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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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Leibniz-Institut
für Sozialwissenschaften

Mitglied der

Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND THE PRODUCTION OF MEANING IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS RESEARCH: A BRIEF METHODOLOGICAL OUTLINE[1]

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Abstract

Discourse analysis has become a mantra for many young international relations scholars that would like to place their research within the camps of postmodern theorizing, increasingly fashionable yet still marginal enough to be attractive to those that do not set for the usual mainstream topics or methods. However, their work has been frequently put under much methodological pressure by positivist social scientists that sometimes reject the discourse analysis framework as too fluid to be a "proper" social research tool. Premising that discourse is a social practice, this paper proposes a non-Marxist argument for pushing forward this debate and for helping especially social constructivists in advancing their methodological concerns beyond the positivist-interpretativist dichotomy.

Keywords: discourse theory, discourse analysis, strata of meaning production, meta-theory, methodology, social constructivism.

Discourse analysis has become a mantra for many young international relations scholars that would like to place their research within the camps of postmodern theorizing, increasingly fashionable yet still marginal enough to be attractive to those that do not set for the usual mainstream topics or methods. However, their work has been frequently put under much methodological pressure by positivist social scientists that sometimes reject much of the discourse analysis framework as too fluid to be a proper social research tool, on the grounds that its causal explanation power is in general limited[2]. This pressure is felt at different intensity within the various fields of political science, but within international relations scholarship it has generated a debate which,

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[1] This paper is a revised and extended version of a fragment from the author's doctoral thesis.
[2] See for instance Gary King, Robert Keohane, Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1994.

although still ongoing, has transformed almost completely the rules of the meta-theoretical discussions in the discipline[3]. The critiques emphasize particularly two alleged features that would undermine the scientific basis of the discourse analysis framework – it is usually too descriptive and in the more comprehensive forms it cannot truly identify causal relations[4]. Inspired by social constructivist principles, this paper presents a brief non-Marxist argument against these critiques. For the purpose of the argument, throughout this paper discourse is understood mostly as social practice.

Discourse analysis is most commonly defined as a large set of methodological approaches "concerned with the production of meaning through talk and texts"[5]. Therefore, to understand this concern one needs to understand first what discourse, talk and text mean. From a lay person's viewpoint, discourse usually refers to a text that a political actor performs for an audience in order to transmit a message. From an academic perspective, discourse commonly refers to a particular speech act, for instance a conversation between two people, a broadcasted speech of a political leader, or a newspaper article. It may also refer to a type of jargon, such as the legal, medical or philological ones. Within this particular context, discourse analysis indicates a primary concern with language and "the semantic aspects of spoken or written text"[6]. In methodological terms, this involves the use of specific tools for the analysis of written materials, such as content analysis[7].

Though this is a major approach to discourse and discourse theory, it is neither the only one nor the dominant paradigm. In fact, as Jacob Torfing convincingly argues[8], one may identify three different generations and consequently three different perspectives on discourse and discourse analysis. First, there is the above-mentioned strategy, inspired mainly by socio-linguistics,

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[3]   On the most in-depth treatment of such discussions see for instance Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse and Beth Simmons, *Handbook of International Relations*, 2nd ed., Sage, London, 2012.

[4]   See for instance Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, *Explanation and Understanding in International Relations*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991, and Peter J. Katzenstein, Robert O. Keohane and Stephen Krasner, "*International Organization* and the Study of World Politics", *International Organization*, 52, 4, 1998, pp. 645-685. Though these critiques are not directly against discourse analysis as set of methods, they address the major tenants of the discourse analysis framework and have been highly influential within the discipline in this respect.

[5]   Fran Tonkiss, "Analysing Discourse", in Clive Seale (ed.), *Researching Society and Culture*, Sage, London, p. 246.

[6]   Jacob Torfing, "Discourse Theory: Achievements, Arguments, and Challenges", in David Howarth and Jacob Torfing (eds.), *Discourse Theory in European Politics*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, p. 6.

[7]   See for instance Ole Holsti, *Content Analysis for the Social Sciences and Humanities,* Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA, 1969; Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, Aldine, Chicago, 1967; Klaus Krippendorf, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, 2nd ed., Sage, Thousand Oaks, 2004.

[8]   Jacob Torfing, *op. cit.*, pp.1-32.

which treats language as a textual unit. A second generation of discourse analysis research developed around some of the main ideas of Michel Foucault, particularly around his view on the relation between power and knowledge[9]. From this perspective, discourse is defined in terms of social practices, while discourse analysis is a large methodological approach that aims at analysing linguistic and non-linguistic data as discursive forms[10]. This argument is shared also by the members of the third generation of discourse analysis, but it is extended to the entire social realm. Influenced mostly by the work of Jacques Derrida, this third generation represents social reality and discourse as mutually constituting each other. In this sense, "there is nothing outside the text".[11]

In political research, the Foucault-inspired strand generated the methodological framework of critical discourse analysis, most notably through the work of Norman Fairclough[12] and Ruth Wodak[13]. Their approach, which is fertilized also by several theories of Marxist and (neo)Marxian inspiration, aims at identifying the sources of power relations within society through the analysis of the power relations instituted at discursive level. For this purpose, they use a wide set of raw empirical data ranging from common written or spoken text materials such as speeches, interviews and reports, to historical events, ideas and institutions. The Derriderian camp, in which Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe are among the most methodologically concerned,[14] has similar goals, as well as frequent (neo)Marxian influences, but the distinction between the

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[9] Particularly Michel Foucault, *Power-knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, Pantheon Books, New York, 1980.

[10] David Howarth and Yannis Stavrakakis, "Introducing Discourse Theory and Political Analysis", in David Howarth, Aletta J. Norval and Yannis Stavrakakis (eds.), *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis: Identities, Hegemonies and Social Change*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, p. 4.

[11] This is how the original French version "il n'y a rien de hors-texte" has been most often translated into English. However, a closer translation should be "there is no outside text", which means that, once reality and discourse mutually construct each other, there is no objective reference point in the real world, see Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, Editions du Minuit, Paris, 1967. For an interesting discussion of the way in which the difficult translation of Derrida's work into English led to several significant misunderstandings of his ideas, see the lengthy introduction to the authoritative English edition of Derrida's *Of Grammatology* by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Translator's Preface", in *Of Grammatology*, corrected ed., Jacques Derrida, ix-xc, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1997.

[12] See for instance Norman Fairclough, *Language and power*, Longman, London, 1989 and Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*, Longman, London, 1995.

[13] Ruth Wodak, *Language, Power and Ideology: Studies in Political Discourse,* Benjamins, Amsterdam, 1989; Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer (eds.), *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis,* Sage, London, 2001; Gilbert Weiss and Ruth Wodak (eds.), *Critical Discourse Analysis: Theory and Interdisciplinarity,* Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, 2003.

[14] See for instance Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy,* Verso, London, 1985.

discursive and non-discursive is abandoned[15]. In fact, the methodological differences between these last two generations of discourse analysis are in general small and rather the different conceptual and intellectual pedigrees set apart various groups[16]. Research in both these ontological frameworks can draw, for instance, on the Foucauldian archaeological and genealogical methods or the Derriderian method of deconstruction.

In my proposal, in line with the second and third generation of discourse theory, I assume that discourse and social reality are mutually constituted. Therefore, all objects and human actions are objects of discourse. They are meaningful, in the sense that through interaction, both at material and discursive level, human agency develops structures of meaning out of which reality could not be thought. Although I share the view that different relations of power manifest throughout the structures of meanings, I do not assume that this necessarily implies a critical agenda or that is should be somehow rooted into a (neo)Marxian tradition.

To illustrate my argument, I will use the case of an international political phenomenon that I studied in more detail – Central and Eastern European international regionalism[17]. Figure 1 below is a visual of the way I structured the discursive space. In line with the constructivist logic, this space has both a material (institutional) dimension and a normative-representational one. Each of these dimensions is built through successive strata of meaning production. At the deepest level is the background stratum. On the institutional dimension, this stratum is identifiable through political-institutional legacies. In the specific case of Central and East European regionalism, in order to identify the presence of this layer, I investigated to what extent regional intergovernmental cooperation developed in the area before the Cold War and looked at their characteristics and dynamics. On the normative-representational dimension, the background stratum was identifiable through various regional identity palimpsests, namely through those overlapping and frequently cross-hybridizing collective representations of regions (mostly) within the space delimited as Central and Eastern Europe. The next stratum is that of context and it has similarly two dimensions. On the institutional one, I framed the research within the security paradigm and therefore I investigated the security requisites that led to the creation and evolution of international regionalism in the area. On the normative-representational dimension, I investigated the larger socio-political context of this creation and evolution. The third stratum is that of specific design of regional initiatives, and this can be assessed both at institutional level

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[15] Jacob Torfing, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
[16] David Howarth and Yannis Stavrakakis, *op. cit*., pp. 4-5.
[17] Luciana Alexandra Ghica, *Friendship Communities? The Politics of Regional Intergovernmental Cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe, 1990-2007*, doctoral thesis, Central European University, Budapest, 2008.

(institutional design) and with respect to the way the participants to a regional arrangement define themselves for themselves as a group. Finally, the last stratum is that of institutional and discursive practices, and for this purpose I investigated how the regional groupings had acted and how they represented themselves to the external world.

	Institutional dimension	Normative-representational dimension
Practices	Institutional practices	Discursive practices
Design	Institutional design	Internal rhetoric
Context	Security requisites	Socio-political context
Background	Political-institutional legacies	Identity palimpsests

Fig. 1. Strata of meaning production applied to an example
of research on intergovernmental organizations

This approach holds both rationalist / positivist and interpretativist allegiances. It is rationalist in that it accepts most of the principles of normal science or rather the principles of logic on which science is founded, particularly the principle of the excluded third. Furthermore, it does not hold the view that there is a hidden sense in the order of the things that needs to be discovered. The world is transparent to research through commonly shared methods accessible to anyone. At the same time, this perspective is interpretativist in the sense that it does not share the positivist treatment of social sciences as similar to the natural sciences. In this, I agree with Wilhelm Dilthey that in the complex social reality in which we live one may not expect to find causal connections in a similar way in which these can be traced in the natural world[18]. This happens not due to the limits of human knowledge but because the essence of social interaction may be different from the essence of interaction in the physical world. From this perspective, any attempt to uncover social laws and mechanisms of causality within the social realm may be an unfruitful endeavour.

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[18]   Wilhelm Dilthey, *Introduction to the Human Sciences*, vol. 1, translated by Michael Neville, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1991.

In this sense, the principle of the excluded third is merely a principle of knowledge (and therefore of discourse), not a principle that is embedded in the social or natural reality. When this principle cannot be applied to describe a social or natural phenomenon, one may talk about a paradox. Therefore, like the principle of the excluded third, the paradox is a category of discourse, not of reality. Although the principle of the excluded third is more frequently applicable than the paradox, they have equal status as knowledge categories and neither of them should be regarded as more appropriate for knowledge purposes.

From this particular viewpoint, the aim of social (and political) research should be to *understand* rather than *explain* social (and political) phenomena. Since both explanation and interpretation may be regarded as categories of understanding[19], it is only a matter of choice which strategy is chosen for understanding our objects of study. When the nature of the social world is conceptualized as different from the natural world, paradoxes may be probably more frequent and regularities less common. For this reason, social research, particularly with respect to complex or large-scale social (and subsequently political) phenomena such as international regionalism, is probably less suited to explanation than it is to interpretation. Yet, this is ultimately a personal choice and any attempt to impose such choice as the "correct" one would be as valid as the adoption of the alternative position[20].

Due to its embedded time dimension (A and non A can not be true *simultaneously*), the principle of the excluded third is key for the notion of causality, which is the central concept for the paradigm of explanation. However, although explanation could not be conceptualised without it, the principle of the excluded third is not limited to the explanatory approach. In other words, it might be accommodated also to an interpretativist strategy. In my view, this can be done through the notion of precedence embedded in the principle, and this does not necessarily imply causality. The principle of the excluded third establishes an order of the events. The notion of causality adds to this order the idea of correlation and thus provides the framework for explaining *why* things happened the way they did. However, the notion of correlation is an optional choice for understanding a social (and political) phenomenon. The "understanding" processes may aim at uncovering *how* things came to happen the way they did. This is an endeavour as legitimate as the *why* attempts. In fact, *how* and *why* may be regarded as the different faces of the same coin as they both attempt to offer a coherent narrative for a particular subject of investigation. However, for the purpose of the *how* type of understanding only the notion of precedence is necessary. Consequently, the principle of the excluded third is fundamental also to interpretativist approaches.

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[19] Richard Rorty, "Method, Social Science and Social Hope", in *Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972-1980)*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, New York, 1982, pp. 191-198.

[20] *Ibid.*, pp. 198-203.

This brings us to the final point of pressure from positivist scholarship, namely that of description versus explanation. As both defenders and critics acknowledge, discourse analysis builds narratives. However, as scholars particularly from humanities have often argued[21], the narrative is not a mere description of the events. It identifies the points of recurrence, similarity, continuity, and caesura. Furthermore, from such elements of resonance and dissonance one may abstract the factors and mechanisms of at play in the case under scrutiny. In this sense, the approach has many common points with the explanatory paradigm. However, these factors and mechanisms are not framed into a causal relationship but from the perspective of a complex process in which the interactions are too much intertwined to attempt to represent them into the linear structure that causality as a knowledge tool usually presupposes. From this viewpoint, explanations are just another category of narrative. Ultimately, with the exception of radical positions, placing oneself in the positivist or the interpretativist camps seems rather a question of focus and personal preference than of genuine scientific disagreement at meta-theoretical level.

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[21] See particularly Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1987.