**Repositioning War: The Ambiguous Language of Private Military- and Security Companies**

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## Introduction

This article argues that war as an institution of the modern state order is repositioned by the ambiguous language used by private military- and security companies (PMSCs).[1] In the last three decades, the use of PMSCs in war-zones and other types of security contexts has become a booming global phenomenon (Singer 2001, Avant 2005, Kinsey 2006, 2023, Baum and McGahan 2013, McFate 2015, Dunigan and Petersohn 2015, Swed and Burland 2020, Batka and Bátora 2024). Governments, international organizations, multinational corporations and non-governmental organizations hire PMSCs to provide a range of security functions both in cooperation- and in competition with state military- and security assets. As extant research shows, this has practical implications for the organization and conduct of war. For one, the increasing normalization of cooperation of state military- and security assets and PMSCs in the delivery of security policies systematically blurs the lines between the public and private sector in an area that has traditionally been an exclusive domain of state authority (Leander 2005, 2013, Deitelhoff 2009).[2] Second, participation of PMSCs personnel in war zones and conflict management operations raises a number of legal issues and renders the applicability of

[1] Our conceptualization of a private military and security company (PMSC) builds on the European Parliament's definition of a 'private security company' as "a corporate entity which provides on a compensatory basis military and/or security services by physical persons and/or legal entities; whereas military services in this context can be defined as specialised services related to military actions including strategic planning, intelligence, investigation, land, sea or air reconnaissance, flight operations of any type, manned or unmanned, satellite surveillance and intelligence, any kind of knowledge transfer with military applications, material and technical support to armed forces and other related activities; whereas security services can be defined as armed guarding or protection of buildings, installations, property and people, any kind of knowledge transfer with security and policing applications, development and implementation of informational security measures and other related activities" (cf Private security companies, 2017:3). Given that the definition encompasses a variety of military services and functions, we find it is useful to apply this definition to a PMSC – a term commonly used in the international relations literature.

[2] This is also the case in contexts where various types of private security organizations seamlessly cooperate with state authorities in providing security in various domains of modern societies such as airport security (Berndtsson and Stern 2011).

established international law provisions uncertain (Tonkin 2011, Cameron and Chetail 2013). Third, several analyses indicate that it is difficult for local populations in conflict zones to differentiate between members of state military forces and PMSCs' personnel – in particular if they operate side-by-side (Transforming Wartime Contracting 2011; The Risk of Doing the Wrong Thing Perfectly 2021). Indeed, these developments challenge key tenets of war as an institution of the modern state order embedded in structures, rules and practices of state militaries and in international law conventions regulating war conflicts (Clausewitz 1820, Huntington 1957, Holsti 2004).

A key aspect of the PMSCs challenge to war as an institution, albeit a less frequently studied one, is the *language* PMSCs use in communicating their activities. As initial studies by Joachim and Schneiker (2019, 2024) indicate, the terminology used by PMSCs and the ensuing meanings associated with such terminology do not automatically link with traditional discursive practices of state militaries. PMSC discourses would often conceptually link with domains such as humanitarian aid, training and capacity development or consulting. Indeed, in some cases, PMSCs discourses are strategically used to depict them as different from state militaries. This is both to help advertise their comparative advantages on the market for military and security services and, in some cases, to potentially disguise the true nature of the services they provide (Leander 2014). We argue that such ambiguities of language play a key part in *repositioning of institutions* – a process by which established institutions acquire new meanings and become embedded in alternative structures, practices, rules and actor constellations.

We suggest that in order to get an analytical grip on the ongoing repositioning of war as an institution, it is useful to study language and discursive practices of PMSCs. This includes capturing emergence of new recombined vocabularies (cf. Loewenstein et al. 2012) connecting PMSCs to multiple societal domains traditionally unrelated to war. To do so, our theoretical approach builds on sociological new institutionalism and on organizational discourse analysis, and we analyse terminology on the websites of PMSCs cooperating with the European Union (EU). Based on data from a new survey of PMSCs (Bátora and Koníková 2024), we created a corpus of text retrieved from 22 000 PMSC webpages. We use principal component analysis (PCA) and non-negative matrix factorization (NMF) to perform topic classification and dimensionality reduction on this corpus and show patterns of recombined vocabularies across multiple domains. We complement this analysis by illustrations of PMSCs recombined

practices in the field showing that language-based repositioning of war is also complemented by its practice-based repositioning.

Repositioning is a process by which established institutions acquire new meanings and become embedded in alternative discourses, structures and practices. Repositioning allows institutions to tap into new kinds of resources and recombine rules from across multiple domains. At the same time, institutions are also rendered more ambiguous and their legitimacy as guides and platforms for appropriate action is undermined. Repositioning is thus a form of institutional reconfiguration combining elements of institutional stability and institutional change: in part, institutions remain stable but, in part, they also get reconfigured by connecting to alternative institutional domains via organizational structures, practices and language. Obviously, a more comprehensive analysis of repositioning would focus on all these dimensions. The current article focuses primarily on the latter dimension of this process, but there is clear scope for further research on the repositioning of war as an institution.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section introduces an institutional theoretical perspective on war and discusses how the organizational basis of war – the state military establishments – adapt by introducing new organizational forms blending rules, resources and practices from multiple domains. It shows how organizational adaptations in the military are complemented by conceptual and doctrinal adaptations supporting the breakdown of institutionalized boundaries between various domains of warfare and other social domains connected with war. Focusing on PMSCs as a specific part of this development, the section then discusses how these organizations evade established categories by tapping into organizing principles from multiple domains. This multi-domain embeddedness of PMSCs represents a serious challenge to the ability of governments and other actors to categorize their activities and thereby to determine what rules and norms should govern interactions with them.

The second section introduces theoretical perspectives on organizational discourse analysis. It discusses how discourses are constitutive of institutions and how an analytical focus on the ambiguity of vocabularies and discourses helps in the analysis of repositioning of institutions. We introduce an analytical framework for capturing vocabularies in the web-based spaces shared by PMSCs. We operationalize this framework using text data from PMSCs linked with the EU to identify the latent thematic dimensions behind the self-portrayal of PMSCs' activities. Our findings show that through ambiguous language using recombined vocabularies PMSCs

reposition war by connecting it to various domains in the society and economy. The concluding section summarizes the findings and provides reflections about the scholarly and practical implications of the repositioning of war.

## War as an institution and the challenge of domain-blending in current military organizations

Institutions can be defined as enduring and inter-subjectively shared social structures that become taken for granted (Berger and Luckmann 1967). They structure behaviour of individuals and organizations in a society as they are "collections of interrelated rules and routines that define appropriate actions in terms of roles and situations" (March and Olsen 1989:160). Institutions emerge when "[h]umans create shared knowledge of routine organizing practices by developing collective typifications of the roles, role relationships, interactions, and material artifacts employed in such practices" (Ocasio 2023:4, see also Schatzki 2019).[3] Institutions, in other words, are embedded in structures, rules and practices of organizations that become physical representations of institutions in our societies across time and space. Hence, as March and Olsen (1989) point out, institutions are intermeshings of three systems: organizational structures and rules (meso-level), organizational practices (micro-level) and organizational environments consisting of other institutions and organizations (macro-level).

This definition goes also for institutions in the international society and applies to key institutions of modern state order such as sovereignty (Krasner 1988), diplomacy (Bull 1977, Wight 1977, Bátora 2005) and war (Tilly 1975, Holsti 1994). The modern notion of war as an institution and modern states have co-evolved in a series of mutually constitutive developments (Spruyt 1994, Scheidel 2017, Langewiesche 2019). As an institution of the modern state order, war is organizationally embedded in the military apparatuses of states (Bull 1977, van Creveld 1991, Holsti 2004). On the meso-level of organizational structures, the standard branches of the military encompass the army, the air force and the navy (more recent additions include space forces and cyber-defense forces). On the micro-level of practices, officers and soldiers in the

[3] The concept of *typification* is key to understanding how meanings are associated with an institution. As originally defined by Schütz (1932, 1944), social interactions in a well-institutionalized setting is enabled by the presence and uses of various typifications – inter-subjectively shared meanings attached to situations and phenomena in a given society. In an institutionalized setting, typifications are scripts guiding behaviour of incumbents of specific roles (Meyer 2008). Such typifications are scripts of appropriate behaviour of role incumbents in specific situations (Ocasio 2023:5). In other words, typifications can be defined as carriers of what March and Olsen (1989) call logic of appropriateness.

military are socialized into the role of guardians of state interests with a readiness and responsibility to fight for their nation and their state (Huntington 1957). This is anchored in a set of highly established and institutionalized practices, such as ceremonial performances of military oaths, conduct of military funerals or military parades, as well as wearing of uniforms and related symbols (Freeman 1948, Abrahamsson 1972, Joseph and Alex 1972). Specific forms of socialization and specific norms and practices separate professional military establishments from other societal spheres (Spendler 1948, Freeman 1955, Clausewitz 2007). Besides such practices and organizational structures, war as an institution is on the macro-level also embedded in international legal regimes, such as the Hague and Geneva Conventions. These legal norms regulate what war is; who can legitimately participate in war; and what constitutes legitimate conduct. As in any well-institutionalized domain, there are clear rules, norms, practices and expectations related to war. Finally – and of key importance to the context of the current analysis - war as an institution of the modern state order is also embedded in professional discourses – language and vocabularies - used by state military forces and defense establishments of states. This enables the maintenance of a specific military identity and resources as a separate sphere of society (Evetts 2003). There is also a specific type of vocabulary and language used by military forces – this includes professional terminology and acronyms that cannot be properly understood even by native speakers unless they are studied and practiced.[4] What is more, there is also a special professional language used by military forces as a way of labelling military situations and practices and which members of the professional military are socialized into (Janowitz 1971).

*Adaptation in military organizations: domain-blending*

In the course of the last two decades, the organizational basis of war as an institution of the modern state order has been changing due to several developments leading to blending of practices, rules and operational concepts across multiple institutional domains in the course of the last two decades (Kilcullen 2020). This is, of course, not an entirely new phenomenon – the establishment of various types of special forces (e.g. the UK's Special Air Service during World

[4] For a list of the most common military terminology used, for instance, by the US military see https://www.military.com/join-armed-forces/military-terms-and-jargon.html. The military also has its own alphabet – the International Ratiotelephony Spelling Alphabet (IRSA) – that has been globally standardized under the auspices of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). For the IRSA, see https://militaryalphabet.net/

War 2) – has done just that (MacIntyre 2016). Still, there is a growing trend in the military more broadly of entire branches adopting operational practices and rules typical of corporate actors or non-state actors (e.g. in the domain of cyber-defense) and/or of establishing organized platforms allowing systematic cooperation with the NGOs and with private corporations. An example of this is Estonia's Cyber Defense Unit combining military cyber defense elements and relatively large personnel resources (reserves) based out of the Estonian corporate-, academic- and NGO sector which regularly train for cyber defense operations and can switch and become military personnel in case a war breaks out (Kaska et al. 2013). Another example is Ukraine's *Aerorozvidka* (Air Reconnaissance) – an NGO of IT-enthusiasts operating drones and deployed on the frontlines of the war against Russia since 2014. This represents an innovative organizational model of how an NGO is incorporated into the organization of the state military (Bátora 2023).

Second, military organizations adapt and embrace the notion that multiple areas of expertise from within the military need to be delivered in a combined manner in operations (Avant 1994, Davidson 2010). Hence, addressing the growing challenges posed by Russia and China, the US army, for instance, has introduced the concept of Multi-Domain Task Forces (MDTFs). These are brigade-size units with enhanced capabilities for intelligence collection and analysis, cyber defense, air-defense and long-range artillery designed to deny enemy's access to an operational area and thereby enhance the US army's freedom of action (Feickert 2023). Emergence of such units challenges traditional institutional and conceptual distinctions between different branches of the military. The army and the air force, for instance, usually had quite distinct identities and, indeed, administrative procedures and involvement in national defense tasks (Allison and Zelikow [1971] 2003). Introduction of integrated cross-domain units changes the organizational dynamic and redraws the conceptual and procedural boundaries between different branches of the military.

Third, there have been doctrinal developments that have introduced new ways of understanding the very notion of war. In China, the strategic doctrine of *unrestricted warfare* was introduced already in the late 1990s (Qiao and Wang 1999). This concept is based on two mutually reinforcing principles including *a)* breaking down the conceptual boundaries and organizational limits between the traditional domain of the military and other domains; and *b)* combinations of resources, rules and practices across multiple domains – including various fields normally not belonging to the sphere of defense and the military. The latter would include what the

authors refer to as regulatory warfare, financial warfare, ecological warfare, information warfare etc. – i.e. various types of military- and non-military instruments combined and aimed at achieving a strategic objective in a conflict. The point of domain-blending, as Qiao and Wang (1999:181) argue, is to obtain "a completely new method of warfare called 'modified combined war that goes beyond limits'. Such a concept entails deploying a whole spectrum of methods of warfare ranging from hard-core *military methods* (e.g. conventional-, nuclear-, biological-, chemical warfare); *transmilitary methods* (e.g. diplomatic-, psychological-, guerilla-, terrorist warfare); and *non-military methods* (e.g. financial-, trade-, ecological-, drug-, media- and ideological warfare) (see also Kilcullen 2020:206). The point is that when power A is facing power B embracing a more traditional understanding of war and warfare (i.e. resting in the realm of the military methods), actual confrontation is most likely to ensue if activities performed by power A concentrate in the domain of military methods. However, if power A practices 'unrestricted warfare' and employs a range of transmilitary- and non-military methods, such activities may actually be less likely to trigger a military-reaction by power B (ibid., 204-205). In this way, 'unrestricted warfare' enables a power to perform what Kilcullen (2020:209-10) refers to as *conceptual envelopment* – by combining resources, rules and practices across multiple domains, the adversary ends up in a situation where s/he neither understands nor has the capacity to counter the respective threats. The result is that the adversary may be gradually defeated without noticing before it is too late, i.e. before a situation in which traditional military means are insufficient to counter the enveloping strategy or there is simply lack of will to fight (see also Bilms 2022).

A similar approach to warfare has been developing in Russia which is sometimes referred to as the *Gerasimov doctrine*. The principles were introduced by Valery Gerasimov – the then Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation Armed Forces[5] – in a brief article published in a Russian military-industrial magazine (Gerasimov [2013] 2016). The article posits out that the nature of modern war has changed:

> "The very "rules of war" have changed. The role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness." (ibid. p. 24)

As a result, argues Gerasimov, in conflicts with other great powers (and/or any other type of adversary), there is a need to expand the tool-box well beyond the military means. This means

[5] General Gerasimov was also the first deputy minister of defense of the Russian Federation at the time of writing.

that political, diplomatic, economic, informational, humanitarian and other non-military instruments need to be deployed much more readily and, possibly, in covert or open combination and coordination with military means. The very delimitation and definition of war hence becomes blurred as informational or economic measures may be interpreted as falling outside of the traditional definitions of warfare (hence the frequently used term 'hybrid war'). Again, the result may be ambiguity and inability of the adversary to distinguish when an attack is being performed and, thus, decreased capacity for active defensive measures.

In Western strategic thought, the above described approaches have been referred to as the development of *grey zones*. As Dobbs et al. (2020) point out,

> "[g]rey-zone activities are coercive statecraft actions short of war. The grey-zone is a mainly non-military domain of human activity in which states use national resources to deliberately coerce other states. States achieve grey-zone goals using multiple, apparently unrelated innocent/low attributable, mutually-supporting and synchronised statecraft techniques below the threshold of war. Grey-zone campaigns seek to exploit adversaries' weaknesses and suppress adversaries' response options, all the while achieving tangible national strategic aims.

The aim of setting up grey zones is to deliberately generate ambiguity about one's own strategic aims by employing instruments and tactics that falls outside traditional categories of military- and defense operations. This includes a spectrum of economic-, social-, political-, diplomatic-, informational- and ideological activities aimed at achieving the strategic goal of subduing an adversary without launching a war (ibid., Belo 2020).

*PMSCs as interstitial organizations: domain blending as the new normal*

The global rise of PMSCs has been studied by IR scholars, legal scholars and international political sociologists as a set of developments contributing to growing deinstitutionalization of the state-centric nature of war (Avant 2000, 2005, Singer 2001, Swed and Crosbie 2019). As organizations, the PMSCs have been embedded in multiple institutional domains. As Kinsey argues, they are based in a "unique business-military cross" (Kinsey 2006, see also Menard and Viollet 2012). They have also been characterized as *interstitial organizations* – tapping into rules, norms and practices of multiple institutional domains including defense, diplomacy,

humanitarian aid and intelligence and recombining these into new patterns (Bátora 2017, 2021, 2024). This has implications also for how PMSCs are perceived and how they present themselves to the public. When it comes to self-representation narratives of PMSCs, a key characteristic feature is their *intersectionality*. As Joachim and Schneiker (2019:118) argue:

> "intersectionality has a special meaning when it comes to these companies. It applies not just to the individual elements but to the different identities as a whole. These identities are powerful precisely because of the eclectic and ambivalent ways in which they can be combined. Chameleon-like, PMSCs project different images of themselves depending on their clients' demands, on the potential employees they want to recruit, and on their competitors. At the same time as companies are military, conventional businesses, or humanitarians, they are not; at the same time as companies can be all in one, military, corporate, and humanitarian, they also can be just any one of them; and at the same time as they can project to be a good and ethical soldier, they also have room to assume a less accepted role."

This practice-level ambiguity has implications for how the governments, business actors or the general public categorize these organizations and their activities. Indeed, given the blending of military-, diplomatic-, business-, humanitarian- and various other types of identities and narratives by PMSCs, it is increasingly difficult to conceptualize and categorize actions performed by PMSCs – be that on behalf of states, international organizations, NGOs or corporate actors (Leander 2014). This has implications for practices performed by PMSCs.

A standard insight in the literature on PMSCs is that they provide on a commercial basis what once used to be an exclusive prerogative of the state - defense- and security services (Singer 2001, Avant 2005, Kinsey 2006, 2023). From an industry-level vantage point there are different ideal types of PMSCs and most of them do *not* provide what would be considered combat services and, instead, fall within the purveyor of other types of services and/or institutional domains. Singer's (2001) 'tip-of-the-spear' *typology* is useful in categorizing these. He distinguishes three broadly defined types of PMSCs: 1) *military provider firms* – actually providing combat services and personnel involved in operations in the theater of war/conflict (e.g. pilots and gunners in helicopters); 2) *military consulting firms* – providing training as well as strategic and tactical analysis and advise supporting preparation of military operations but not directly participating in hostilities; and 3) *military support firms* – providing logistics,

airlift- and other transport capabilities, medical- and evacuation support, as well as diplomatic- and intelligence support, as well as psychological- and information operations and cyber-defense. When analyzing services hired by the US in their operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, it is clear that most of the services would fall within Singer's category 3 or 2 and only a small portion within category 1. Looking, for instance, at the US personnel in Iraq between 2003 and 2011, most of the contractor personnel were unarmed, performing consulting and support tasks and duties (Transforming Wartime Contracting 2011).

In another typology, Kinsey (2006) categorizes PMSCs according to their degree of lethality and degree of working for private- or public authority. Again, there are rather few PMSCs offering military-style services with high degrees of lethality close to what state military forces can offer. Most of the PMSCs operate with low degrees of lethality on contract for both public and private actors and offering a range of services falling *outside* the typical remit of military organizations.[6] Overall, as both Singer's and Kinsey's typologies indicate, the structure of the private military industry and the services offered suggest that increasing reliance of states and other actors on PMSCs in providing defense and security also leads to shifts in the nature of the organizational basis of defense and security.

While there is a mixture of military- and non-military functions and services on offer in the private military industry, there is also blending of resources, practices, rules and routines from multiple institutional domains *within individual companies*. Some PMSCs remain narrowly focused in one specialized domain (e.g. demining), but many actually provide services not just in multiple fields of expertise but, in fact, in multiple institutional domains (e.g. military, diplomacy, intelligence) (Krahmann and Friesendorf 2011, Bátora 2021, Bátora and Koníková 2024). As analyses of individual PMSCs show, their growth into various institutional domains is often led by business opportunities. The case of Blackwater is instructive. Originally a veterans' club / shooting range, it grew to a PMSC providing training to military- and police rapid reaction forces and to naval personnel, and later convoy security and close protection services to US governmental agencies in Afghanistan and Iraq, only to add a fleet of several

[6] Kinsey (2006:25-26) lists the services provided by ArmorGroup International operating at that time in 30 countries as follows: information and business intelligence; safeguarding brands; countering fraud; protecting operations in high-risk environments; protecting individuals from kidnap threat; humanitarian support; integrated electronic security solutions; computer security and forensic services. Another PMSC, Control Risks Group, had offices in 17 countries, operated in more than 130 countries and offered the following services at that time: political and security risk analysis; confidential investigations; pre-employment screening; security consultancy; crisis management and response; information security and investigation (ibid., p. 26-27).

dozen transport planes flying supplies to US forces in various operations, and eventually also setting up its in-house intelligence group – all this in about a decade (Scahill 2008). Similarly, PMSCs such as the US-based CACI[7], France's GEOS Group[8] or Sweden's Vesper Group[9] offered intelligence analysis as well as a spectrum of other analytical and technological services to their respective governmental agencies at the time of writing.

Besides the PMSCs own business models and structures, another reason for the blending of rules and practices across institutional domains when PMSCs are hired is the nature of *contracting practices* by international organizations, governments and other actors hiring PMSCs. A good example are UN peacekeeping missions. For example, the UN MONUSCO mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) contracts out 'security services' and publishes those as such while contracts for security equipment and operations of such equipment (e.g. military technology; protective barriers) are contracted out under other headings and hence not directly reported as 'security services' (Krahmann and Leander 2019:171). In such a context, operational practices of PMSCs are hence *different* from the military-style operations of well-armed teams of contractors stereo-typically associated with PMSCs. Instead, PMSCs providing security to the UN operations in the DRC are often "unarmed, local and low key" (ibid., p. 172).[10]

When it comes to practices of PMSCs in the field, they combine practices from multiple institutional domains – most notably the domain of the military (public domain) and the corporate domain (private domain) (Batka et al. 2020, Batka et al. 2022). This is the case in Swedish PMSCs working closely with the Swedish government. As Berndtsson (2014, 2019) and Berndtsson and Stern (2013) observe, there is a high degree of 'publicness' in the way these PMSCs conduct their business. This relates to the fact that there is a widespread practice of hiring former members of the Swedish armed forces and the Swedish police who bring in such practices with them. In addition to the blend of public and private domains, PMSCs also often blend practices and rules across multiple functional domains. As Bátora's (2024) case study of Vesper Group shows, it is normal for contractors in field missions to switch between roles as,

[7] https://www.caci.com/what-we-do
[8] https://www.groupegeos.fr/services
[9] https://vespergroup.se/en/services/
[10] Krahmann and Leander (2019:173) also note, however, that locally hired PMSCs also exhibit various deterrence practices and they publicly communicate (on websites or through visibly well-protected perimeters of buildings) that they are capable of wielding armed force.

for instance, close protection officers, technical repair and maintenance staff for vehicles, and representatives at diplomatic events – all sometimes within the same day. This multi-role switching is something the PMSCs regularly promote as a special skill-set of former military personnel employed in the private military industry – something that is used as a unique selling point (Joachim and Schneiker 2024:19).

Similarly, PMSCs use practices in the field that are transposed from the domains of intelligence agencies, the diplomatic services or the development aid agencies (Bátora 2024). Indeed, some PMSCs thus 'act like a state' providing private profit-oriented services on behalf of or in the service of state interests. There are even cases when PMSCs present their services as serving the interests of 'Europe' and thereby establish the actorness of the EU (Bátora and Koníková 2024, Batka and Bátora 2024).

Given the normalcy of the blending of public and private resources and practices in military- and other organizations, the analytical challenge is to capture where and how language-driven institutional repositioning of war happens. The point is to analytically identify the social and linguistic space of institutional repositioning – i.e. the linguistic patterns and practices shifting meanings related to war as an institution. The next section outlines an analytical framework for doing that.

## Ambiguous vocabularies and shifting organizational discourses: analyzing institutional repositioning

When studying institutional repositioning through discourses, our basic social ontological point of departure is the critical realist approach to language (Fairclough 2005, see also Loewenstein et al. 2012). This means that we see both the natural- and the social world as constituted independently of any specific human being and its conceptualizations of it. Still social constructs and conceptualizations of social phenomena captured in discourses (and vocabularies) allow for shared meanings and thus interpretations of these social phenomena and represent a key element in what binds society together. Indeed, we share Searle's (1995:59) view that language is constitutive of institutions. This insight has been around for a long time

and found its formulations in Wittgenstein's focus on words as material objects (*Gegenstände*) with specific contextualized meanings and, in turn, practices embedded in particular language enabling us to make sense of these practices (Wittgenstein 1994). Foucault (1970) also understands discourse as constituted by a mutually constitutive relation between language and practices, and demonstrates this, inter alia, by exploring how particular animals are named in Hebrew – a language he considers closest to what was once – according to some interpretations - the original universal language of humankind. He cites the work of 16th Century French botanist and linguist, Claude Duret, pointing out that animal names in Hebrew capture particular behavioural traits:

> "Thus the stork, so greatly lauded for its charity towards its father and its mother, is called in Hebrew *Chasida*, which is to say, meek, charitable, endowed with pity… The horse is named *Sus*, thought to be from the verb *Hasas*, unless that verb is rather derived from the noun, and it signifies to rise up, for among all four-footed animals, the horse is the most proud and brave, as Job depicts it in Chapter 39" (Foucault 1970:36, italics in the original).

As this example indicates, language is used to not just to label but, in fact, to position objects or beings in sets of complex social relations and meanings within a given social context. This then generates expectations about behaviour and/or about relationality of objects or beings in a social context. Bringing these insights into IR and launching what eventually became the practice-turn in international relations, Neumann (2002) shows how practices in diplomacy as a key institution of the modern state order are embedded in particular language of foreign ministries and, at the same time, how statements are also performed actions.

In the current analysis, we build on these insights. Yet our focus is on how organizational forms and institutional structures are carried and generated by particular vocabularies (Loewenstein et al. 2012). In particular, our analytical focus is on how ambiguities of vocabulary and language can generate conditions for change dynamics in institutionalized structures and practices.

In every institutional domain there are social categories that constitute that domain (Hannan 2019). Once, however, there is blending of categories, it is increasingly difficult for us to categorize situations, identify what rules and norms apply in those situations, and choose appropriate action.[11] In other words, blending of categories destabilizes established patterns of

[11] As scholars of organizations have long maintained, ambiguity in categorizing situations and rules is a usual challenge in organizational decision-making (see, for instance, March and Simon 1958, March and Olsen 1976, March 1994). This goes also for any modern legal attempts to encode international practices into legal rules as these also continue to be subject of context dependent contestation and (re-)interpretation (Koskenniemi 1990).

appropriate action pertaining to specific institutional domains. Conversely, relative clarity of concepts and categories pertaining to a particular institutional domain makes action within such a domain more effective in that situations are readily categorized and cognitive search for alternatives in choosing appropriate rules for action is minimized (March and Simon 1957, March 1994).

Blending of categories also destabilizes 'typifications' (cf Schütz 1970): it is no longer clear what an incumbent is supposed to do in a given situation. Or, alternatively, if there are multiple meanings (and roles) attached to a specific organization (or individual in that organization), there can be confusion as to what role this organization (and/or individual) are supposed to play in what situation.

Typifications spread and become institutionalized through *objectivation*. The latter process "occurs through collective typifications of routine interactions by types of actors and roles and their reproduction through shared language and non-linguistic symbols" (Ocasio 2023:5). Language and symbols thus constitute a key element in the reproduction and spread of institutions (Zucker 1977, Scott 2000). As Phillips, Lawrence and Hardy (2004:637) argue, analysis of discourses (i.e. bodies of text pertaining to a specific phenomenon or institutional domain) is crucial in capturing processes through which social entities such as organizations and institutions emerge and change. Hence, "institutions are constituted by the structured collections of texts that exist in a particular field and that produce the social categories and norms that shape the understandings and behaviours of actors" (ibid., p. 638). Actions and discourses are mutually constitutive, and they are both productive of- and constrained by institutions (ibid., p. 639-40).[12]

This has implications for institutions and for the operation of the respective institutional (or organizational) fields[13] sustaining them. Following this approach, to capture a discourse, it is

Still, we would contend that the categorization challenge gets even more complicated once the very labelling of political and social phenomena – due to blended vocabularies – is made more ambiguous still. Hence, the current study's focus on language as a carrier and an enabler of institutional repositioning.

[12] This line of reasoning resonates well with the way proponents of the practice turn in IR conceptualize the mutually constitutive relationship between practices and discourses. See, for instance, Neumann (2002) or Adler and Pouliot (2011).

[13] While concept of *field* is often associated with bourdieuian sociology (see Bourdieu 1990), the current study focuses more specifically on the interplay between vocabularies and organizational- and institutional change dynamics in- and between fields. Thus, we build on the notion of *organizational fields* as defined by new institutionalist approaches in organizational sociology (for a standard account see DiMaggio and Powell [1983] 1991).

useful to focus on a particular *social space* (cf. Phillips et al 2004:647) – in our case the social space delineated by the discourse of PMSCs.

At the same time, it is also the case that discourses operating within the social space of one particular institutional field can draw upon discourses belonging to other institutional fields and/or spanning multiple institutional fields (Lawrence and Phillips 2002). This leads to innovation and we can thus capture emergence of new organizational forms and/or new patterns of institutionalized action (ibid.). A useful way of identifying key features of an institutional field is to focus on *vocabularies* present in the respective field.

*Analyzing vocabularies as carriers and generators of institutional logics*

Vocabularies are "structured systems of cultural categories that generate meaning and enable and constrain social practices" (Loewenstein et al. 2012:63). As already Burke's work from the 1930s has shown, names and categories we use to describe social phenomena have direct implications for attitudes we form regarding these phenomena and, as a consequence, also for actions that we take in relation to the categorized phenomena (Burke 1935, 1937).[14] Indeed, the process of 'sensemaking' precedes attitudes formation (Weick 1985, Zerubavel 1997). First we need to decide what we see before we can form an attitude as to whether we like what we see (March and Olsen 1989:39-45). Meaning is generated through vocabularies and this has then direct implications for actions. Naming a phenomenon in a certain way has direct implications for categorization of situations and, indeed, for invoking appropriate roles and actions in relation to those situations (ibid.). Vocabularies are thus central to what March and Olsen conceptualize as *logic of appropriateness* – an institutionalized way of linking roles, situations and actions (ibid., p. 23). To provide an example from the field the current study addresses, it makes a clear difference if a situation is categorized as a 'war' or if it is categorized as 'fight against organized crime' or, to use a more recent discursive innovation if it is labeled as a 'special military operation'. Categorization of situations has direct implications for what rules, resources and practices are deemed appropriate. While both 'war' and 'organized crime' are well institutionalized categories and there are hence clear implications in terms of what actions are taken and what practices are considered normal, this is much less clear in case of innovative

[14] These insights were also foundational for the work on institutionalized social interactions carried out later by Goffman (1959, 1979) and Geertz (1980) as well as complimentary to the work on typifications carried out by Schütz (1932, 1944).

labels such as 'special military operation' or in cases of PMSCs terminology referring to flexible terms denoting actions such as training, secure transport and logistics, perimeter security or security analysis. In the cases, there are high degrees of ambiguity enabling various kinds of norms, rules and practices to be applied and/or paralyzing activation of counter-measures.

As the previous examples indicate, vocabularies are key to categorization and institutionalized action. But how do they operate and how does the study of vocabularies help us in analyzing institutional fields?

*Ambiguity of vocabularies and institutional innovation*

Well-institutionalized fields are characterized by clear meanings associated with discourses and vocabularies used within the context of such fields. Identifying a vocabulary structure of a given social field allows for identification of what institutional logics (cf. Friedland and Alford 1991) and – by extension – what organizational forms are present in this field. Yet, most fields also feature multiple institutional logics and legitimate principles[15] and actors within fields may choose to draw upon, exploit and recombine multiple sets of rules and practices generating new recurrent patterns and thereby innovation (Olsen 2010:17). As, for instance, Ruef (1999) has shown, the field of healthcare in the US has been characterized by multiple overlapping institutional logics (as evidenced by different types of vocabularies) – the market logic, the professional logic and the community logic. The result of the overlaps has been uncertainty and ambiguity about appropriate roles and rules applying to actors in the field as well as emergence of various new recombined organizational forms (see also Padgett and Powell 2012). Vocabularies are, thus, both indicative and generative of new organizational forms. Those, in turn, indicate shifts in the organizational basis of an institutional field.

Situations of blending of organizational forms and resources within a field may result in two types of ambiguity.[16] First, it may result in ambiguity as a structural condition enabling

[15] Indeed, as Eisenstadt (1964) points out in his classical study of institutionalization, the very process of stabilization of an institutional order entails formation and stabilization of endogenous anti-systemic structures and practices within the same order.

[16] A key student of *ambiguity* in decision-making in modern governments, James G. March, defines it as "features of decision making in which alternative states are hazily defined or in which they have multiple meanings, simultaneously opposing interpretations. Students of ambiguity argue that information may not resolve misunderstandings of the world; that the 'real' world may itself be a product of social construction, thus

flexibility in interpretation of rules and practices (Olsen 2010). Second, it may also enable ambiguity as an instrumental strategy chosen by actors (March 1994). In both cases, language is of key importance as a way of creating, establishing and communicating meanings and exploiting its ambiguities for various purposes. This is particularly important in decision-making in politics and beyond. As March (ibid., 211) points out,

> "understanding decision-making involves understanding the ways in which language carries, elaborates, and creates meaning. […] Decision making, like legal interpretation, extracts meanings from language. As decision makers look for meaning in words, they draw on the subtleties of linguistic undertones, finding new interpretations that are immanent in words rather than imposed on them."

Coming back to the first type of ambiguity outlined above, blending of organizing principles within an institutional field may lead to the rise of 'grey zones' in Pouliot's (2021) sense – situations when rules in an organized setting are made and codified into a specific language on the go leading to gradual shifts in what comes to the dominant praxis in the field. There are two ideal-typical models of this process originally proposed by Czarniawska (2009) – pyramid and anthill – the former one a top down model of designing new rules in an instrumental fashion and the latter one a more organic type of gradual adaptation of rules and practices based on multiple inputs from various parts of a field. Pouliot (2021) argues that generation and codification of new rules and practices in ambiguous grey-zones should rather be defined as combined 'pyranthills' – recombining rules, practices and indeed language from multiple sources. Structural ambiguity thus requires innovation in how language is used and allows for high degrees of flexibility and multiple meanings attached to new organizational forms emerging through recombination.

This is also a key insight in the extensive line of work on the emergence of new organizational forms. As Padgett and Ansell (1993) point out, recombination of multiple roles, resources and rule-sets allows actors to also generate *multi-vocal actions* – actions that can be labeled and interpreted in multiple ways in relation to multiple rule-sets in different fields. Similarly, recombination, transposition and refunctionality of structures, rules and practices across fields also leads to emergence of new language and vocabulary capturing the emergent patterns of recurrent actions. Indeed, such linguistic capturing of new organizational forms is key in

not so much discovered as invented; that interpretations of experience and desires may be fundamentally ambivalent rather than simply uncertain; and that ambiguity may be used to augment understanding through imagination" (March 1994:179).

stabilization of such innovations. This is in line with the above outlined model connecting discourse and action as suggested by Phillips et al. (2004).

Multi-vocality is also a useful way of how ambiguity can be harnessed by decision-makers in coalition building in support of actions. As March argues, that is directly linked to terminology and language used: "it is easier to conceal or ignore disagreements if policies are written with provisions or terminology that can be interpreted differently by different people. In assembling a coalition to support a policy, it is often necessary to make the terms of the agreement unclear in order to hide or suppress conflicts" (March 1994:170). In crisis management operations or security policy involving warfare, you can use PMSCs and describe their services using ambiguous language (e.g. security analysis, training of troops in tactical maneuver in the field, secure transport and logistics, security consulting). Using vocabulary that is unclear would, for instance, enable easier buy-in of coalition partner governments or publics into security operations.

Finally, the above discussed nature of PMSCs as interstitial organizations and their 'intersectionality' provide for structural conditions promoting ambiguity of language and vocabularies used to describe their services. Indeed, as Joachim and Schneiker (2019, 2024) show, the 'chameleon-like' nature of PMSCs provides for them appearing differently across time (shape-shift linguistic labels and meanings associated with their services in different types of operations) and across space (shape-shift linguistic labels and meanings associated with their services in relation to different types of clients).[17] Again, this conceptual elasticity allows for the development and implementation of innovative practices in war and in other types of security operations.

As pointed out in the above, there has been a significant rise in the uses of PMSCs in wars, crisis management operations and other defense- and security-related contexts world-wide since the end of the Cold War (Singer 2001, Avant 2005). Indeed, some major powers – including the US - actually now can no longer go to war without involving numerous PMSCs providing various services to their armed forces (Kinsey 2023). Hence, the current impact of

[17] As Leander (2014) points out in her analysis of the US national intelligence contracting practices, systematic involvement of private firms in the delivery of various national security services leads to *enmeshment* – a situation when the boundaries of the private and the public sphere and, indeed, the very definition of these categories, become ambiguous or 'chimera-like'.

the PMSCs ambiguous language is likely to have a correspondingly significant effect on war as an institution. To analytically capture the ambiguous language used by PMSCs, the current analysis thus focuses on the *vocabulary structure* featured on the websites of PMSCs linked to the EU. By doing that we can identify both the distinct institutional logics connected with the field of the PMSCs (e.g. military, diplomacy, intelligence) as well as *blended vocabularies* and logics and the entities carrying those. In other words, we should attempt to perform a *social x-ray* (cf. Korff et al 2015) of the emergence of new institutional patterns related to the discourse of PMSCs and thus identify possible discursive repositioning of war as an institution. In doing this, we build on the concept of institutional vocabularies as developed by Loewenstein et al. (2012). By identifying vocabulary structure within an institutional field, this approach enables identification of new blended institutional logics and thereby also identify an ongoing dynamic of institutional repositioning of war. In the current analysis, blended and ambiguous discourses as presented on PMSCs websites serve as one of the indicators of an ongoing re-positioning of war. In the next section, we present our method, data collection and findings.

**Data and analysis**

It is rare for PMSCs to discuss their activities at length in public, but many of them have some form of online presence. To get a sense of the vocabularies of PMSCs' discourse, we search for the websites of 564 PMSCs with a demonstrable link to EU foreign policy activities.[18] For 229 of these we managed to find their official website with at least one page in English. The text extracted in July 2023 from the approximately 22 000 English webpages of these companies forms the basis for our quantitative analysis.

We first build a vocabulary of unique words used by each company on their website. Because text extracted from PMSCs' websites varies significantly in structure, quality and length, looking only at the presence or absence of words rather than their magnitude mitigates the effect of website heterogeneity on our analysis of discourse. In addition, we categorize words in PMSCs' vocabularies into 25 different topics covering both military and non-military issues (see Appendix). Our thematic dictionary focuses on discriminant words which are unlikely to

[18] The database includes PMSCs operational between 2014 and 2023. Three criteria were used for including PMSCs: 1) legal seat in one or more EU-member states (including UK as former member state); or 2) at least one contract in the field of security- and defense services with one or more EU member states; or 3) at least one contract by EU institutions in the field of security and defense (including Common Security and Defence Policy missions and operations).

be shared across topics and which offer significant informational value in a context frequently characterized by vacuous, promotional language. This method of constructing topics is more laborious than commonly applied machine learning techniques, but it offers more interpretability and certainty that topic classification is not driven by noise (Wilkerson and Casas 2017). More generally, the reason this kind of classification of words can impart useful insight into issue attention is that language use is statistically patterned[19] – issues and concepts in human language attract a non-random combination of terms which exhibits in their frequency and co-occurrence. At the same time, the categorization of terms does not prevent us to subsequently analyse vocabulary blending; it merely ensures that we are examining theoretically relevant linguistic information, rather than trivial or irrelevant language.

Applying the dictionary to the document-vocabularies lands us with a document-feature matrix (229 x 25) where each cell counts the number of matches per document and dictionary topic. Figure 1 summarizes the document and feature frequencies for our dictionary categories. These counts are subsequently normalized by the total number of matches in a document to control for varying document-vocabulary size and by the total number of matches per feature to control for variation among dictionary entries and the baseline probability of a word appearing in text.

[19] This point has been most starkly exemplified by the near-perfect mimicry of human language by large language models which exploit at a massive scale the existence of patterns in language use.

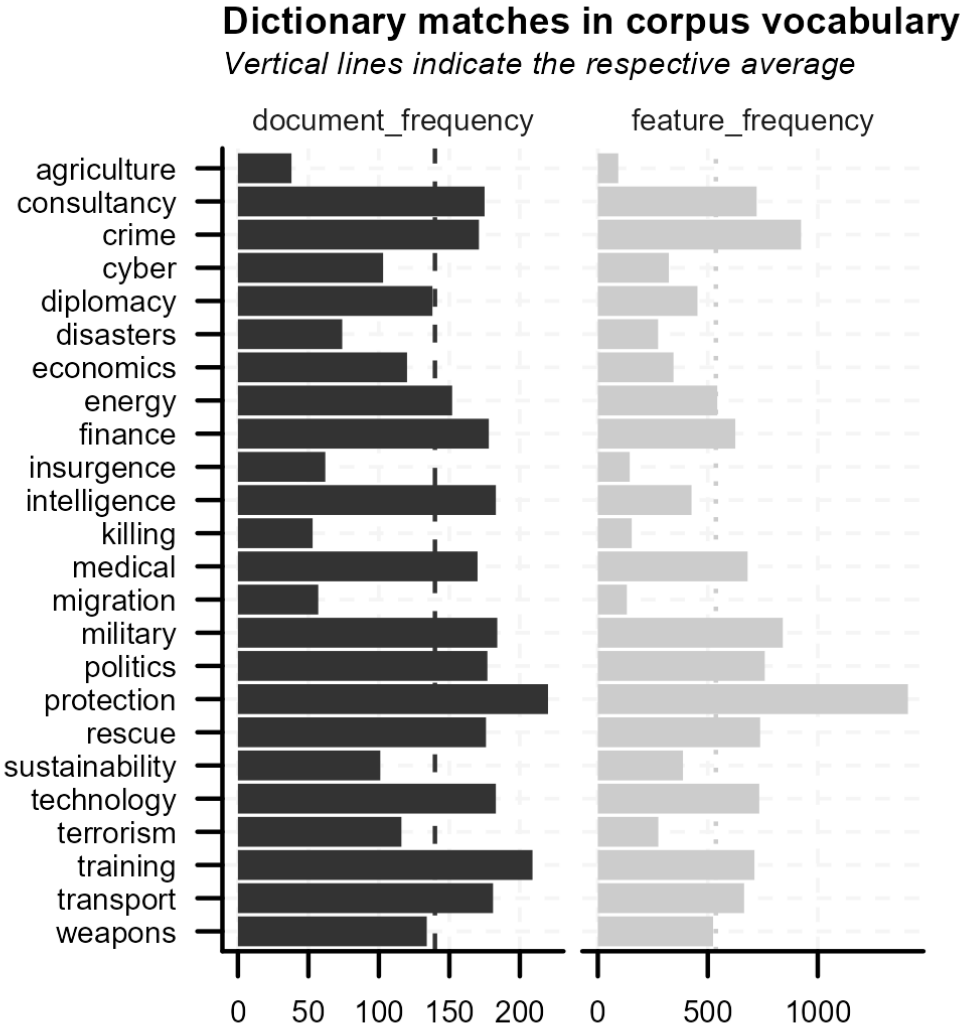



Figure 1: Document and dictionary feature frequencies

We can see in Figure 1 that the kind of vocabulary PMSCs use as part of their online presence goes beyond merely military and security themes. Not only adjacent topics such as training and rescue, but also non-traditional themes like finance, energy and technology appear frequently on websites (feature frequency) of relatively many PMSCs (document frequency). Nonetheless, consistent with the basic idea of PMSCs as security providers, words associated with protection are by some distance the most common in the vocabulary corpus. It should be noted that our dictionary approach does not place any weights on the issues or the words associated with them. This is both a limitation and a conscious analytical choice – we do not want to make *a priori* assumptions about which topics PMSCs consider important beyond a broad selection.

One drawback of our dictionary approach is the allocation of words to categories and the degree to which the features might be correlated (e.g. military and weapons). We were careful in selecting words which are unlikely to be associated with more than just a single topic. Still, one could make different choices about the word-topic allocation and end up with somewhat different results. While we accept there are a number of ways one could meaningfully slice up the thematic space of the PMSCs' vocabularies – and we illustrate this point below by using two different dimensionality-reducing methods – we are ultimately interested in finding out whether thematic language maps onto latent dimensions broadly corresponding to a traditional, security-oriented role of PMSCs, on the one hand, and a "new" issue one, on the other. Whatever the exact initial topical classification of PMSCs' vocabularies, we expect a significant portion of the variation in the data to be reducible to such two dimensions.

We use principal component analysis (PCA) to perform dimensionality reduction on the normalized document-feature matrix. PCA produces principal components, which are linear combinations of the original features (Labrín and Urdinez 2020). Suitably for our setup, principal components are orthogonal – to the extent that our dictionary topics are correlated with each other, the principal components distil the feature variation into uncorrelated latent variables. More simply put, PCA enables us to measure the extent to which PMSCs' issue attention overlaps across the different topics and reduce the overlapping variation into a two-dimensional space about which we have prior theoretical expectations, namely that it consists of a security (in the strict sense) dimension and a separate non- or "soft-" security dimension. We judge the extent to which we find support for our theoretical expectations by examining the underlying variables' contribution to the reduced dimensions (the first two principal components), as well as by considering the overall amount of variation in the text data explained by the principal components.

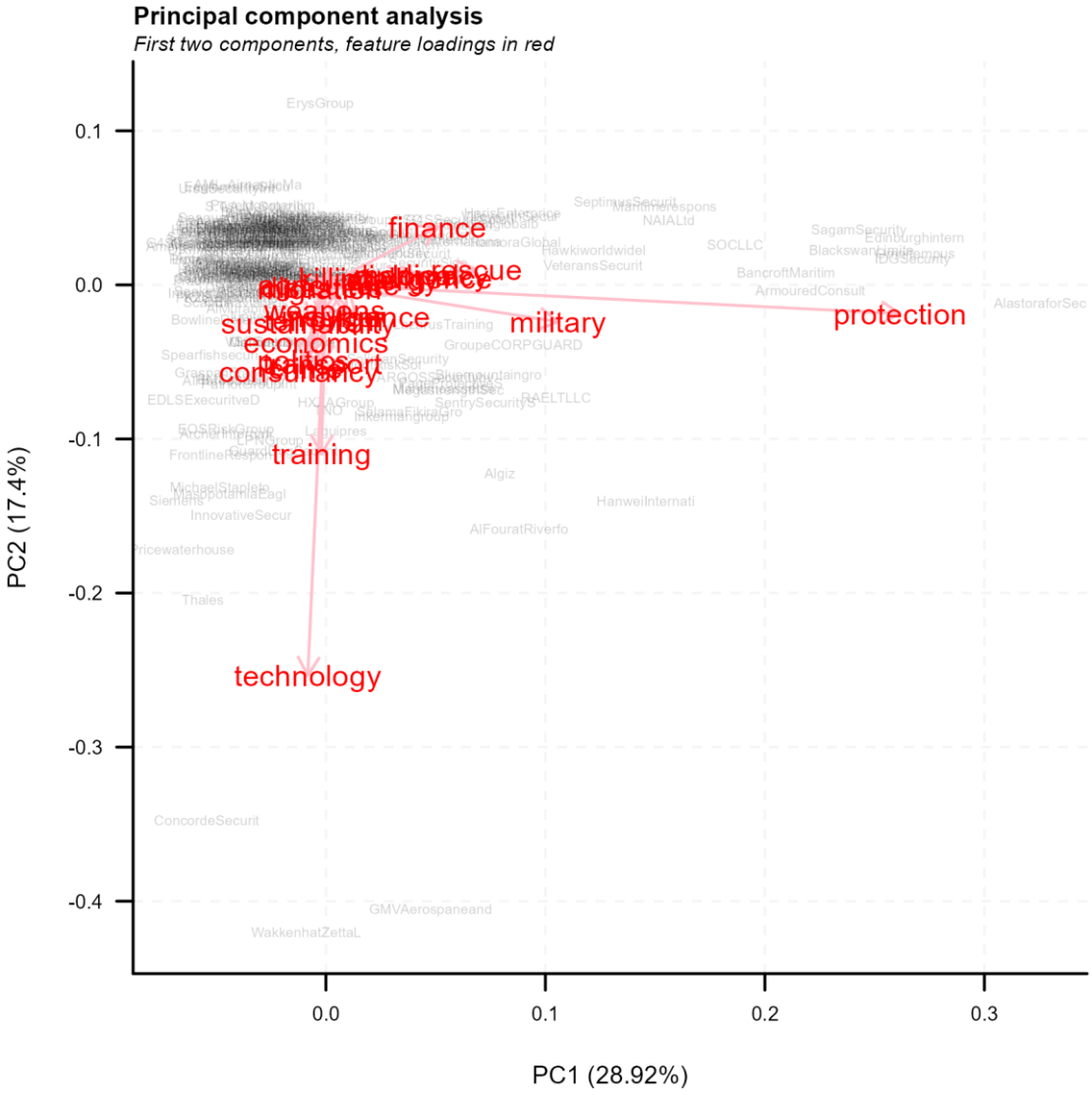



Figure 2: First two principal components, variance explained and feature loadings. In light grey are the PMSCs as located in the reduced two-dimensional space

Figure 2 visualizes the PMSCs' vocabularies in a two-dimensional space constructed by the first two principal components. Together, the first two dimensions explain some 46% of the total variation in the data. The first component, plotted along the x-axis, is strongly correlated with the protection theme, the most dominant feature in the underlying matrix. Supported by military discourse, we can plausibly claim that the first latent dimension corresponds to the expected traditional role of PMSCs as security providers for hire. The first component is the most important from the perspective of explaining the total variation in the text data with almost 29% of it being reducible to what can be considered security in the traditional or strict sense.

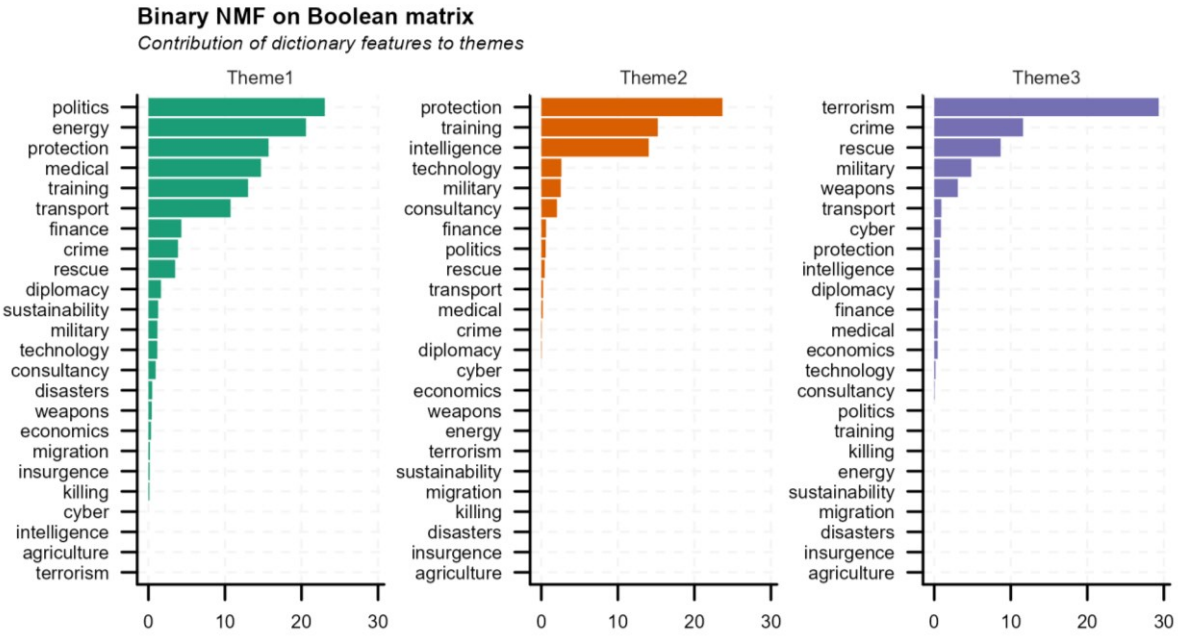
The second component, which explains less variation than the first (approximately 17%), appears to support the notion that PMSCs' differential emphasis on non-military topics is an important factor for locating them in the discursive space. More specifically, the strongest driver on the second dimension, plotted along the y-axis, are mentions of technology, followed by training and consulting services.

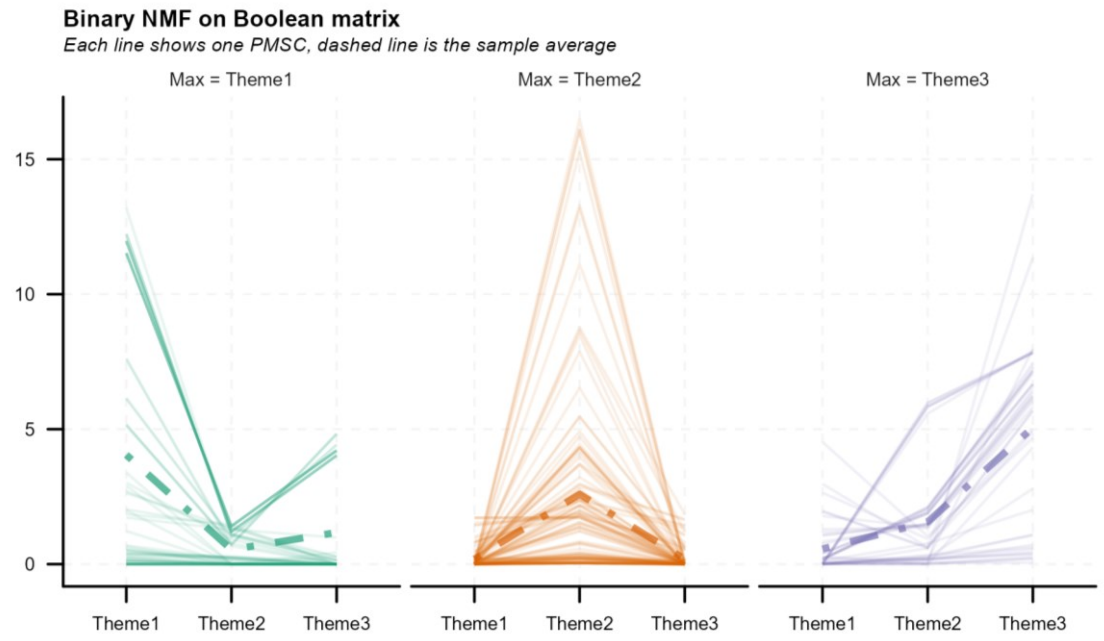
What is immediately notable from Figure 2 is that the majority of PMSCs in our analysis do not focus their discourse on traditional military and security mandates. Instead, many PMSCs' vocabularies address issues beyond the first or even the second most important discursive dimension. Given that even large consulting and technology companies like PwC and Siemens feature on our list of PMSCs – both of which provide some face validity to the dimensions by scoring very low on the first component and high in magnitude on the second component – the variation in company profiles is understandable. We must also stress that while the first two principal components identified by PCA explain the most variation in PMSCs' vocabularies, the totality of the companies' language is understandably not reducible to just the two dimensions. There are nuances in how PMSCs differentiate themselves substantively that go beyond the extent to which they use the language of security/military and technology/consulting. The more granular results shown below shed some light on systematic differences beyond this dichotomy.

An alternative method of identifying latent dimensions in our data is non-negative matrix factorization (NMF). Unlike PCA, NMF does not maximize variance under an orthogonality constraint but instead decomposes the data into non-negative components by minimizing a cost function with the goal of the product of the two components approximating the original matrix. Matrix multiplication rules enable the original $m \times n$ matrix $V$ to be represented as two lower dimensional matrices $W$ ($m \times k$, feature matrix) and $H$ ($k \times n$, coefficient matrix) where $k$ is set outside the algorithm. This method is only substantively meaningful under the assumption that there is an interpretable latent structure in the data. Nonetheless, by deploying NMF we are still aiming to better understand the overlap in PMSC discourses across the various issue areas, as with PCA.

NMF for topic modelling is normally performed on the document-word count matrix. However, to contain uninformative sources of heterogeneity in websites and dictionary categories, we recode our dictionary-based matrix as Boolean and apply a modified version of NMF tailored

to binary input data (Tomé et al 2015). Compared to standard NMF implementations, binary NMF scales the approximate matrix using the logistic function during updating and minimizes binary cross-entropy loss (also known as log-likelihood loss) instead of mean squared error.[20] We choose $k = 3$ for our main analysis to broaden the exploration of the latent structures. We report additional results from $k = 2, 4$ models in the appendix.




[20] We provide a simple implementation of binary NMF in the programming language R, see (masked for review).

Figure 3: Binary NMF results (top: feature matrix; bottom: coefficient matrix)

Figure 3 reports the binary NMF results. The upper panel shows the contribution of the dictionary topics being present on a PMSC's website to what we call a theme – a latent feature resulting from NMF decomposition. Similarly to the first principal component explored above,[21] the second theme loads primarily on protection, followed by training and intelligence. This theme thus describes the core security mandate of PMSCs. The third theme also relates to security but with an even narrower focus especially on terrorism, crime and rescue operations. The first theme is the most mixed and is mostly driven by mentions of politics and energy, both of which belong to the non-military realm. Alongside protection the third theme also includes medical and transport discourse, suggesting in line with our theorization that PMSCs' involvement can nowadays be much broader and go significantly beyond military deployments.[22] It is worth noting that when we enable the algorithm to search for a fourth latent structure, the theme it identifies concerns sustainability and technology (see Appendix).

The lower panel in Figure 3 shows how prevalent the themes are in each company's discourse. PMSCs for whom the third theme (terrorism, crime) is the most dominant tend to score, on average, relatively high also on the second theme which relates to security as well. Vice versa, this is less so the case. There are many PMSCs that focus almost exclusively on issues captured by the second theme (protection, training, intelligence), as visible by the steep peaks in the second panel. These companies arguably fit best the traditional image of PMSCs. Conversely, a subset of the mixed-role companies scoring high on the first theme also discussed the third theme.

## Conclusion

Over the last three decades, PMSCs have become ubiquitous in the delivery of security services in various types of crisis management operations and wars. As this article shows, the language

[21] We stress that while both recover latent structures from the data, PCA and NMF are different dimensionality reduction methods. Unlike principal components, the themes obtained through NMF are not individually variance maximizing or ordered. We number the themes for ease of reference only – theme 1 is not more or less important than theme 2.

[22] The prevalence of medical discourse is in our case likely affected by temporal proximity to the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020s.

used by PMSCs in describing their activities, functions, organizational features, capabilities and aims is nowadays ambiguous by drawing on vocabularies from multiple domains not directly related to war. The language of PMSCs represents a significant shift away from typical military discourse traditionally characterizing war as an institution. This indicates that a repositioning of war has been taking place.

To analyse PMSC discourse, we built on a database of 564 PMSCs linked with the EU and scraped their websites generating a corpus of text from over 22 000 individual webpages from 229 PMSCs' websites with at least one page in English. Our findings based on topic classification and dimensionality reduction show that two sets of topics stand out in the PMSCs discursive space: the first pertains, more traditionally, to military and protection, while the second encompasses training and technology. We also find that the majority of PMSCs use language that is mixed and falls within a relatively ambiguous area including vocabularies from the domains of the economy, politics, energy, intelligence, diplomacy and others. We arrive at similar conclusions regarding the partial reducibility of PMSC discourse to military-civilian dimensions using both PCA or NMF for the identification of latent themes in the vocabularies.

These findings suggest that institutional *repositioning* is taking place. Repositioning is a process by which institutionalized categories (such as war) get linguistically and in terms of structures and practices connected to and embedded within different institutional domains. If war as a concept gets systematically linked with vocabularies, structures and practices from domestic politics, business and crime-management, it is no longer clear that we are capable of distinguishing activities performed by actors and categorize them as 'war' – in the traditional sense. Discursive repositioning shifts meanings related to war and thereby also expectations of who legitimate actors and what legitimate forms of behaviour in war are. Thus – when combined with corresponding repositioning shifts at the level of structures and practices – key tenets of war as an institution are gradually and potentially radically redefined.

Yet, stabilization of meanings around a new repositioned equilibrium is not a given. Institutions function on inter-subjectively shared meanings. In a situation of discursive repositioning, the possibility of shared meanings is severely undermined and replaced by a myriad of possible meanings – highly individualized based on how individuals perceiving a situation are looking at it. The emerging meaning becomes overlaid by layers of individual-specific connotations.

The result is a *meaning-mire* where well-established categories such as war are repositioned and possibly replaced by a multiplicity of highly individualized meanings.

However, as we show, it is not just language and vocabularies that reposition meanings. The uses of PMSCs are also characterized by a whole spectrum of organizational structures and practices which have at face value only a tangential connection to military or combat operations (advice, intelligence, diplomacy, logistics, training). This is especially the case in PMSCs with multiple domains of activity. Thus, the study of institutional repositioning through language should be complemented with a corresponding focus on the repositioning of organizational structures and practices.

We argued that the ongoing repositioning of war was brought about by shifts in military doctrines. When, as in the case of the Chinese doctrine of 'unrestricted warfare', anything can be categorized as warfare, then it becomes uncertain what war is. This leads to profound ambiguities when not just war-related actions of states and other actors but the very categorization of these actions are rendered unclear.

War in the second decade of the 21st century is organized in a different way than in the late 20th century. Today, it relies on a broader organizational basis encompassing a range of organizations belonging to various spheres of the society and economy. This corroborates our findings on vocabularies – war is being repositioned into other domains of society and economy. If war is becoming a multi-vocal phenomenon (in the Padgett and Ansell sense), spanning multiple social domains and no longer clearly delineated within the traditional legal and institutional boundaries, it is also far less clear how states organize for war, who the legitimate participants in wars are and, indeed, what the legitimate forms of conduct of war are. Moreover, if the dictum of historical sociologists like Tilly (1975), Spruyt (1994) and Langewiesche (2019) holds, that war made states and states made war, then a repositioning of war should also lead to shifts in the nature of the state, of its relations with the society and the economy. The findings in the current analysis indicate that to study such macro-level transformations of institutional orders it may be useful to shift the analytical focus from clearly observable major breaking points in history towards the more mundane yet significant gradual and fluid repositioning of institutions via language, organizational structures and practices. The current analysis demonstrated the usefulness of focusing on the first dimension. The latter two dimensions will need to be addressed more systematically in future research.

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**Appendix: Supplementary Materials**

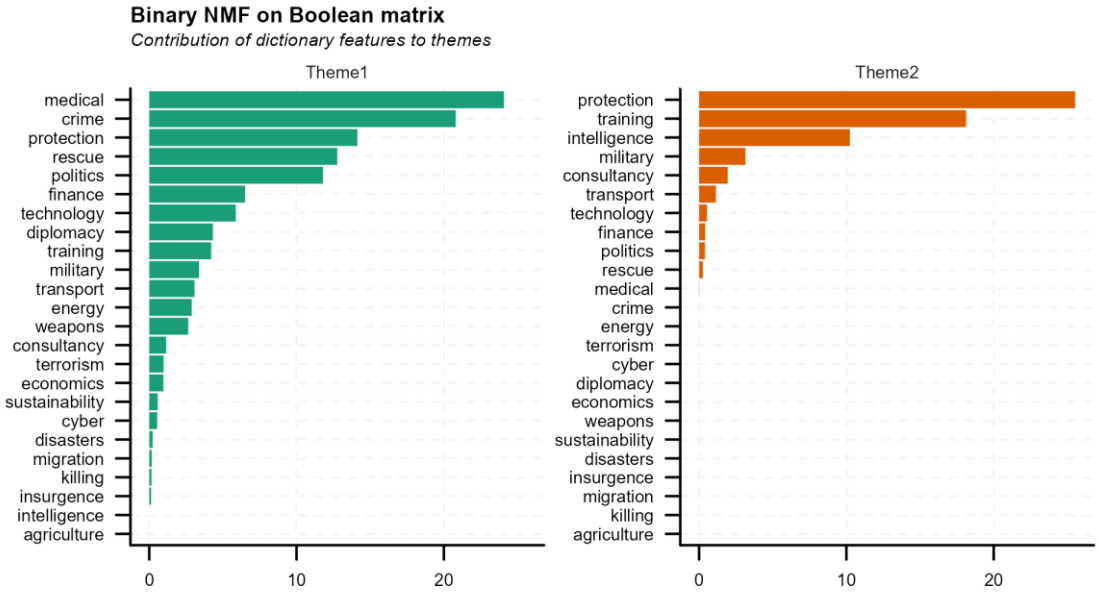
Dictionary

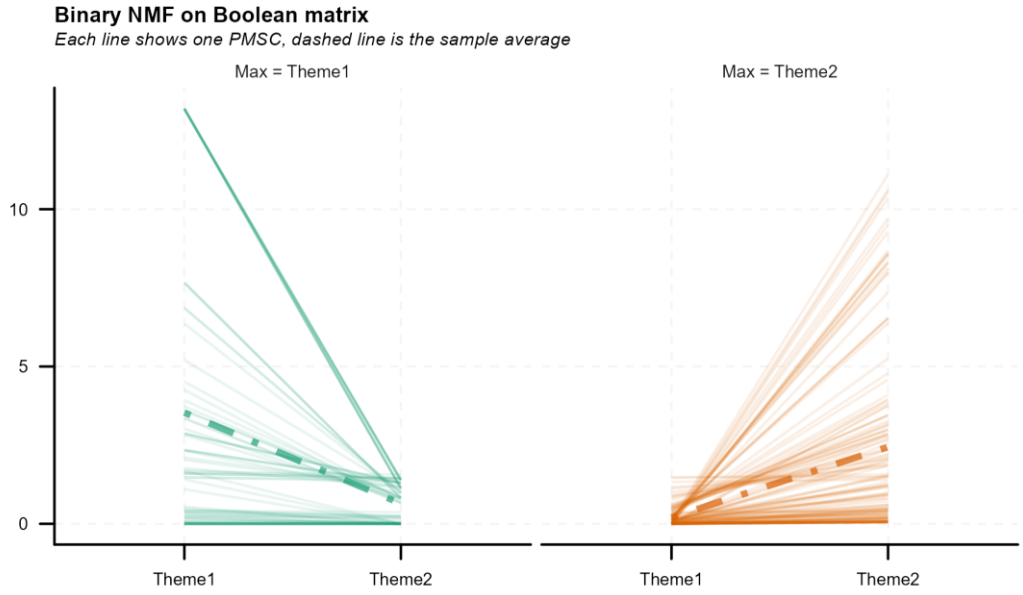
The following dictionary was used in the analysis.

- [protection]:
  - secure, protect*, safeguard, bodyguard, guard, guards, escort*
- [consulting]:
  - advise*, advisor*, consulta*, managm*
- [military]:
  - militar*, army, defens*, defenc*, soldier*, veteran*, war, wars, torture*, colonel*, lieuten*, combat*, troop*
- [training]:
  - training, trained, trainer*, instructor*, skills
- [intelligence]:
  - intelligenc*, spy, spies, espion*, counterintel*, intel, secret*, satelit*, surveillance
- [sustainability]:
  - sustaina*, renewable*, greenhouse*, biodivers*, ecolog*, ecosystem*, recycl*, decarbon*, aquati*
- [agriculture]:
  - agricu*, wheat, barley, grains, farming, fishermen, fisheries, fertilizer*, fertiliser*
- [weapons]:
  - weapon, weapons, arms, armament*, firearm*, gun, guns, knife, knives, munition*, ammo, ammunit*, gunpowder, shoot*, bullet*
- [killing]:
  - kill*, assassin*, murder
- [politics]:
  - politic*, election*, propagand*, geopolit*, democra*, government*, protest*
- [cyber]:
  - cyber*, hacker*, hacking, cryptograp*, encrypt*
- [technology]:
  - digital*, comput*, automation, technolog*, biotech*
- [energy]:
  - energy, electri*, gas, oil, hydroele*, generator*, wind, solar
- [transport]:
  - cargo*, shipping, transport*, logistic*, lorry, lorries
- [finance]:
  - financ*, cash, insurance, banknote*, bonds, debt, taxation*, currency, cryptocurren*, markets
- [economics]:
  - inflation, deflation, econom*, macroecon*, microecon*, monetary, fiscal
- [medical]:
  - medic*, health, healthcare, hospital*, pandemic*, vaccine*, cardiac, patients

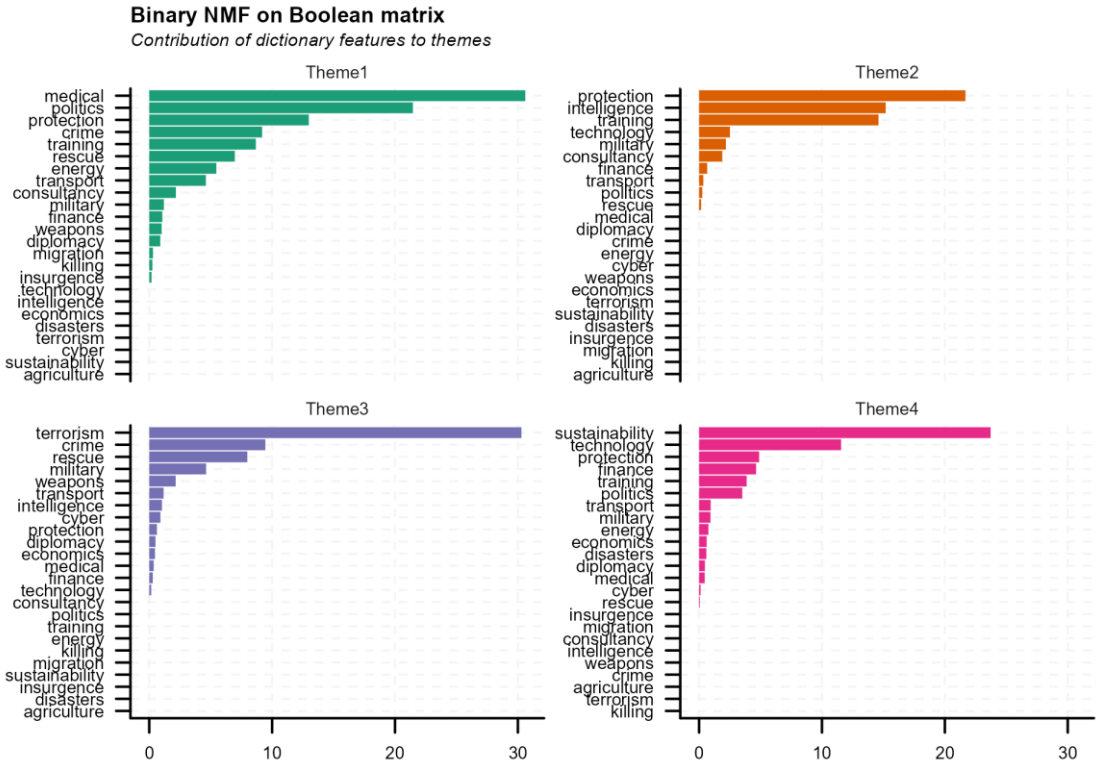
- [crime]:
  - crim*, robber*, theft, vandali*, prosecut*, imprison*, victim, prison, prisons, jail, police, narco*, arrest*
- [rescue]:
  - hostage*, rescue*, emergenc*, extraction*, repatriat*, abduct*, extort*, humanitar*, kidnap*, ransom
- [terrorism]:
  - terror*, extremi*
- [insurgence]:
  - insurge*, rebels, rebellion, overthr*, fighters, raiders, revolution, revolt, coup, mutiny, uprising, counterinsu*, counterrevo*
- [migration]:
  - migra*, immigr*, emigra*, refugee*, asylum*
- [diplomacy]:
  - diplomac*, diplomat*, negotiat*, embassy, embassies, ambassador*, summit*, multilateral*, bilateral*, delegate*
- [disasters]:
  - flood*, deforest*, firefig*, monsoon*, drought*, wildfire*, earthquak*, cyclone*, volcan*, tsunam*, tornado*, blizzard*, famine*

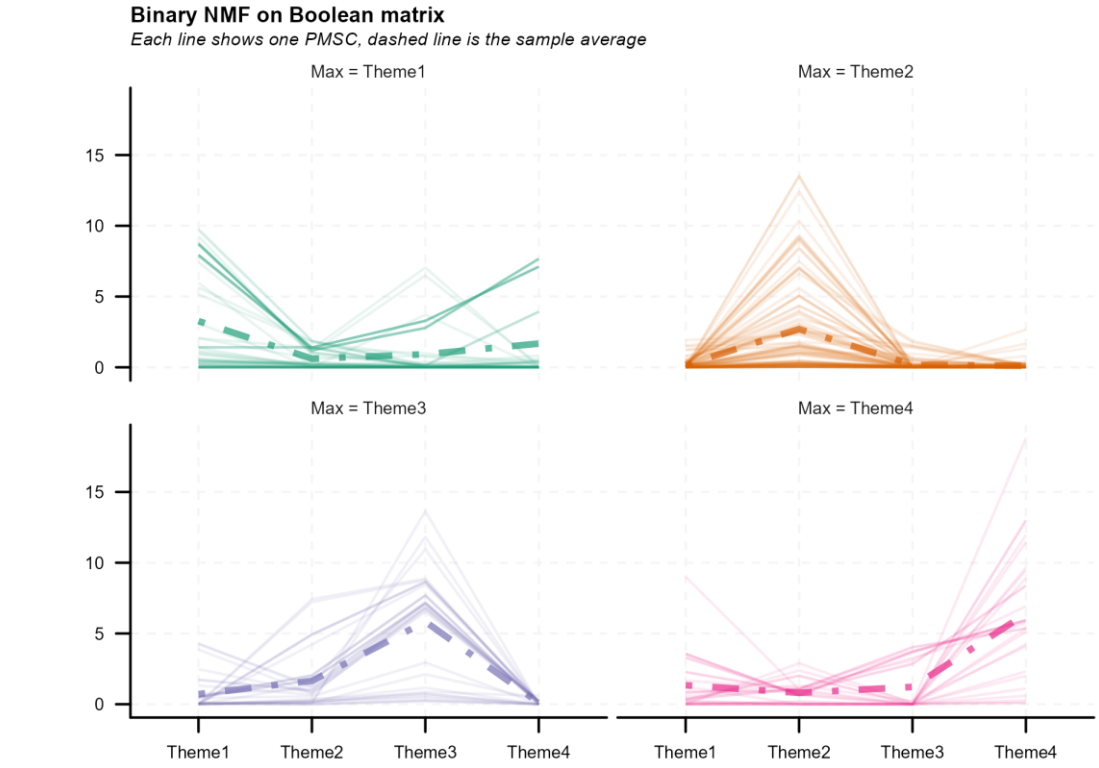
Binary NMF (k = 2)




Binary NMF (k = 4)


Binary NMF on Boolean matrix
Contribution of dictionary features to themes
Theme1
medical
politics
protection
crime
training
rescue
energy
transport
consultancy
military
finance
weapons
diplomacy
migration
killing
insurgence
technology
intelligence
economics
disasters
terrorism
cyber
sustainability
agriculture
Theme2
protection
intelligence
training
technology
military
consultancy
finance
transport
politics
rescue
medical
diplomacy
crime
energy
cyber
weapons
economics
terrorism
sustainability
disasters
insurgence
migration
killing
agriculture
Theme3
terrorism
crime
rescue
military
weapons
transport
intelligence
cyber
protection
diplomacy
economics
medical
finance
technology
consultancy
politics
training
energy
killing
migration
sustainability
insurgence
disasters
agriculture
Theme4
sustainability
technology
protection
finance
training
politics
transport
military
energy
economics
disasters
diplomacy
medical
cyber
rescue
insurgence
migration
consultancy
intelligence
weapons
crime
agriculture
terrorism
killing
0
10
20
30


Binary NMF on Boolean matrix
Each line shows one PMSC, dashed line is the sample average
Max = Theme1
Max = Theme2
Max = Theme3
Max = Theme4
15
10
5
0
Theme1
Theme2
Theme3
Theme4