

How language influences perceptions of suicide

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A new study reveals the impact of the associative meaning of a single word on how readers subsequently view and refer to suicide.

In German, three terms are used to denote [suicide](#)—"Suizid," "Selbstmord" ("self-murder") and "Freitod" ("free death"). A new empirical study shows that the choice of word used in media reports of

suicides has a measurable impact on how readers subsequently perceive and evaluate the act of suicide. The study was carried out by Dr. Florian Arendt of the Department of Communication Science and Media Research at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universitaet (LMU) in Munich, together with his former colleague Dr. Sebastian Scherr (who is now at the Leuven School for Mass Communication Research in Belgium) and researchers based at the Medical University of Vienna. It has now been published in the journal *Social Science & Medicine*.

The authors recruited 451 individuals for the web-based study. The sample was first divided into three groups. The participants read short newspaper reports on suicides, which differed from one another only in the word used to refer to the act itself (Suizid, Selbstmord or Freitod). The texts given to members of each group used only one of these terms. Participants were then asked to summarize the content of what they had read in their own words, and to fill in the blanks in a word puzzle designed to test implicit memory. Finally, they were asked about their personal attitudes to suicide. "We found a clear effect, insofar as participants favored the use of the term that they had previously read in the texts assigned to each of them," says Florian Arendt.

In addition, the results provided the first indications that the three terms actually trigger different associations in readers' minds. Participants who had read the reports that referred to Freitod expressed a more positive view of suicide by incurably ill patients than those who had encountered either of the other terms. Notably, the use of Freitod by the media is regarded as problematic. "The word Freitod implies that the victim made a clear-sighted and rational decision. But all the evidence suggests that suicidal individuals typically have a very restricted perspective on their personal situation, their lives and their surroundings—they exhibit a kind of emotional tunnel vision. Seen in this light, it is very difficult to describe such a decision as free or rational," Arendt points out.

In an earlier publication, Arendt had shown that the expression most frequently chosen by news media in the German-speaking countries is Selbstmord. Meanwhile, the neutral term Suizid is used almost as often, but nevertheless, the word Freitod still appears regularly in press reports. Selbstmord is not recommended because of its implicit reference to crime. Given the problematic connotations of the word Freitod noted above, the recommended term for use in reports of suicide in the German media is the neutral term Suizid.

"Our study underlines the fact that the [media](#) could play a major role in the prevention of suicides. Journalists should take care to choose the least 'loaded' term, says Arendt. However, careful choice of words is "only one of the measures which empirical research has shown can reduce the incidence of suicide." The World Health Organization (WHO) has issued guidelines for news coverage of suicides. In the English language, for example, the WHO-recommendation is not to refer to suicide as "successful" or as a "failed attempt" because these terms may elicit problematic associative meanings, implying that death is a desirable outcome. Instead, it is recommended to write "died by suicide."

More information: The role of language in suicide reporting: Investigating the influence of problematic suicide referents, *Social Science & Medicine*, 2018

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