

Foucault & Discourse

A Handout for HIS 389
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Discourse is a term that many will dismiss quickly as useless intellectual jargon, so it is worthwhile discussing why many scholars prefer this term and not some other, more common-day language.

A. Other Possible Terms?

To begin with, discourse is just one term that scholars have *developed to analyze the systems of thoughts, ideas, images and other symbolic*

practices that make up what we, following anthropology, generally call “culture.” Other terms have their limitations though:

- 1) **Ideas and Concepts.** This is the term most frequently used by intellectual historians. And, of course, there is no doubt about it: when we are talking about culture, we are talking about ideas. Furthermore, we need to recognize that intellectual history did give us a model for outlining the flow of thoughts from one person to another, with slow transformations taking place as the ideas moved from person to person, place to place, period to period. However, two main problems exist with the terms. First, the tradition of intellectual history tended to focus on the well-formed, clear ideas of philosophers, writers, and other thinkers. The vague thoughts and perceptions of the everyday person were often excluded from study. Second, Foucault suggested in several of his works that by focusing on a particular flow of ideas, and thereby failing to connect that flow with other currents of thought or even the wider cultural context, there was a danger of missing broader fissures of thought happening culture-wide.

In other words, by focusing on the continuities of change, there was a danger of missing the possibility of a massive rupture, a tremendous discontinuity with what came before.¹

- 2) **Myth.** This term has been frequently used, especially by scholars working in the fields of anthropology, archeology, and the study of religion. It has the advantage of not focusing on the “concepts” of important thinkers, but on the conceptions (or, perhaps, misconceptions) of the culture at large. It also was a way to get at the larger attitudes and values of society. Its frequency is part of the problem, though. Outside of its everyday connotations (suggesting a common story that has no basis in truth), “myth” has been used in many different ways by different scholars. Encountering the term today, one has to ask, is the scholar using it in the sense of the structural philosopher Roland Barthes? Or the anthropologist James Frazier? The sense of the Frankfurt-school critical philosophers Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno, or

¹ Above all, see Michel Foucault’s *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970).

maybe the Jungian-based interpretation of Joseph Campbell? Or even perhaps the more structuralist reading of Claude-Levi Strauss? In short, it is difficult today to employ without carefully restricting one’s usage.

- 3) **Mentalités.** One school of French historians (the Annales school) introduced the term *mentalités*, which might be translated as collective attitudes or a mental outlook. The French historians of *mentalités* were groundbreaking in opening up the study of culture for historians, but it never managed to create a coherent method of its own.² Instead, the school’s best practitioners (Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Philippe Ariés, Carlo Ginzburg, and Natalie Zemon Davis, to name a few) borrowed liberally from other traditions, especially anthropology.
- 4) **Cultural Patterns and Systems.** Cultural anthropologists, especially those following in the tradition of Clifford Geertz’s

² Robert Darnton, “Intellectual and Cultural History,” in *The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States*, ed. Michael Kammen (Ithica and London: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 346.

“Thick Description,” have been very important in teaching historians how to look for meanings woven into and around cultural artifacts and social interactions; in the end, though, their methods were useful for *interpreting* a given culture, but less apt at *explaining* cultural transformation. In the words of one anthropologist, “The webs [of meaning], not the spinning; the culture, not the history; the text, not the process of textualizing” was at the heart of much early cultural anthropology.³ At the same time, the methods developed by early cultural anthropology were not always helpful in identifying the ways that power structures helped maintain one set of meanings over another. Indeed, cultural anthropologists often depended on reading a culture as a vast “text” that could only be understood in terms of itself. The result was that contradictions in meanings were played down and ambiguities smoothed over, even though contradictions and ambiguities

³ Aletta Biersack, “Local Knowledge, Local History: Geertz and Beyond,” in *The New Cultural History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), p. 80.

often are key to understanding larger social and political conflict.

- 5) **Ideology.** The Marxist-derived term “ideology,” on the other hand, was ideal for analyzing these power struggles, but it always retained some of its earliest associations with a system of ideas that blinds one from the truth. Ideology was also built on the assumption that all ideas and thoughts were a reflection of social reality, and especially the economic interests of a dominant group or class of people; historical change, therefore, was primarily the product of social transformations. Ideas could play at best a limited role themselves in bringing about social transformation.

Because of the limitations of these various methods, many scholars of literature and the social sciences began to turn in the 1980s to the concept of discourse. It is a term that has a rather specific usage taken from the writing of Foucault and several other French poststructuralists.⁴ It is well suited for

⁴ Actually, this is a bit of a simplification. “Discourse” has been used slightly differently by thinkers like the French linguist Émile Benveniste or the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. And then, you have the old-fashioned meaning of “an extended discussion of a topic, or simply an exposition of

analyzing struggles over meaning and other power conflicts, since Foucault and the other poststructuralists always assumed that any given society would be infused with many competing discourses. In some scholars' minds, it is even more flexible than ideology since it does not focus specifically on power struggles between different classes and genders, or between the state and its subject. Instead, it suggests that power is diffuse, and power conflicts can happen at many different sites and levels.⁵

Discourse also has another major advantage over ideology. Discourse assumes that ideas structure social spaces, and therefore ideas can play a significant role in historical change.

B. Language: The Primary Object of Study

Because ideas can *produce* historical transformation, and not simply *reflect* them, discourse theory teaches us to be very attentive to small shifts in how ideas are expressed in language. Language, therefore, as well as other

forms of symbolic exchange, is the primary object studied by discourse theory. Language, this theory suggests, can be broken into different “[bodies] or [corpuses] of statements and utterances governed by rules and conventions of which the user is largely unconscious.”⁶ By this, we do not mean simply “German,” “Chinese,” or other categories of language that we are all familiar with; we are not even referring to different dialects of language that we might identify as “New York American English” or “Southern American English”. Instead, scholars interested in discourse point to those small differences in language that allow us to tell the difference between a scientist and a lawyer, or a journalist and pimp. As one literary critic puts it, “discourse is a social language created by particular cultural conditions at a particular time and place, and it expresses a particular way of understanding human experience.”⁷ Discourse refers to *very specific patterns of language that tell us something about the person speaking the language, the culture that that person is part of, the network*

some sort” (according to the Oxford English Dictionary)—as in René Descartes’ famous *Discourse on Method*. Cultural historians, literary critics, and other practicing cultural studies have been influenced by Michel Foucault’s and Jacques Derrida’s specific usage of the term.

⁵ For more on this, see Michel Foucault, “Two Lectures,” *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), pp. 78-108.

⁶ David Macey, *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 100.

⁷ Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1999), p. 281.

of social institutions that the person caught up in, and even frequently the most basic assumptions that the person holds.

C. Sets of Rules that Shape Our Lives

What are these patterns of language that discourse analysis looks for? Well, above all, they are sets of rules that governs a specific style of language. As Foucault put it, “whenever, between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations), we will say...that we are dealing with a discursive formation.”⁸ Discourse cannot be isolated to speech, but instead structures written language as well. These rules are so important to how we think that they can spill over into other aspects of our lives: the pictures we draw, the buildings we construct, the artwork that we create and appreciate, and even the very social institutions that we live in. Some of the best-known work of Foucault has suggested how transformations in medical discourse produced effects on a whole network

⁸ Michel Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), p. 38

of medical institutions; likewise, changes in legal discourse, he argued, had an impact on our court system and methods of criminal punishment.⁹

Because these discourses affect multiple areas of life, they cannot be isolated to a specific type of text, or even a particular genre. Literary novels often have bits of scientific or legal discourse embedded in them; films could include elements of religious discourse. In fact, Foucault imagined discourse as a field, perhaps comparable in a vague way to a magnetic field. Just as a magnetic field is spatially spread out, encompassing all the different lines of force grouped around a set of magnetic poles, so is discourse spread out, gathering together “the totality of all effective statements (whether spoken or written)” that follow certain rules “in their dispersion as events.”¹⁰

D. How Discourse Operates

For Foucault, discourse operates in four basic ways:

⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archeology of Medical Perception*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Vintage Books, 1973); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).. See also Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, p. 51.

¹⁰ Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, p. 27.

- **Discourse creates a world.** By shaping our perceptions of the world, pulling together chains of associations that produce a meaningful understanding, and then organizing the way we behave towards objects in the world and towards other people, one might say that discourse generates the world of our everyday life. After all, even though science teaches us that the “real world” is the material world made up of atoms and energy, in a real way the world for most of us is a world of colors, emotions, ideas, and life. It is a kind of virtual world generated by our minds, but not by us alone—we construct this world socially through a complex interaction between experience, upbringing, and education. Discourses, as chains of language that bind us social beings together, play a key role in the social construction of reality.
- **Discourse generates knowledge and “truth.”** Discourse constitutes not only the world that we live in, but also all forms of knowledge and “truth.” Knowledge for Foucault (as for most other structuralists and poststructuralists) was not something that existed independently of language. In other words, knowledge is not simply communicated through language; all knowledge is

organized through the structures, interconnections, and associations that are built into language. Foucault would even go so far as to say that discourse generates truth—or what some have called truth-effects. Certain discourses in certain contexts have the power to convince people to accept statements as true. This power can have no relation to any objective correctness of the statement. The medical practice of leeching was accepted in the eighteenth century as helpful despite the harmful affects that we recognize today because it was embedded in a network of ancient medical discourses that many accepted as “true.” Likewise, many medical practices commonly accepted today might have seemed like madness or even barbaric because they had no discursive support.

- **Discourse says something about the people who speak it.** Discourse communicates knowledge not only about the intended meaning of the language, but also about the person speaking the discourse. By analyzing the discourse a speaker uses, one can often tell things about the speaker’s gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class position, and even more specifically the speaker’s implied relationship to the other people around him. Medical discourse, for

example, gives doctors the authority to speak, thereby placing them in a position of power over their patients. Foucault was particularly interested in looking at modes of discourse that not everyone had a *right* to use, or that require specific locations to gain authority.¹¹ A sermon that would be right at home behind a church lectern might produce only an awkward silence if given at a party. And a certified lawyer acquires a certain right to speak legal discourse in a courtroom setting through a complex system of education, a series of exams, and network of state controls.

- **Discourse and Power.** This brings us to the fourth way that discourse operates, namely by being intimately involved with socially embedded networks of power. Because certain types of discourse enable specific types of individuals to “speak the truth,” or at the very least to be believed when speaking on specific subjects, discourses also give these individuals degrees of social, cultural, and even possibly political power. Doctors are generally believed when they talk about physical or mental illnesses, and this gives them an authority to recommend courses of action or patterns

of behavior. In many societies, and for long stretches of Western history, religious authorities wielded tremendous social and political power because they had the power to speak about the divine. This power was caught up with their specific position, but was also based on the fact that religious discourse suffused all of life, shaping social organization and influencing how people interpreted the world.

E. Discourses are always Multiple.

The only final point to be made is that discourses are multiple—in three specific ways.

- **Cultures are constructed out of numerous, competing discourses.** Some discourses may dominate the culture by helping to shape political and social institutions and by infiltrating into different levels of life (as Foucault believed scientific discourse had done in the modern era). But he taught us also to look for other discourses as well that competed for power and influence.
- **Discourses change over time.** Discourses are multiple also in the sense that they undergo transformations. Science is not static, of

¹¹ Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, p. 50.

course, and so even though scientific discourse is based on certain assumptions and rules that allow it to be defined against other forms of discourses (religion, for example), it will take on different forms at different times. Once transformations in a given discourse happen, the new rules can spread, infiltrating their way into new areas of life and even transforming older discourses or forcing them out of practice. You could make a comparison here between discourse and computer viruses, at least if you could remove the negative connotations of the latter term. Discourses too are “modules of rules” that are designed to spread from mind to mind and take over key operations.¹²

- **Discourses can generally be subdivided.** Discourses are complex, and often can be subdivided into subcategories that are too divided by the rules that govern them. Depending on how you

look at it, one can speak of “scientific discourse” as a whole, or one could talk about “psychiatric discourse” as a subcategory of this larger whole. And then one can isolate specific strains of scientific discourse that perhaps stretch across several fields: racist-biological discourse, for example, which had an influence on many different scientific fields around the turn of the century, and also influenced Western culture and politics at large.

¹² Such a comparison is made by the philosopher Daniel Dennet in his book *Consciousness Explained* (Back Bay Books, 1992), pp. 187-226. Dennett is himself not a philosopher of discourse, and the scientific basis of his theory would no doubt give some problems for many scholars who practice discourse theory. However his discussion of “memes” and “narratives” share some resemblances with discourse, and his comparison between the computer and the brain can, I think, help many today accept some of the basic propositions of discourse theory.