

Understanding the context of securitization theory philosophy essay



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Over the last decade, contemporary security studies witnessed a fundamental attempt by various social constructivist approaches to re-conceptualize the traditional notion of security as a perception of objective threat, and redefine the theoretical agenda of security studies. One of the most influential and eminent analytical frameworks among these approaches, the “ securitization theory”, developed by Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and their associates from what came to be later known as the Copenhagen School, based the meaning of security upon the socially constructed practice among actors. The core hypothesis of the Copenhagen School rests with the designation of securitization as a discursive process through which an intersubjective understanding is constructed within a political community to treat something as an existential threat to a valued referent object, and to enable a call for urgent and exceptional measures to deal with the threat.[1]

Thus, successful securitization encompasses three inextricable components – “ existential threats, emergency action, and effects on inter-unit relations by breaking free of rules”. [2] This, however, leads to an epistemological dilemma of whether the main purpose of securitization theory is to focus on the speech act as a creative force of security or to relate the establishment of security articulations to the context in which an interplay of the securitizing actor and a relevant audience takes its place. In other words, the enduring problem in the analytical framework of the securitization theory is what or who decisively invokes the move beyond the sphere of “ normal politics” – the speech act itself or the context in which relevant actors interacts.

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Consequently, this theoretical problem triggered two distinct interpretations of securitization theory. The first interpretation adhered to a rather “internalist” reading of securitization claiming that the security can be understood as a self-referential activity,[3]while the second standpoint, labeled “externalist”, correctly pointed out that the Copenhagen School generally put aside the contextual aspects in the analytical framework of the securitization theory, and in contrast proposed a conception of security as an intersubjective process[4]. The “internalist” point of view, narrowly based on the poststructuralist reading of securitization, is focused on the speech act event, and is anchored in the notion of a performativity, i. e. a result of the securitization is determined by the power of the act itself. In contrast, the “externalist” perspective rests with a more complex understanding of the securitization as a process of interactions between the audience and the securitizing actor through which a meaning of security is brought to existence. In particular, the former assert that the determinant power inherent in the discourse creates an exceptionality modus, whereas the latter link the effects of securitization to the context in which an interplay between the securitizing actor and a relevant audience occurs.

The “internalist” understanding of the securitization theory rests with Waever’s interpretation in “Securitization and Desecuritization” where it is, by drawing on John L. Austin’s concept of “performative utterances”, [5]claimed that the mere utterance of “security” is more than just saying or portraying an event, but performing an action that moves an issue beyond “normal politics”. [6]Whether this utterance of security is related to a particular context in which a stimulus triggers a response is irrelevant for the

“ internalists”. Contrary to the “ externalist” argument that the communication between the agency and a respective audience enables the endowment of extraordinary measures, the “ internalists” downplay the role of the context to the performative force of the speech act to impose an extraordinary situation and create a “ security”. In particular, by referring to Derrida’s claim that “ there is nothing outside the text”, the “ internalist” understanding of the securitization concludes that the indeterminate nature of a speech act itself has a power to create new circumstances in a broader social framework. More specifically, it is not the sender-responder relation that bears authority in imposing the exceptional conditions, as the “ externalists” suggest, but rather it is about the very nature of the performative speech act that constitutes not only new meaning, but also the social actors and reality.[7]

However, this particular perspective on the determinacy of the situation by merely uttering the speech act has two shortcomings. Firstly, given the nature of the performative act which is in the “ internalist” notion solely regarded as the language-discursive framework, one can argue that this is only one means through which the meaning of security is constructed. More specifically, the speech act of securitization cannot be reducible to verbal phrases or rhetoric, because what portrays something or someone as an existential threat is a broader performative act composed of different contextual and symbolic patterns that increase the overall effectiveness of an appeal for emergency measures. As Michael Williams shrewdly notes, the television images of 9/11 destruction, casualties and human suffering have considerably contributed to the dominant perceptions of security and to a

construction of a “ necessary” response to an existential threat.[8]Secondly, it is not the utterance of performative act that creates a meaning of security, but rather the routinized practices of the bureaucratic machinery and “ professional managers of unease” applied to various issue areas that allow the act to urge an embracement of extraordinary measures.[9]In particular, surveillance practice, the control of borders or immigration policy is an ultimate aim behind the use of language by networks of security professionals that generate specific meaning of (in) security.

Related to the second shortcoming, the “ externalist” reading of securitization contributes to the debate by adding a social and political context in which the practice is exercised by relevant structures. In general, by referring to the concepts of the audience and the facilitating conditions suggested by Buzan et al. (1998) in *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, the “ externalist” understanding transfers the creation of the meaning from the speech act to the intersubjective level of analysis. Thus, rather than reducing the securitization to a discursive event, the “ externalist” understanding draws on a broader conception-a dynamics between the securitizing actor initiating the speech act, and a relevant audience accepting or refusing it.[10]The interpretation and depiction of the existential threat are, in other words, “ negotiated” between the actor and a respective audience. Nevertheless, although the speech act is enacted and introduced by the authoritative actor, it is the audience in this relationship that decides whether the discourse will be accepted as an appropriate narrative.[11]In addition, following the concept of “ facilitating conditions” the “ exceptionalist” logic infers that the possibility of a successful

securitization act will depend on whether the audience recognizes the conventional procedures within the performative act, and whether the securitizing actor holds a position of authority.[12]

Nevertheless, both concepts (the audience and the facilitating conditions) are theoretically underdeveloped leaving many epistemological gaps in the analytical framework of the securitization. Firstly, even if one identifies a relevant audience, the question remains why and how the receivers will react to the utterance of the act. Although coercion or brute force may in general be effective, in order to maintain credibility the securitizing actor will particularly need to identify his/her move beyond “ normal politics” with the audience’s values, norms, interests and feelings. Thus the content of the performative message would need to be contingent upon the moral justification corresponding to what is generally perceived as legitimate by the audience, and upon the approval of the legal authority.[13] Yet, it still remains unclear what constitutes the broader socio-political basis for the securitizing actor to claim authority to impose measures and for the audience to conform to the language of the act. However, the concept of facilitating conditions is a rather objectivist, to the extent that it posits the discursive process inside the exogenously given actor-audience structure and at the same time it is static, in terms of reducing a securitization to a mere event dependent on the stimulus-response pattern. To comprehensively grasp the essence of the securitization, one therefore needs to move beyond both “ internalist” and “ externalist” understanding and analyze the audience’s expectations, the actor’s authority and a

meaning of the speech act as embedded “ in social relations of meaning and power that constitutes both actors and speech acts”.[14]

The seemingly unavoidable gap between the two understandings may be bridged through the “ internalist-externalist” distinction developed by Holger Stritzel who seeks to establish a context in which the actor, an audience and the speech act are embedded as mutually constitutive and non-separable relations. The context in this view is constituted of two dimensions: social-linguistic, referring to the “ networks of constitutive rules and narratives that surround a single linguistic act” and socio-political, i. e. structures from which the power to influence the process of constructing meaning is derived[15]. Consequently, the power connectedness of the three elements of securitization is interlinked with the two dimensions through the constitution of three forces of securitization: the performative force of the speech act (“ internalist”), its embeddedness in the existing discourse (“ externalist”) and the positional power of actors who shape the meaning (“ internalist-externalist”).[16]What Stritzel effectively achieves with his analytical framework is three-fold: firstly, the moving from the given meaning of the threat to the meaning generated by the dynamic social interactions; secondly, the interrelatedness between the text of the speech act and the discursive practices add a missing part to the “ internalist” notion of the speech act as an utterance itself; finally, the power position of the actor that underpins his/her authority departs from both the inclusive nature of the linguistic concept of power outlined by the “ internalist” reading, and the exogenously defined relationship between the actor and the audience proposed by the “ externalist” understanding of securitization.

In conclusion, the epistemological division between the “ internalist and the “ externalist” view, as shrewdly suggested by Stritzel, may be bypassed through the establishment of interconnectedness between the language act and actors/audience within the mutually constitutive social context.

Nevertheless, the dilemma about which element decisively constitutes the security persists within the securitization theory. As McDonald effectively put it, the incoherence within the existing analytical framework of securitization theory will lead to the downplay of “ either the performative effects of the speech act or the inter-subjective nature of security”.[17]Therefore, a closer focus on different empirical cases may provide useful insights into the problematic of the speech act-actor-audience triangle, and moreover contribute to the analytical framework of securitization theory.