

Advanced Methods of Interpretation

Lecture I

What is Interpretation?

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Advanced Methods of Interpretation
in Cultural Sociology (soc 575)
Spring 2017





Syllabus of the Lecture I

- I. What is Interpretation?
- II. On Methodology
- III. Hermeneutics and Structuralism
- IV. Structural Hermeneutics I
- V. Structural Hermeneutics II
- VI. Artifacts and Practices



Syllabus of the Lecture II

Reading Week

VIII. Interpretation of Pictures

IX. Narratives, Interviews, Discourse

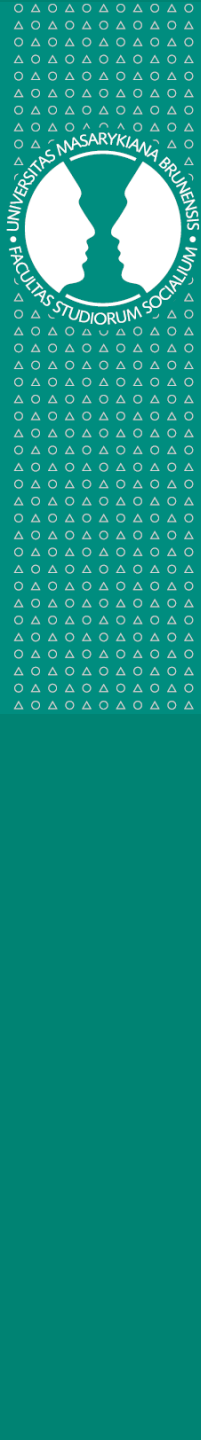
X. Discourse Analysis

Final Exam



Course Requirements

- Regular attendance
- Active participation in the lecture (10%)
- Written test at the end of the semester (90%)
- The test is based on the *content of the lecture* **and** the *obligatory readings*



What is Interpretation?

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Meanings of “interpretation”:



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Meanings of “interpretation”:

- Interpretation as *problematized understanding*
→ e.g. the definition of an ambiguous social situation

Non-Understanding as a Prerequisite of Interpretation

Hermeneutics [as method of interpretation] rests on the fact of the non-understanding of discourse: taken in its most general sense, including misunderstanding in the mother tongue and everyday life.”

Friedrich Schleiermacher,
General Hermeneutics (1809/1810)



What is Interpretation?

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Meanings of “interpretation”:

- Interpretation as problematized understanding
- Interpretation as *explication of meaning*
→ e.g. explaining the meaning of a symbol or text



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Meanings of “interpretation”:

- Interpretation as problematized understanding
- Interpretation as explication of meaning
- Interpretation as *translation* (“interpreter”)
→ more precisely: simultaneous translation



What is Interpretation?

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Meanings of “interpretation”:

- Interpretation as problematized understanding
- Interpretation as explication of meaning
- Interpretation as translation (“interpreter”)
- Interpretation as *performance* (“interpreting”)
→ e.g. interpreting a composition, a play, a role etc.



What is Interpretation?

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Meanings of “interpretation”:

- Interpretation as problematized understanding
- Interpretation as explication of meaning
- Interpretation as translation (“interpreter”)
- Interpretation as performance (“interpreting”)

→ All are relevant for interpretative methodology!



What is Interpretation?

Cultural Sociology and Interpretation

Interpretative sociology and qualitative social research:

- Subjective and symbolic meanings

Cultural sociology:

- Strong focus on the cultural foundations of subjective and symbolic meanings
- *Culture as structure of meaning*: e.g. binary codes, collective representations, classification systems, root metaphors, iconic, performative and narrative patterns



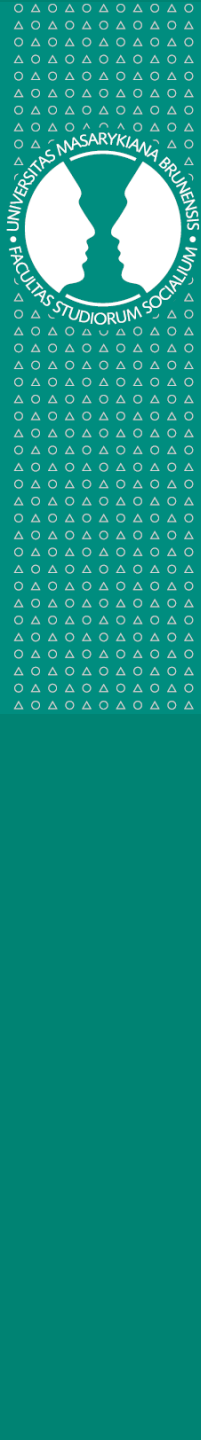
What is Interpretation?

Modes of Scientific Observation

- Description
- Interpretation
 - informative re-description (new information)
- Explanation
 - informative re-description that includes causes (or conditions)

Geertz (2006): “thin” vs. “thick description”

Reed (2011): “minimal” vs. “maximal interpretation”



What is Interpretation?

Erklären vs. Verstehen

The success of the sciences in the 19th century led scholars like Johann Gustav Droysen (1808-1884) and Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) to develop “understanding” as an alternative to “explanation” for the humanities.

Sciences	Humanities
Explanation	Understanding
Nomothetic	Ideographic
Universal	Individual, historical

Max Weber

(1864—1920)





Weber

Weber's Interpretative Sociology

Weber's reconciliation of "Erklären" and "Verstehen":

1. The aim of sociology is to *explain* social action
2. Social action cannot be understood without subjective meaning, especially the motives of the actors

Conclusion: In sociology, we have to *understand the actors in order to explain their actions*

Sociology as interpretative and explanatory social science

Sociology [...] is a science concerning itself with the **interpretive understanding** of social action and thereby with a **causal explanation** of its course and consequences.

Max Weber (1978: 4, emphasis by me)

Action and Subjective Meaning

We shall speak of “action” insofar as the acting individual attaches a **subjective meaning** to his behavior [...]. Action is “social” insofar as its subjective meaning takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course.

Max Weber (1978: 4, emphasis by me)



Weber

Action



Social Action





Weber

Varieties of Subjective Meaning

Meaning is primarily understood as *subjective* or *motivational* meaning (rational or irrational motives)

1. Meaning attributed to real actors:
 - a) Actual meaning of an actor in a concrete case
 - b) Average or proximate meaning in case of a plurality of actors
2. Ideal or pure type of meaning attributed to a hypothetical actor (e.g. economic rationality and the *homo oeconomicus*)



Weber

Weber on Interpretation

- “All interpretation of meaning, like all scientific observations, strives for clarity and verifiable accuracy of insight and comprehension (*Evidenz*)” (1978: 5)
- Rational understanding and sympathetic participation (*Einfühlung* → classical hermeneutics)
- Direct understanding of a symbolic action (content) vs. the explanatory understanding of an action (motive)
- Attributions of causality in sociology are always interpretative, more or less plausible hypotheses



Weber

Weber's Critique of Non-Interpretative Sociology

- Sociological explanations cannot explain anything without reference to “subjective meaning”
- Statistical correlations don't explain anything
 - a. The correlation has to be interpreted in terms of it's causal direction
 - b. Causal mechanisms have to be specified
- Causal mechanisms have to refer to the subjective and motivational meanings of actors (cf. Hedström 2005)



Weber and Durkheim

Case Study: Durkheim on Suicide

Observation: Statistically, Protestants commit more often suicide than Catholics

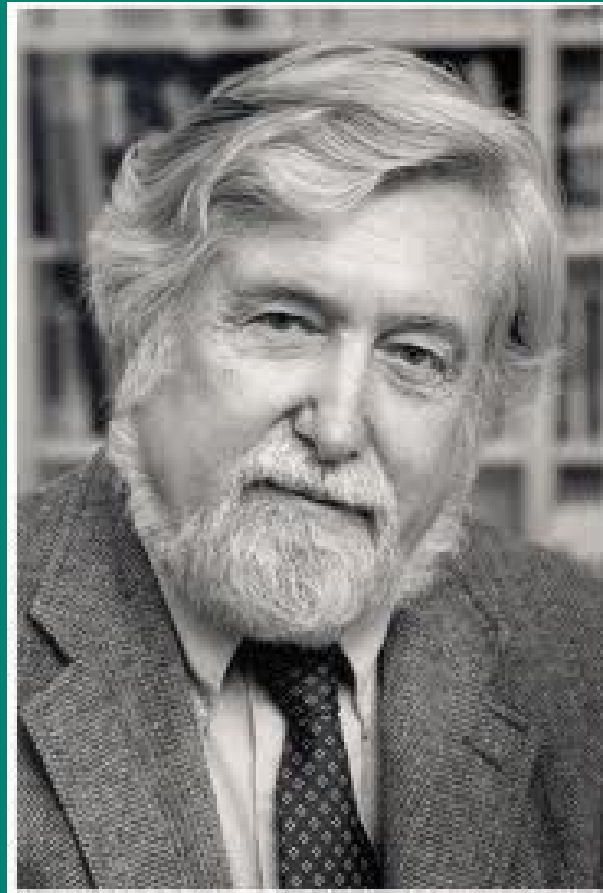
Problem I: This doesn't explain the difference

Problem II: Both religious doctrines prohibit suicide

Explanation: Durkheim's concept of the "egoistic suicide" interprets and explains this correlation with religious differences in social structure and, accordingly, subjective meaning

Clifford Geertz

(1926—2006)

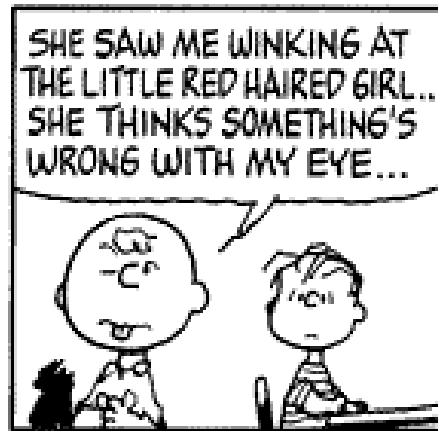
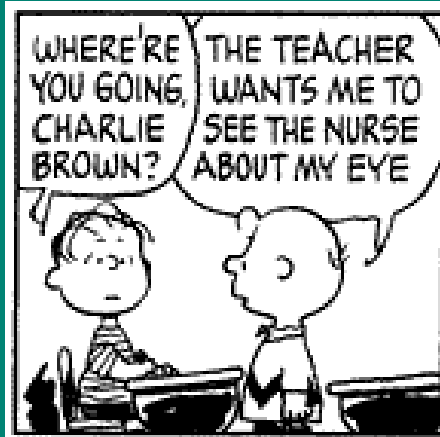




Geertz

Geertz: Interpretive Theory of Culture

- Actors are entangled in “webs of meaning”
- Ethnography as “thick description” (twitch vs. blink)
- Every good observation is already an interpretation referring to subjective and social meanings
- Semiotic concept of culture → structured system of signs and symbols
- “Culture is public because meaning is” (1973: 12) → meaning is no longer purely “subjective”



Interpretation as Clinical Inference

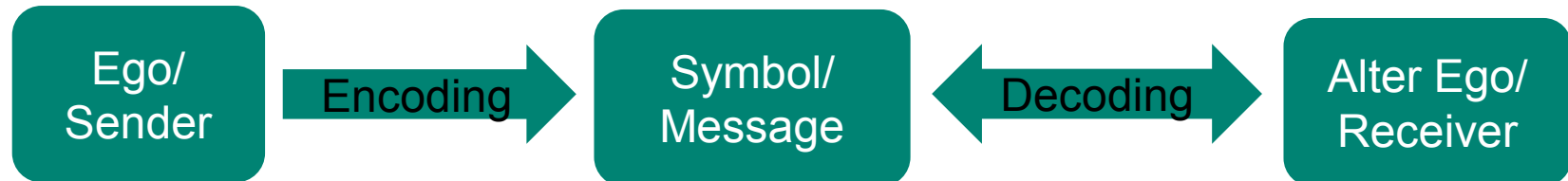
To generalize within cases is usually called [...] clinical inference. Rather than beginning with a set of observations and attempting to subsume them under a governing law, such inference begins with a set of (presumptive) signifiers and attempts to place them within an intelligible frame. [...] In the study of culture the signifiers are not symptoms or clusters of symptoms, but symbolic acts or clusters of symbolic acts, and the aim is not therapy but the analysis of social discourse.

Clifford Geertz (2006: 26)



Geertz

Symbolic Action and Communication



Symbolic Acts as Symptoms





Geertz

Geertz on Interpretation

- There is no “verification” of interpretations, though some interpretations are better than others
- Risk of over- as well as underinterpretation (1983: 16)
- Interpretations have to stand the test of time as new phenomena are interpreted
- The boundaries between description and interpretation, empirical analysis and theoretical formulations are fluid
- Tension between “thick description” of the surface and the cultural analysis of structural depth (“diagnosis”)



Geertz

Case Study: The Balinese Cockfight

- The cock as ambivalent symbol: sacred expression of the masculine self and at the same time a collective representation of the polluted animal nature of man
- Cultural Interpretation: The cockfights stages symbolic binaries, existential conflicts and the collective repressed (catharsis!) of Balinese Society
- Social Interpretation: The “deep play” of the cockfight reflects the social matrix of a Balinese village



Thank you for your
attention

and in advance for criticism and
further suggestions!

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