashes may also perceive the car as the norm and other traffic participants as intruders. Combining the theoretical framework of automobility and the methodology of Fairclough's CDA approach leads to a particular focus on agency, fore- and backgrounding of events and actors, events in grammatical terms, the use of active and passive, the assertion of guilt, and phrasing in the terms of automobility.

The following ten questions developed by Fairclough (2001) guide the inductive analysis:

### Vocabulary

1. What experiential values do words have?
2. What relational values do words have?
3. What expressive values do words have?
4. What metaphors are used

### Grammar

5. What experiential values do grammatical features have?
6. What relational values do grammatical features have?
7. What expressive values do grammatical features have?
8. How are (simple) sentences linked together?

### Textual Structures

9. What interactional conventions are used?
10. What larger-scale structures does the text have?

## 3.2 Case Selection

The following section outlines the specific circumstances of the Berlin case and provides motivation and reasoning for choosing Berlin as a suitable case for this study. To study the impact of the hegemony of automobility on the news reporting of traffic crashes involving cyclists, the German capital Berlin and the daily Berlin-based newspaper Tagesspiegel were chosen for the analysis.

The city of Berlin is the most populous in Germany with nearly 4 million inhabitants and is also the most densely populated city in Germany. A high density means that space for traffic is limited and contested. According to the annual survey from the ADFC, the German National Cyclists' Association, Berlin has not been a very cycling-friendly city. Moreover, Berlin ranks on place nine among the fourteen German cities with more than 500.000 inhabitants (Allgemeiner Deutscher Fahrrad-Club, 2021). However, already in 2016, the

citizens' initiative *Volksentscheid Fahrrad* has successfully gained media and public attention for transforming traffic in Berlin by strengthening sustainable modes of transport, especially cycling and walking, while limiting motor-vehicle traffic. The initiative collected more than 100.000 signatures for better cycling infrastructure (Changing Cities, n.d.). A representative survey after the successful citizens' initiative showed that most of Berlin's inhabitants support a stronger political engagement for cycling traffic (Schwedde, 2021). In 2018 the city council, pressured by the citizen initiative, passed the Berlin Mobility Act, focusing on environmentally friendly modes of transport, namely, public transport, walking, and cycling (Changing Cities, n.d.). This kind of mobility law is unprecedented in Germany. It signals a change in the mobility strategy, moving away from car-centered approaches and towards more sustainable modes of transport.

Furthermore, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Berlin implemented pop-up bicycle lanes (Rita Cyganski et al., 2021) and has seen increased bicycle usage. Hence, comparing news reporting in 2020 with news reporting 20 years ago, when traffic planning was very car-centric, is an interesting comparison to investigate the influence of context on news reporting of traffic crashes. Additionally, it serves as a viable case to investigate the challenged hegemony of automobility.

### **3.3 Data collection**

This CDA analyses qualitative data from the *Tagesspiegel*. The news articles gathered for analysis include all articles concerning traffic crashes between cyclists and motorists, such as car and truck drivers, in 2000 and 2020. Only short news articles reporting immediately after the crash are selected for the analysis. However, some articles reporting on a recent traffic crash include explicit references to past crashes. These articles are included in the analysis. Excluded are articles concerning crash participants, other can cyclists, and motorists such as motorcyclists or pedestrians. In addition, articles reporting on traffic crashes or road safety

issues more broadly and opinion articles were excluded to create a coherent and comparable corpus of articles for both years.

The archive of the Tagesspiegel was used to collect the news articles. The following keywords were used in the search in both years: Fahrradunfall, tödlicher Verkehrsunfall, Unfall Fahrrad, tödlicher Unfall, Radfahrer, Radfahrer\*in, Radler, Radler\*in. The keywords led to 232 results in 2000 and 584 results in 2020. After a content check, the final selection resulted in 30 articles for 2000 and 32 articles for 2020. The vast discrepancy between articles found initially and articles selected is due to the broad keywords used in the initial search, resulting in many unrelated articles. The final selection comprises a total of 62 news articles that represents all Tagesspiegel articles reporting on traffic crashes between cyclists and motorists in the years 2000 and 2020. A table of the final selection can be found in the appendix (see appendix Table 1) to make the selection more transparent and open to criticism.

### **3.4 Operationalization and Data Analysis**

This chapter explains how the CDA in the study of news reporting traffic crashes is executed. Fairclough's guiding questions are applied to the gathered articles using the data analysis software Atlas.ti. The analysis focuses on the linguistic presentation and agency of the participants, foregrounding and backgrounding, active and passive usage, general vocabulary choice, and text structure. While the guiding questions guarantee a systematic evaluation of the material, the inductive approach ensures openness to the material. The coding process is made transparent by sharing the Atlas.ti file and the final coding scheme generated after several turns of inductively (re-)coding the material (see appendix Table 2).

### **3.5 Conclusion**

To investigate news reporting on traffic crashes involving cyclists and motorists, 62 articles from the Berlin-based Tagesspiegel from the years 2000 and 2020 are analyzed using Fairclough's approach to CDA. A Berlin-based newspaper was chosen because Berlin was

planned car-centric but has recently seen an increased citizen engagement for more cycling-friendly planning. The citizens' initiative *Volksentscheid Fahrrad* has successfully pushed the Berlin Senat to pass the Berlin Mobility Act, which aims to improve alternatives to motorized transport. Using Fairclough's guiding questions, the selected articles are coded inductively using the data analysis software Atlas.ti.

## 4 Analysis

The analysis structure follows Fairclough's CDA framework consisting of ten guiding questions. It is divided into three sections: vocabulary, grammar, and larger context. The last section is slightly altered compared to Fairclough's original framework to include specific findings found during the inductive analysis. Throughout the analysis, evidence is gathered to answer the research question and the sub-question. The entire analysis is based on the assumption that the formal features found in a text are particular choices made by its producer from a range of options (Fairclough, 2001). Thus, implying that the text producer is conscious of the formal features used.

### 4.1 Vocabulary

The following chapter investigates the vocabulary used in reporting traffic crashes between cyclists and motorists. It investigates what terms are used to describe the event and its actors. A particular emphasis is placed on the possible difference between the vocabulary choice of text producers in 2000 compared to 2020.

#### 4.1.1 *The accident*

The term "accident" (Unfall) was the most common to describe a crash between cyclists and motorists. It occurs 159 times in total. In 2000 it was used 46 times in 30 articles, while it was used 113 times in 32 articles in 2020. The difference in frequency is primarily due to the greater length of articles in 2020 compared to 2000. The term "traffic accident" (Verkehrsunfall) occurs 38 times in all 62 documents. Another term describing a traffic crash,

“turning accident” (Abbiegeunfall), occurs 25 times but exclusively in articles from 2020. To put the use of the word accident in perspective, the term “collision” (“Zusammenstoß”) only appears 16 times in all 62 articles. Thus, while “accident” and different types of it are used 222 times in total to describe a traffic crash or collision, the term “Zusammenstoß” was used only 16 times.

The term “accident” is misleading because most traffic crashes involving motorists are not accidental. Either, as Stewart and Lord (2002) point out, they involve substance abuse, speeding, reckless driving, or potentially negligent driving behavior such as texting, talking on the phone, or eating, or they are connected to the traffic system, road design, or other characteristics of the system.

The term “turning accident” (Abbiegeunfall) is particularly contradicting. It describes a traffic crash in which a motorist intends to turn right and disregards the right-of-way of cyclists riding straight ahead on the bike lane on the driver's right. This term highlights the contradictory use of "accident" by describing a specific, recurring pattern of a traffic accident with a noun used to describe unpredictable and unfortunate events.

Labeling a collision between a car and a bicyclist as an accident is misleading and supports the episodic description of traffic crashes as tragic accidents that happen by chance. Moreover, to portray traffic accidents as singular, unfortunate events obscures the systemic nature of the produced risk of traffic accidents.

In addition, it discredits traffic crashes as newsworthy as they are considered a natural part of everyday mobility. Normalization is a characteristic of hegemony (Fairclough, 2001). It constitutes power through normalizing an aspect of reality (traffic crash) to an extent where a phenomenon is perceived as natural and thus, unchangeable and uncontested.

Often in the news reporting on accidents between cyclists and motorists, the phrases involving the word “accident” do not include the car or the driver as a cause or at least part of

the crash. Phrases such as “Cyclist killed in traffic accident” (“Radfahrer bei Verkehrsunfall getötet.”) (D16), “Cyclist seriously injured in accident” (“Radfahrer bei Unfall schwer verletzt”) (D3), or “Cyclist dies after accident in Berlin-Charlottenburg” (“Radfahrer stirbt nach Unfall in Berlin-Charlottenburg”) (D50) leave out the second party of the crash and focus on the cyclist alone. Although the car, truck, or car/truck driver are mentioned throughout the articles, it is essential to note that in the most prominent sections of newspaper articles which are the headline and the drophead, the driver or the vehicle were rarely mentioned. Thus, it focuses solely on the cyclist and omits the motorist's actions (see 4.2 Grammar).

#### **4.1.2 Euphemism and euphemistic expressions**

Besides the misleading term “accident”, text producers use different expressions and phrases that understate the action of the driver and the severeness of the consequences in news reporting. One term frequently used is the verb “anfahen” to describe the action of a driver hitting a cyclist. “Anfahen” in the context of traffic crashes could be translated as “run into”, “hit”, or “drive against (something/someone)” (Langenscheidt, n.d.-a). The German Duden dictionary defines it as “injure by the vehicle while driving; graze with a vehicle” (“beim Fahren durch das Fahrzeug verletzen; mit einem Fahrzeug streifen” (Dudenverlag, n.d.). Although it can be used synonymously with the verb “ram”, it has a less violent connotation in German. The word is used in articles from 2000 and 2020 a total of 50 times, making it the most common expression describing the crash between a cyclist and a (driver of a) vehicle. It is used to describe the driver's action when hitting a cyclist. The term is vague and a catch-all term that can include many ways a driver hits another subject or object. It leaves room for interpretation of the severeness of the driver's action and to what degree it has led to injuries and, in some cases, the death of other traffic participants. It is far less brutal and assigns less blame than, for example, the term “kill” which has been used in some cases (see 4.1.3 Changing Tone).

Another term that understates the driver's action is “overlook” (übersehen) which occurs a total of seven times. It is used as follows “In the process, he apparently overlooked a 58-year-old female cyclist who was riding in the opposite direction on the Königin-Luise-Straße cycle path at the same time. At the intersection with Fabeckstraße, she crashed into the windshield and remained on the ground.”<sup>4</sup> (D58). In this quote, the only fault of the car driver was to overlook the cyclist. It is not mentioned that he drove against or over her. Instead, she apparently hit the car, assigning blame to the cyclist in a situation where the car driver was uncontestedly at fault. However, the only accusation against the car driver is limited to not being careful enough. The consequence of the act of “overlooking” was, in this case, that the cyclists suffered life-threatening injuries. The example illustrates why the term is problematic. Overlooking is not very harmful. One could, for example, overlook a mistake while proofreading their bachelor thesis, which is not very dangerous. However, when a person operates a potentially dangerous, heavy, fast motor vehicle that can easily injure or kill a person, it can have severe consequences. That is why great care must be taken when operating such a vehicle. If the driver is not cautious enough and crashes into another traffic participant, this could be regarded as negligent, which assigns a certain degree of guilt to the driver.

### ***4.1.3 Changing Tone***

In the previous chapter, euphemistic expressions were identified as understating the actions of motorists and thus the dangers of the automobility system. However, the tone of voice, the clarity, and the frequency in which actions of motorists are described have changed in 2020 compared to reporting in 2000.

Although drivers’ actions were often either left out (see 4.2 Grammar) or described in vague or euphemistic terms in both years, a change was still observable in the reporting in

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<sup>4</sup> Original: “Dabei übersah er offenbar eine 58-jährige Radfaherin, die zeitgleich in entgegengesetzter Richtung auf dem Radweg der Königin-Luise-Straße unterwegs war. Im Kreuzungsbereich zur Fabeckstraße prallte sie gegen die Windschutzscheibe und blieb auf dem Boden liegen.” (D58, 23.09.2020)

2020. In 2020 journalists used the expressions “run over” and “roll over” to describe how cyclists were hit by vehicles, especially trucks. The phrases were used 47 times in 2020 and once in 2000. The following sentence provides an example of the expression, “A 25-year-old man ran over a woman with his transporter on Brüderstrasse.”<sup>5</sup> (D49). The term “run over” implies that the transporter physically rolled over the woman. The image the quote creates is more violent than the vague phrasing mentioned above.

An additional verb used in 2020 to describe the driver's actions is “ram”. It is used four times<sup>6</sup> exclusively in 2020. The Cambridge dictionary defines “ram” as “to hit or push something with force” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). To ram is more violent than hit as it highlights the force of the body of action.

To summarize, the word "anfahren" has been replaced by the terms "roll over" and "run over" as the most common term used to describe traffic crashes between motorists and cyclists in 2020. This indicates a change from a vague choice of words to a more direct and drastic language in reporting traffic crashes highlighting the driver's actions.

While the vocabulary and grammar describing drivers’ actions changed from 2000 to 2020, becoming more direct and more explicit using active sentences and harsher wording, the description of cyclists and their actions has become less critical, more sympathetic, and partly even emotional. In news reporting in 2000, faults of cyclists such as being intoxicated, not watching out for traffic, or crossing a red light have been mentioned in five<sup>7</sup> out of thirty headlines. In the same year, thirteen<sup>8</sup> articles contained descriptions of faults of cyclists in the text body such as the following examples “Drunk cyclist hit by car”<sup>9</sup> (D28), “According to the

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<sup>5</sup> Original: “Ein 25-Jähriger überfuhr mit seinem Transporter eine Frau auf der Brüderstraße.” (D49, 18.08.2020)

<sup>6</sup> D33, D51, D56, D64

<sup>7</sup> D9, D12, D28, D29, D30

<sup>8</sup> D5, D9, D11, D12, D15, D16, D17, D18, D20, D25, D26, D28, D29

<sup>9</sup> Original: “Angetrunkener Radfahrer von Auto angefahren” (D28, 27.04.2000)

police, the cyclist was not riding on the existing bike path.”<sup>10</sup> (D26), or “Apparently, he had been careless when he drove onto the road.”<sup>11</sup> (D16). The misbehavior of the cyclists varies in terms of the influence they had on causing the crash. However, highlighting the faults of cyclists while simultaneously backgrounding the driver’s action could be interpreted as displaying cyclists as the problem and implying that being injured or killed is their fault.

Moreover, while in some instances, that may be true, for example, when a cyclist crosses a red light at an intersection and gets hit by a car passing a green light, it generally understates the power imbalance between vehicles and bicycles. People operating vehicles weighing several tons that can severely injure or kill someone could be expected to be held to higher standards of care than vulnerable road users such as cyclists or pedestrians, who are fundamentally less likely to injure or kill another person severely (see also Culver, 2018).

However, the frequent mentioning of relatively harmless faults of cyclists such as not having working lights (D11, D12, D15, D25) or not using the bike lane provided (D26) can create a false balance regarding who is to blame for the crash. Furthermore, it draws on the discourse of road safety, which highlights the responsibility of being careful around motorized traffic, making it the responsibility of the vulnerable traffic participants not to get injured by stronger participants instead of urging operators of disproportionately powerful vehicles to care and caution. This dates back to the change in the discourse of streets as public spaces for everyone to redefine streets as places for cars and highspeed travel (Bonham, 2006; Canzler et al., 2018; Sheller & Urry, 2000; Urry, 1999, 2004).

The reporting has changed from 2000 to 2020, as evident in the lack of appointments of misbehavior by cyclists in 2020. Nevertheless, one article mentions misbehavior by a cyclist,

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<sup>10</sup> Original: “Der Radler war nach Auskunft der Polizei nicht auf dem vorhandenen Radweg gefahren.” (D26, 26.05.2000)

<sup>11</sup> Original: “Offenbar war er unachtsam auf die Straße gefahren.” (D16, 16.03.2000)

but the wording differs from reporting in 2000. The following examples all describe traffic crashes in which a driver hit a cyclist who rode on the cycling path in the wrong direction.

“According to the police, the cyclist was using the bicycle lane, but was going in the wrong direction.”<sup>12</sup> (D9)

“At about 9 p.m., according to police, a 38-year-old motorist making a turn on Orankeweg overlooked a 44-year-old cyclist who was riding along the bike path in the opposite direction”<sup>13</sup> (D20)

“While turning left, she was allegedly riding on a bike lane that is supposed to be for the other direction of travel.”<sup>14</sup> (D63)

The first two examples are from 2000, and the last example is from 2020. In the first two examples, the information is preceded by a claim of authority (“according to the police”) which increases the value and trustworthiness of the information. Contrastingly, the article in 2020 uses “allegedly”<sup>15</sup>, which is more vague and leaves room for the possibility of change. Furthermore, the second quote places the driver’s fault and the misbehavior of the cyclist in the same sentence implying that the crash is at least partly the cyclist's fault. In the last quote, the author uses “bike lane that is supposed to be for the other direction of travel” to describe that the cyclists used the bike lane in the wrong direction. The modal auxiliary verb “supposed to” leaves room for deviation. It is less binding than, for example, “must” or “should”. In comparison, the first two quotes do not use modal auxiliary verbs but instead present the event at a terminal point, stating it as categorically true. This is interesting when investigating the possible ideological underpinning of news reporting because, in this case, the author of the

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<sup>12</sup> Original “Dieser benutzte nach Auskunft der Polizei zwar den Radweg, fuhr aber in die falsche Richtung.” (D9, 09.02.2000)

<sup>13</sup> Original: “Gegen 21 Uhr übersah nach Polizeiangaben ein 38-jähriger Autofahrer im Orankeweg beim Abbiegen einen 44-jährigen Radfahrer, der den Radweg in entgegengesetzter Richtung entlang fuhr” (D20, 20.06.2000)

<sup>14</sup> Original: “ Beim Linksabbiegen soll sie auf einem Radweg gefahren sein, der eigentlich für die andere Fahrtrichtung vorgesehen ist.” (D63, 27.05.2020)

<sup>15</sup> Allegedly (alternatively: reportedly, or supposedly) is as close as it gets to original meaning in German since an exact translation of the phrase “sie soll” is not possible

article leaves room for interpretation and understates the cyclist's action where there should not be leeway. Thus, leaning towards a cyclist-friendly interpretation of the situation since the direction of the bike lane is by law only to be used in one specific direction.

A change in reporting traffic crashes between cyclists and drivers is observable in multiple articles in 2020. One is the detailed and emotional description of a traffic crash involving a seven-year-old boy killed by a truck riding his bike.

“Almost two years ago to the day, seven-year-old Constantin was killed at this intersection by a truck turning right. In front of his mother's eyes, the boy had been run over by a truck turning right on his way to school at a green light on June 13, 2018. The boy's parents have been fighting for more safety in road traffic ever since.”<sup>16</sup> (D48)

The first thing to notice is that the article is about a different crash where a truck ran over a sixty-year-old woman at the same intersection. By referring to the boy's killing, the author highlights the risk for cyclists at this intersection. Furthermore, the author uses expressions such as “in front of his mother's eyes” that possibly evoke emotions and feelings of compassion. 11. A similar image led to mass protests in the Netherlands in the early 1970s. After the child of a Dutch journalist had been killed by a motorist, he started a movement named “Stop de Kindermoord” (Stop the child murder) which has found enormous support in the entire country (Feddes et al., 2020). Together with other cyclist movements, the campaign significantly influenced the creation of bicycle-friendly transport policies and road safety measures in the Netherlands (Feddes et al., 2020). Today, the Netherlands is one of the most cycling-friendly countries in the world (Feddes et al., 2020). This shows how powerful the image of an innocent child being killed in traffic can be.

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<sup>16</sup> Original: “Fast auf den Tag genau vor zwei Jahren ist auf dieser Kreuzung der siebenjährige Constantin von einem nach rechts abbiegenden Lastwagen getötet worden. Vor den Augen seiner Mutter war der Junge am 13. Juni 2018 auf dem Weg zur Schule bei grüner Ampel von einem nach rechts abbiegenden Lkw überfahren worden. Die Eltern des Jungen kämpfen seitdem um mehr Sicherheit im Straßenverkehr.” (D48, 16.06.2020)

Another example of a more detailed and emotionalizing reporting is the vivid description of the public memorial set up for a killed cyclist in Berlin.

“Flowers lie on the sawed-off tree trunk at Savignyplatz. Red roses and tulips in pale pink. Tape and stones fix the stems to the wood so that the wind doesn't carry them away. A small card leans against a stone, a breeze fans it out. It says: ‘With love forever and ever. S.’”<sup>17</sup> (D44)

First, the fact that a reporter went to the crash site to report on a traffic crash shows a stark contrast to the short news reporting in 2000, where most articles seem to lean heavily on police reports. The time and resources put into the article symbolize the increased importance of the topic of killed road users, particularly cyclists and pedestrians. The author describes the scene in a very illustrative way, making it easy for readers to picture it. In addition to the vivid description of the memorial, the author also includes the words of a grief card. This highlights the loss and grief of the friends and family of the killed cyclist, which can evoke empathy in the text recipient. Instead of describing the cyclist as just another number in a traffic deaths statistic, the author creates an image of a human being with friends and family who have lost a loved one taken from them in a seemingly senseless traffic crash by a motorist.

## 4.2 Grammar

According to Fairclough’s framework, it is important to investigate experiential values of grammatical features such as processes, participants, agency, and active and passive constructs (Fairclough, 2001). These experiential aspects of grammar describe the way events and participants interact in the form of language (Fairclough, 2001)

In his framework, Fairclough describes the importance of experiential values of grammatical features (Fairclough, 2001). The analysis focuses on the grammatical structure of

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<sup>17</sup> Original: “Blumen liegen auf dem abgesägten Baumstamm am Savignyplatz. Rote Rosen und Tulpen in blassem Rosa. Klebeband und Steine fixieren die Stängel auf dem Holz, damit sie der Wind nicht davonträgt. Ein Kärtchen lehnt an einem Stein, eine Brise fächert sie auf. Darin steht: ‘In Liebe auf immer und ewig. S.’” (D44, 09.02.2020)

participants in sentences describing actions such as the following “Motorist hits female cyclist and seriously injures her”<sup>18</sup> (D41). The sentence describes an action where the driver is the *agent* who acts upon the cyclist, who is the *patient*. The following section analyzes the agent-patient relation in the news reporting under study.

A common way of describing traffic crashes in news coverage is through passive constructs such as “Female cyclist hit and killed by truck”<sup>19</sup> (D21). In this example, the cyclist as the patient of the action is the subject of the sentence, and the vehicle as the agent of the action is the object of the sentence. It highlights the cyclist and backgrounds the driver’s actions, thus, focusing on the consequences of the crash rather than the circumstances leading to the crash. Furthermore, it backgrounds the agent in two ways simultaneously, first through the passive construct and second through replacing the driver as an agent with the car as an agent. Foregrounding the cyclist may seem positive because it highlights the injuries suffered and shows that cyclists are often involved and injured or killed in traffic crashes. However, the passive construct also backgrounds or omits agency, disguising cause and responsibility.

Another typical sentence structure is the agentless passive sentence, such as “Cyclist killed in traffic accident”<sup>20</sup> (D16). Here, the agent is omitted in these sentences, so causality and action remain unclear. Especially in cases where the cyclist was killed, an agentless passive sentence hides the severe actions of the other party and thus limits the guilt assigned to the driver. It is to be noted that in most articles, the reasons for the traffic crash are mentioned in some way. However, the frequency of the agentless sentence systematically backgrounds the driver's actions. Further, as the grammatical features are to be understood as an active choice of the text producer, the producer chose the option backgrounding the driver the most compared to active sentences with the driver as agent or passive sentences including the driver.

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<sup>18</sup> Original: “Autofahrer fährt Radfahrerin an und verletzt sie schwer” (D41, 08.06.2020)

<sup>19</sup> Original: “Radfahrerin von Lkw erfasst und getötet” (D21, 22.02.2000)

<sup>20</sup> Original: “Radfahrer bei Verkehrsunfall getötet” (D16, 16.03.2000)

In 2020 another way of describing the crash between motorists and cyclists became more frequent, active sentences with the car driver as the subject of the sentence and the agent of the action. This way of describing crashes puts the most blame on the driver compared to the two aforementioned constructs. It places the focus on the driver's actions, such as in the following examples “Car driver seriously injures female cyclist while turning”<sup>21</sup> (D51) and “A car driver rammed her while turning left”<sup>22</sup> (D64). Additionally, because the active sentences often include the driver as a subject rather than the motorized vehicle, they direct the attention towards the behavior of the people behind the wheel, emphasizing why and how a traffic crash occurred. Moreover, instead of highlighting the victim of the accident, active sentences focus on the cause and the person who caused it, drawing attention from the dangers of cycling to the dangers of motor traffic. Active sentences with the driver as the agent allow seeing patterns such as crashes when turning or speeding

The slow change from passive to active sentences signals a change. Nevertheless, passive constructs, foregrounding the cyclist, remain the standard way to describe traffic crashes in 2000 and 2020.

The cyclist as the causer of the crash is less common compared to the driver or the vehicle as the causer of the crash, but the times where the cyclist is described as the cause are particularly interesting. The first example is taken from a news article in 2000. The action of the agent, the cyclist, is described as follows “Without paying attention to following traffic, the student rode from the bike path onto the roadway at the corner of Pionierstraße and Osningweg, according to police.”<sup>23</sup> (D5). To make sense of this sentence, one must assume that cyclists must watch out for motorized traffic. Further it presupposes that cyclist, because they are unprotected and easily injured and killed, need to pay attention, be extra careful, and watch out

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<sup>21</sup> Original: “Autofahrer verletzt Radfahrerin beim Abbiegen schwer” (D51, 19.02.2020)

<sup>22</sup> Original: “Eine Autofahrerin rammte sie beim Linksabbiegen” (D64, 28.02.2020)

<sup>23</sup> Original: “Ohne auf den nachfolgenden Verkehr zu achten, fuhr der Schüler nach Polizeiangaben in der Pionierstraße Ecke Osningweg vom Radweg auf die Fahrbahn.“ (D5, 06.07.2000)

for motorized traffic. As CDA is concerned with what is not in the text or what could have been in the text, it is important to look at alternatives. The text producer could have also described the situation in which cyclists as unprotected and easily injured traffic participants need to be watched out for. Instead of the cyclist not paying attention, it could have also been said that the driver did not watch out for the cycling traffic and, because of the lack of attention, ran over the cyclist. Thus, placing the blame on the driver rather than the cyclist.

To summarize, the cyclist is seldom the agent of the traffic crash but can be the agent of actions leading to the crash. The driver as an agent is widely backgrounded through passive sentences in which the patient is the subject, and the agent is the object or omitted through agentless passive sentences. This pattern is slightly altered in 2020 with a higher frequency of active sentences with the driver as an agent.

### **4.3 The larger context**

This section focuses on elements of the larger text structure, particularly the length of the articles. Additionally, it includes the larger context of traffic crashes and the actors involved in shaping its perception.

#### ***4.3.1 Text Structure and Length***

The larger structure of a text is a crucial element in CDA. The text length and structure depend on the importance of the event and its newsworthiness. The length increases when the editor or journalist regards an event as important and newsworthy. The length can also depend on the information available. The more information available about an event, the longer an article could be. However, even with a wealth of information, it is the editor or journalist who decides how much of the limited space in a newspaper is allocated to specific information. Analyzing the news articles from 2000 and 2020, it became evident that the length had increased significantly from 2000 to 2020. The length of individual articles varies in both samples. However, in 2000 the average article contained 115 words, while in 2020, the average

article was more than twice as long, containing 338 words on average. The lengthiest article (D29), reporting two crashes in 2000, consists of 318 words, which is less than the average article length in 2020. In contrast, the longest article in 2020 (D44) consists of 916 words and reports only on a single incident. The article is written by three authors and includes statements from residents, the ADFC, and a local citizens' initiative for safer cycling. Furthermore, it contains a photo as well as a detailed description of a public memorial set up in memory of the cyclist who got killed (see 4.1.3 Changing Tone)

The increased length and detail in 2020 compared to 2000 serves as an indicator for an increased interest in the topic of traffic crashes involving cyclists. Articles in 2020 describe the circumstances of the crashes in more detail and provide additional information about the broader external conditions of crashes between vehicles and cyclists. One article (D44) includes a photo of the public memorial of a killed cyclist. In addition, it contains an illustrative description of the memorial and the reception of people passing by “Several families stop at the tree stump, read the note, breathe heavily and shake their heads.”<sup>24</sup> (D44). It appears that the text producers are trying to evoke sympathy for the cyclist who was killed and to raise awareness of the issue of road safety for cyclists (and pedestrians) and the dangers of current car-oriented traffic in the text recipient.

Fairclough states that order in news articles is based on the newsworthiness placing the most interesting and newsworthy elements at the beginning of an article followed by other elements in descending order of their news value (Fairclough, 2001). The headline of a news article is its most prominent feature and should summarize the article while perusing the reader into reading the entire article. The headlines of the articles analyzed primarily focus on the injured or killed cyclists with headlines such as “Cyclist killed in accident in Prenzlauer Berg”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Original: “Mehrere Familien bleiben am Baumstumpf stehen, lesen den Zettel, atmen schwer und schütteln den Kopf.” (D44, 09.02.2020)

<sup>25</sup> Original: “Radfahrer bei Unfall in Prenzlauer Berg getötet Radfahrer bei Unfall in Prenzlauer Berg getötet”(D10, 11.01.2000)

(D10) or “Cyclist killed in traffic accident”<sup>26</sup> (D16). When a second party is mentioned in the headlines, it is in most cases the vehicle that was involved and only rarely the person sitting behind the vehicle's wheel. In 2000 a driver was only mentioned in a single headline when the driver was drunk, thus, giving certain newsworthiness to the event.

The structure of the headlines systematically backgrounds the vehicle and, even more so, the driver involved in the crash. One article from 2000 (D12) provides an interesting case for the backgrounding of the driver's actions while highlighting aspects of the cyclists that are relevant but not the leading cause of the crash. The headline “Cyclist rode drunk and without lights” suggests that it was the cyclist's fault. However, it was the car driver who opened the car door with a lack of attention and care that brought the cyclist to a fall. Also, the alcohol level is unclear. The term "angetrunken", which translates to tipsy (or drunk, although tipsy is closer to the original meaning), is a rather subjective measure. It is not clear whether the cyclist was legally allowed to cycle. This could be the case as German law allows cyclists a relatively high blood alcohol level of 1.6 ‰. Furthermore, the article backgrounds the action of the car driver (suddenly opening the car door) that has led to the crash and instead highlights an aspect of the cyclist in the headline, the most prominent and noticeable part of a news article.

The structure of the text body also backgrounds the driver's actions while highlighting those of cyclists. This is true for the entire corpus of the study. All terms describing the driver, such as “car driver” (Autofahrer, Autofahrerin), “driver” (Fahrer, Fahrerin), and “car owner” (Autobesitzer, Autobesitzerin) have been used a total of 163 times in all 62 articles. In contrast all terms describing cyclists such as “cyclist” (Radler, Radlerin, Radfahrer, Radfahrerin, Radfahrender, Fahrradfahrer, Fahrradfahrerin, Fahrradfahrende) occur a total of 377 times in 62 articles. Although the back- or foregrounding varies among the individual articles, the vast difference between the total number of times cyclists is mentioned and the total number of

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<sup>26</sup> Original: “Radfahrer bei Verkehrsunfall getötet” (D16, 16.03.2000)

times drivers are mentioned serves as an indicator that the driver is systematically backgrounded in news reporting of traffic crashes. The systematic nature of the backgrounding of the driver and her actions can be interpreted as ideological.

The news reporting visibly changed in 2020 compared to 2000. In six of thirty-two articles, the driver and the driver's actions are mentioned in the headline, and only one of these articles concerns an intoxicated driver. Although small, a change is noticeable particularly, as it is accompanied by increased use of active sentences in the text body when describing the drivers' actions, for instance, "Truck driver runs over 35-year-old man at a traffic light"<sup>27</sup> and more drastic terms for describing the drivers' actions such as "A motorist rammed her while turning left"<sup>28</sup> (D64) (see 4.2 Grammar).

#### **4.3.2 *Ghost Bikes and Cycling Advocates***

Another reason for the increased article length is the increased referencing to the larger context of traffic crashes. References to the larger context describes sentences or paragraphs which refer to other traffic crashes, issues of road safety, or opinions of stakeholders such as politicians, organizations, or cycling advocates. References are found mainly in news reports from 2020 but sparsely exist in news articles from 2000. However, in 2000 they are limited to referring to other traffic crashes or the number of cyclists who died that year. Unlike articles in 2020, articles in 2000 do not include stakeholders' opinions or references to road safety issues. The stakeholders in the articles in 2020 are politicians (D43, D48), the ADFC (D37, D44), and the NGO Changing Cities (D36, D37, D42, D49, D53, D57). The two organizations Changing Cities<sup>29</sup> and the ADFC, are mostly mentioned in combination with the organizing of so-called "Mahnwachen" which they organize for every cyclist or pedestrian who got killed in a traffic

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<sup>27</sup> Original: "Lkw-Fahrer überfährt 35-Jährigen an einer Ampel" (D39, 04.08.2020)

<sup>28</sup> Original: "eine Autofahrerin rammte sie beim Linksabbiegen." (D64, 28.02.2020)

<sup>29</sup> Changing Cities e. V. is the parent organization of Volksentscheid Fahrrad which initiated the Radentscheid which has led to the Berlin Mobility Act (Mobilitätsgesetz).

crash (Allgemeiner Deutscher Fahrrad-Club, 2020). Ten<sup>30</sup> out of thirty-two articles in 2020 mention Mahnwachen. In English “Mahnwache” could be translated as vigil (Langenscheidt, n.d.-b). According to the ADFC, Mahnwachen are events to commemorate the killed cyclist and set a sign for more road safety (Allgemeiner Deutscher Fahrrad-Club, 2020). At the Mahnwachen, the ADFC places a so-called “ghost bike”<sup>31</sup>, a white painted bicycle with a memorial note, as a public memorial for the cyclist, which will remain at the place of the cyclist’s death for one year. In Berlin, Mahnwachen can attract one hundred or more people who will sit on the road at the site of the crash and have a joint minute of silence. The Mahnwachen can lead to new articles about the crash with background information on reasons for traffic crashes and critical perspectives on road safety. For example, one follow-up article covering a Mahnwache for a killed cyclist includes statements from different activists and detailed information about reasons for the traffic crashes, such as missing turning assistant systems in trucks (Lemkemeyer & Klinger, 2020).

#### 4.4 Conclusion

The following section summarizes the analysis's vocabulary, grammatical and structural findings. Guided by Fairclough’s framework, the inductive CDA generated insight on how traffic crashes are reported against the backdrop of the system of automobility.

Throughout the text corpus, text producers use the word “accident” to describe traffic crashes which is controversial because it presents traffic crashes as isolated tragic incidences and blurs the systemic nature and recurring patterns of traffic crashes. Furthermore, the analysis has revealed that text producers often use vague and non-violent language to describe the actions of motorists in traffic crashes. However, in 2020, the reporting has notably changed. In 2020 text producers used more violent and drastic words more frequently than vague phrases

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<sup>30</sup> D36, D42, D43, D44, D45, D49, D52, D53, D56, D57

<sup>31</sup> The first ghost bike in Berlin was set u in February 2009 in memory of a cyclist killed in 2008 (*Berlin Ghost Bikes*, n.d.)

to describe drivers' actions in traffic crashes. While describing the motorist in more harsh words, the description of cyclists has been less critical in 2020. Furthermore, the vocabulary choice in 2020 included more emotional phrases which may evoke sympathy for the cyclists among the text recipients.

The grammatical analysis of news reporting revealed that motorists are largely backgrounded in passive sentences or omitted in agentless passive sentences. Additionally, text producers often background the concrete actions of drivers through object-based language, which exchanges "driver" with "car" and thus depersonalizes the motorist. Despite the general backgrounding of the driver as an agent, the news reporting of 2020 increasingly uses direct sentences with the driver as an agent and the cyclist as a patient, which shifts the focus away from the cyclists and towards the driver's action in a traffic crash.

The analysis of the structure of the news reporting displayed an increased length and detail of the news articles reporting on traffic crashes, showing an increased interest in the topic. The increased length is partly due to the inclusion of statements from different stakeholders and cycling advocacy groups that critically comment on the traffic crashes. It indicates an increased public interest in road safety for cyclists and increased influence of advocacy groups.

In conclusion, all news articles under study feature many elements of vague language describing the participants in general and motorists in particular. Often traffic crashes are displayed as individual cases. However, a change in reporting on traffic crashes between 2000 and 2020 is observable and indicates a shift towards more critical and detailed reporting, which puts an increased focus on the motorists involved in crashes.

## **5 Conclusion**

The study executed a CDA to explore the news reporting on traffic crashes involving motorists and cyclists against the background of the system of automobility. By analyzing the

news articles of the Tagesspiegel of 2000 and 2020 reporting on traffic crashes, this study has shown that news reporting on traffic crashes tends to background the cause and the motorist while highlighting the outcome and the cyclist involved. The use of passive voice combined with objectifying language and vague terms describing drivers' actions supported the backgrounding. By choosing vague and neutral terms, the driver's actions were regularly trivialized, and blame was avoided. Additionally, traffic crashes were presented as singular tragic events, obscuring the crashes' systemic nature and reoccurring patterns.

Furthermore, possible differences between the reporting of 2000 and 2020 were explored. The reporting in both years backgrounded the motorists compared to the cyclist and described the crashes in relatively vague and passive terms. However, in 2020 a clear shift towards portraying motorists as active agents responsible for injuring and killing cyclists was detected. Moreover, the articles in 2020 doubled in average article length. The increased space was filled with statements from cycling advocacy groups, vivid descriptions of public memorials for killed cyclists, and emotionalizing language, humanizing the victims of traffic crashes.

The findings of this study indicate that a changing discourse and shifting public interest can influence news reporting, a domain generally understood as neutrality and objective. The shift in news reporting towards a more critical reporting on traffic crashes simultaneously influences the public perception of traffic crashes. Furthermore, the analysis showed clear signs of the influence of advocacy groups on news reporting.

The study successfully contributes new knowledge to the growing body of news media discourse on traffic crashes. The study adds a new German perspective to a still, North American-focused body of knowledge. While the study provides new insights on changes in perception and reporting of traffic crashes, the evidence was gathered from analyzing only one newspaper outlet and is thus not generalizable. In addition, the coding was done by a single

researcher, which could lead to bias. However, the coding scheme and project file are provided for transparency.

Based on the unexpected finding of strong influence from cycling advocacy groups, further research could be conducted on the campaigning and communication strategy of cycling advocacy groups and networks to investigate their strategies and influence on discourse and policy-making.

To conclude, this study found evidence in news reporting on traffic crashes indicating a persistence of the system of automobility but additionally found strong indicators that a shift towards a more critical perspective on automobility is well underway.

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## Appendix

**Table 1**

*List of all articles Tagesspiegel articles analyzed in this study*

Document number	Date	Title of the article	Word count
2	01.03.2000	Lastwagen fährt Radfahrer an: Lebensgefahr	94
3	01.08.2000	Polizeinachrichten: Radfahrer bei Unfall schwer verletzt	94
4	03.05.2000	Radfahrer prallte gegen Autotür - Armbruch	101
5	06.07.2000	Polizeinachrichten: Aktuelle Meldungen aus Berlin	108
6	08.05.2000	Drei Verletzte nach Zusammenstoß auf Kreuzung	94
7	08.05.2000	Polizei sucht Zeugen zu Unfall mit Fahrerflucht	108
8	08.06.2000	Polizeinachrichten: Polizei sucht Zeugen zu tödlichem Verkehrsunfall	108
9	09.02.2000	Angetrunkener Radfahrer von Auto angefahren	96
10	11.01.2000	Radfahrer bei Unfall in Prenzlauer Berg getötet	106
11	12.12.2000	Betrunkene Fahrer fuhr ohne Licht: Radlerin von Auto 140 Meter weit mitgeschleift	140
12	13.06.2000	Polizeinachrichten: Unfall: Radler fuhr angetrunken und ohne Licht	108
13	14.06.2000	Polizeinachrichten: Radfahrer bei Unfall schwer verletzt	96
14	14.07.2000	Polizeinachrichten: Radfahrer von Auto erfasst und schwer verletzt	116
15	14.11.2000	Polizei-Nachrichten	70
16	16.03.2000	Radfahrer bei Verkehrsunfall getötet	90
17	17.08.2000	Polizei-Nachrichten: Aktuelle Meldungen aus Berlin	131
18	18.07.2000	Polizeinachrichten: Radfahrer bei Unfall in Weißensee verletzt	101
19	19.06.2000	Polizei-Nachrichten: Neunjährige Radfahrer bei Unfall leicht verletzt	107
20	20.06.2000	Polizeinachrichten: Auf Liegewiese angefahren	107
21	22.02.2000	Radfahrer von Lkw erfasst und getötet	110
22	22.08.2000	Polizeinachrichten: Kind von Funkwagen verletzt	105
23	24.10.2000	Verkehrsunfälle: Wieder starben zwei Radfahrer	223
24	25.04.2000	Radfahrer und Kleinkind angefahren	90
25	26.01.2000	Schüler auf Fahrrad von BVG-Bus mitgeschleift	113

26	26.05.2000	Radler gegen geöffnete Autotür geprallt	102
27	26.09.2000	Polizei-Nachrichten: Aktuelle Meldungen aus Berlin	116
28	27.04.2000	Angetrunkener Radfahrer von Auto angefahren	116
29	28.03.2000	Rentnerin achtete nicht auf Verkehr	318
30	29.06.2000	Polizei-Nachrichten: Bei "Rot" auf die Straße: Radfahrer schwer verletzt	109
31	30.08.2000	Polizeinachrichten: "Nigeria-Connection"	74
32	01.02.2020	Lkw fährt beim Abbiegen Radlerin an: 79-Jährige von Sattelzug in Tegel schwer verletzt	212
33	02.07.2020	Bei Abbiegeunfall lebensgefährlich verletzt: Radfahrer in Lichterfelde von Lastwagen angefahren und mitgeschleift	314
35	03.02.2020	Zusammenstoß mit der Polizei: Fahrradfahrer schwer verletzt	230
36	03.06.2020	Am Unfallort gestorben: 62-jährige Radfahrer von Lkw in Friedrichshain überrollt	470
37	04.02.2020	Nach Unfall mit Laster in Tegel: 79-jährige Radfahrer erliegt ihren schweren Verletzungen	261
38	04.03.2020	Lkw fährt 46-Jährigen an: Radfahrer bei Verkehrsunfall in Reinickendorf schwer verletzt	173
39	04.08.2020	Radfahrer in Berlin-Adlershof getötet: Lkw-Fahrer überfährt 35-Jährigen an einer Ampel	180
40	05.07.2020	Lkw wollte rechts abbiegen: Radfahrer nach Verkehrsunfall in Lebensgefahr	171
41	08.06.2020	Abbiegeunfall am Kottbusser Tor: Autofahrer fährt Radfahrer an und verletzt sie schwer	141
42	08.10.2020	Berlin-Köpenick: 89-Jähriger bei Unfall mit Lkw getötet	570
43	09.01.2020	Tödlicher Unfall in Kreuzberg: Radfahrer von Lkw überfahren	698
44	09.02.2020	BMW überfährt Radfahrer: 64-Jähriger stirbt nach schwerem Unfall am Savignyplatz	916
45	10.01.2020	Mann von Auto erfasst: Radfahrer erleidet schwere Kopfverletzungen	220
46	13.06.2020	Unfall in Mitte: Betrunkener Autofahrer erfasst Radlerin - schwer verletzt	226
47	15.05.2020	Abbiegeunfall in Berlin-Reinickendorf: 64-jähriger Radfahrer schwer verletzt	177
48	16.06.2020	Wieder schwerer Unfall an Spandauer Kreuzung: Tanklastzug überrollt Radfahrer, die Grün hatte	667

49	18.08.2020	Bereits 38 Verkehrstote 2020 in Berlin: Zwei Radfahrerinnen in Spandau getötet	761
50	18.11.2020	Schwerer Verkehrsunfall auf der Caprivibrücke: Radfahrer stirbt nach Unfall in Berlin-Charlottenburg	143
51	19.02.2020	Unfall in Berlin-Lichtenberg: Autofahrer verletzt Radfahrerinnen beim Abbiegen schwer	115
52	19.08.2020	Bei „Dooring“-Unfall schwer verletzt: Radfahrer prallt gegen plötzlich geöffnete Autotür und stürzt	228
53	20.01.2020	Tödlicher Unfall in Berlin-Johannisthal: BVG-Bus überfährt Radfahrerinnen	616
54	20.05.2020	Abbiegeunfall in Berlin-Treptow: 48-jähriger Radfahrer von Wohnmobil angefahren	169
55	21.08.2020	Schwerer Unfall auf Potsdamer Straße: Polizeiauto im Einsatz kollidiert in Schöneberg mit Radfahrer	341
56	21.11.2020	48 Verkehrstote seit Jahresbeginn: Fußgänger und Fahrradfahrer bei Unfällen in Berlin gestorben	596
57	22.08.2020	Tödlicher Fahrradunfall in Berlin-Reinickendorf: Wieder ein Rechtsabbieger, wieder ein Lastwagen	689
58	23.09.2020	Unfall in Berlin-Dahlem: Radfahrer lebensbedrohlich verletzt	180
59	24.05.2020	Verkehrsunfall in Wilmersdorf: Autofahrer fährt rückwärts und verletzt Radfahrer schwer	181
60	24.08.2020	Mit dem Fahrrad verunglückt: Bundesliga-Handballer Milos Vujovic von Lkw erfasst	367
61	24.09.2020	30-Jährige schwer verletzt im Krankenhaus: Lkw überrollt Radfahrerinnen in Berlin-Lichtenberg	244
63	27.05.2020	Unfall in Charlottenburg: 61-jährige Radfahrerinnen schwer verletzt	237
64	28.02.2020	Unfall in Spandau: Autofahrerinnen verletzt Radfahrerinnen schwer	153
65	30.07.2020	Obduktion soll Todesursache klären: 82-jähriger Radfahrer stirbt nach Verkehrsunfall	180

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**Table 2***The inductively developed coding scheme*

Code group	Code name	Definition
	action of cyclists	Any action of the cyclists before, during, or after the crash
<hr/>		
cause of the crash		
	vehicle as causer	When the vehicle is describes as cause of the crash
	cyclists as causer	When the cyclist is described as the causer of the crash
	cause unclear	When responsibility for crash is unclear
	driver as causer	When the driver is described as the causer of the crash
	Changing Cities/ADFC/Mahnwache	Any paragraph describing Changing Cities, ADFC or Mahnwachen
	criticism about cars	Any paragraph critical about cars/automobility
	description of injuries	Any paragraph describing injuries
	description of the crash scene	Any paragraph describing the crash scene
	description of the cyclist	Any paragraph describing the cyclists e.g. student, senior, mother
<hr/>		
driver related codes		
	trivializing actions of driver	When drivers' actions are described in vague terms
	drivers action	Any action of the driver before, during, or after the crash
	action of driver left out	When agentless sentences are used
<hr/>		
	emotional language/story telling	When the author uses emotionalizing language
	euphemistic expression	When wording understates the action
	explicit description of correct cyclist behavior	When correct behavior of cyclist is explicitly stated
<hr/>		
faults of the cyclist		
	intoxicated cyclists	see code name
	cyclists using wrong lane	see code name
	cycling without light	see code name

cyclist not paying attention	see code name
cycling wrong way in one-way street	see code name
cyclists crossing red light	see code name
cyclists not using bicycle lane	see code name
<hr/>	
faults of the driver	
<hr/>	
intoxicated driver	see code name
driving without light	see code name
driver not paying attention	see code name
driver lost control	see code name
driver was speeding	see code name
driver ignores right of way	see code name
<hr/>	
Grammar	
<hr/>	
Grammar - passiv	When passive sentences are used
Grammar - action not linked together	When two sentences describing an action are not linked together
Grammar - action linked	When two sentences describing an action are linked together
Grammar - active SV event	When active sentences are used Sentences consisting of subject and verb
SVO action	Sentences consisting of subject, verb, and object
presuppositions	
<hr/>	
Grammatical agency	
<hr/>	
cyclist as grammatical agent	When cyclists are described as agents
driver as grammatical agent	When drivers are described as agents
vehicle as grammatical agent	When vehicles are described as agents
<hr/>	
Grammar - passiv	When passive sentences are used
Grammar - action not linked together	When two sentences describing an action are not linked together
Grammar - action linked	When two sentences describing an action are linked together
Grammar - active SV event	When active sentences are used Sentences consisting of subject and verb
SVO action	Sentences consisting of subject, verb, and object
presuppositions	When text builds on a presupposition
<hr/>	
Grammatical agency	
<hr/>	

cyclist as grammatical agent	When cyclists are described as agents
driver as grammatical agent	When drivers are described as agents
vehicle as grammatical agent	When vehicles are described as agents

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