

# Advanced Methods of Interpretation

Lecture V

## Structural Hermeneutics II

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Advanced Methods of Interpretation  
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# Reconstructive Methods and Methodologies of Interpretation

1. Interpretation as reconstruction of an implicit or latent meaning structure
2. Interpretative methodology as reconstruction of the implicit expertise of an interpreter
  - A. Documentary method of interpretation (Mannheim, Bohnsack)
  - B. “Structural” or objective hermeneutics (Oevermann)

Methodology seeks but to make explicit in logical terms what is de facto going on in living research.

Mannheim 1968: 37

# Karl Mannheim (with Julia)

(1893—1947)





## Mannheim on Interpretation

- Mannheim's contemporaries used in their empirical studies concepts like "Weltanschauung" (world view) or "Geist" (spirit) without much methodological reflection
- Aim of his 1923 paper: a methodological analysis of the concept of *Weltanschauung*
- Making "explicit the logic behind the actual procedure followed by a few selected scholars" (e.g. Weber's "spirit of capitalism")



## The Problem of *Weltanschauung*

- *Weltanschauung* is a deep cultural structure that manifests itself in actions and artifacts
  - *Weltanschauung* is not directly observable: Danger of “speculation” vs. necessity of treating “cultural wholes”
  - *Weltanschauung* is something “a-theoretical”, not produced by thinking, but by feeling
  - Methodological problem: something “a-theoretical” has to be grasped by theoretical means
- We need a theory of interpretation of *Weltanschauung* that is systematic and adequate



## Three Types of Meaning

In contrast to natural objects, cultural artifacts have several layers of meaning:

- Objective meaning
  - refers to material forms and social conventions
- Subjective meaning
  - refers to mental processes
- Documentary meaning
  - refers to cultural dispositions



## Documentary Interpretation

- *Weltanschauung* and related phenomena document themselves in actions and artifacts
- Documentary interpretation is not inductive (generalization and addition), but abductive



This search for documentary meaning, for an identical, homologous pattern underlying a vast variety of totally different realizations of meaning, belongs to a class apart that should not be confused with either addition, or synthesis, or the mere abstraction of a common property shared by a number of objects.

Mannheim 1968: 57



## Documentary Interpretation

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  - Documentary interpretation is not inductive (generalization and addition), but abductive
- The self-interpretation of the actor or the producer is only relevant as a document among many others

“[...] just as the doctor will take the self-diagnosis of one of his patients as a symptom rather than a correct identification of the latter’s illness”.

Mannheim 1968: 58



## Documentary Interpretation

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  - Documentary interpretation is not inductive (generalization and addition), but abductive
  - The self-interpretation of the actor or the producer is only relevant as a document among many others
- The interpreter is in a privileged position, however: documentary interpretation is always historically situated and can never produce an a-historical truth



# The Documentary Method

1. Use your intuition: Somehow we possess the faculty to grasp the documentary meaning of an act or artifact
2. Take an educated guess: Come up with an hypothesis
3. Verify your hypothesis (empirically and logically)

Verifiability may be ensured in two ways: (1) by the empirical confrontation of the hypotheses with historical material; (2) by an attempt to establish logical links connecting the various symptomatic, documentary phenomena [...] with one another and one guiding principle.

Mannheim 1968: 77



## The Documentary Method

1. Use your intuition: Somehow we possess the faculty to grasp the documentary meaning of an act or artifact
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4. Coin a concept: Sublimation of objective meaning (“capitalism” → “spirit of capitalism”)



## The Documentary Method

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3. Verify your hypothesis (empirically and logically)
4. Coin a concept: Sublimation of objective meaning (“capitalism” → “spirit of capitalism”)
5. Construction ideal cultural collectivities (“protestants”) as carriers of documentary meanings (“protestant ethic”) opposed to empirical social collectivities





## Cultural Sociology

- Documentary interpretation is and can be used in all cultural sciences (e.g. art history)
- According to Mannheim, cultural sociology's task is to confront documentary meanings of acts and artifacts with sociological categories (such as “class”)
- Cultural-sociological explanation as a move from analytical to concrete autonomy of culture: not ideal collectivities, but social groups as carriers of culture
- Documentary interpretation not “totally different from genetic, historical, causal explanation”(1968: 80)

Interpretation serves for the deeper understanding of meanings, causal explanation shows the conditions for the actualization or realization of a given meaning.

Mannheim 1968: 81



## After Documentary Interpretation

- Mannheim: sociology of knowledge (studies on conservatism, generations etc.)
- Panofsky: iconological interpretation of pictures
- Bourdieu (via Panofsky): from *Weltanschauung* to “habitus” → localization of the global outlook
- Garfinkel: documentary interpretation in everyday life
- Bohnsack (et al.): use of the documentary method in qualitative social research (mostly in Germany)



# Ethnomethodology and Documentary Interpretation

- Harold Garfinkel: *Studies in Ethnomethodology*
- Documentary interpretation as a general feature of social life → a “method” used by regular actors
- Not only sociologists, but also other actors interpret actions as documents of an underlying pattern
- According to Garfinkel, the ascription of subjective intentions depends on “documentary interpretation”
- Methodological consequences: Description instead of interpretation: “giving accounts on accounts”

Not only is the underlying pattern derived from its individual documentary evidences, in their turn, are interpreted on basis of “what is known” about the underlying pattern.

Garfinkel 1967: 78

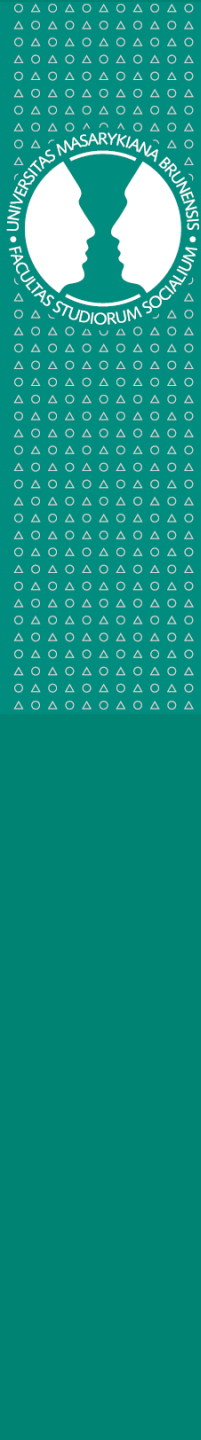


## Bohnsack: Documentary Method

- Documentary method between “common sense knowledge” and “hermeneutics of suspicion”
  1. Formulating interpretation: Immanent or explicit meaning, the “what” that is said (communicative)
  2. Reflecting interpretation: Documentary or implicit meaning, the “how” it is said (conjunctive)
- Praxeological approach: Documentary meaning as “habitus”, the collective logic of practice (Bourdieu)
- Documentary method is used for group discussions, narrative interviews, image and video interpretation

The documentary method aims at reconstructing the implicit knowledge that underlies everyday practice and gives an orientation to habitualized actions independent of individual intentions and motives.

(Bohnsack 2010: 20)



# Oevermann: Objective Hermeneutics

“Structural” or “objective hermeneutics”

- is a very “interesting” but “impractical” method of interpretation developed by Ulrich Oevermann
- was inspired by psychoanalysis and structuralism
- regards social reality and interaction as a “text”, an objectified meaning structure that is not reducible to intentions or the psychic realities of actors
- is a “hermeneutics of suspicion” par excellence → the interpreter looks for common pathologies of meaning





# Meanings in Objective Hermeneutics

1. Literal meaning: objective structures of significance (cultural text)
  2. Manifest meaning: intentions or subjective meanings (psychic reality)
  3. Latent meaning: objective structures of meaning (social interaction)
- The literal meaning exposes the gap between “latent objective structures of meaning” and their “subjective intentional representation”



## Methodological Assumptions

- Literal meanings are not “public”, but hidden behind our subjective (individual or collective) representations
- Uncovering the literal meaning of the text allows us to reconstruct the latent meaning structure of the case
- Each sequence reveals the meaning structure of the case, the structure of the entire text → the universal is in the particular (qualitative representativeness)
- In principle, it is not necessary to interpret more than one sequence (which can be two or three sentences)



# Methodical Principles of Objective Hermeneutic Interpretation

- Context-freedom
- Literality
- Sequentiality
- Extensivity
- Parsimoniousness



# Methodical Principles of Objective Hermeneutic Interpretation

- Context-freedom
  - each segment has first to be interpreted disregarding the textual or social context
- Literality
- Sequentiality
- Extensivity
- Parsimoniousness



# Methodical Principles of Objective Hermeneutic Interpretation

- Context-freedom
- Literality
  - every sentence has to be interpreted as it is, disregarding grammatical “errors” or our beliefs what the actors “really” wanted to say
- Sequentiality
- Extensivity
- Parsimoniousness



# Methodical Principles of Objective Hermeneutic Interpretation

- Context-freedom
- Literality
- Sequentiality
  - the micro-logic of the text is sequential, when we start to interpret a passage, we have to proceed sequentially
- Extensivity
- Parsimoniousness



# Methodical Principles of Objective Hermeneutic Interpretation

- Context-freedom
- Literality
- Sequentiality
- Extensivity
  - before we move on in a sequence, we need to cover every possible interpretation
- Parsimoniousness



# Methodical Principles of Objective Hermeneutic Interpretation

- Context-freedom
- Literality
- Sequentiality
- Extensivity
- Parsimoniousness
  - interpretations should be as parsimonious as possible with regard to presuppositions (including theoretical presuppositions)



# Objective Hermeneutics

## A Case Study



George W. Bush on a press conference with the Jordanian king, May 6, 2004

“I told him I was sorry for the humiliation suffered by the Iraqi prisoners, and the humiliation suffered by their families. I told him I was equally sorry that – that people um – have been seeing those pictures, didn’t understand the true nature and heart of America.”

Bush on a press conference with the Jordanian king, May 6, 2004



## “ I told him...”

- 1) I told him not to drop his studies. (a)
- 2) I told him that I went to Vienna last weekend (b)
- 3) I told him that he should not drop his studies (b)
- 4) I told him to go to Vienna next weekend (a)

a) “I told him” + infinitive → order, advise, request

b) “I told him” + “that” → report



“ I told him I was sorry for the humiliation suffered by the Iraqi prisoners...”

a) No infinitive → no order, advice, request

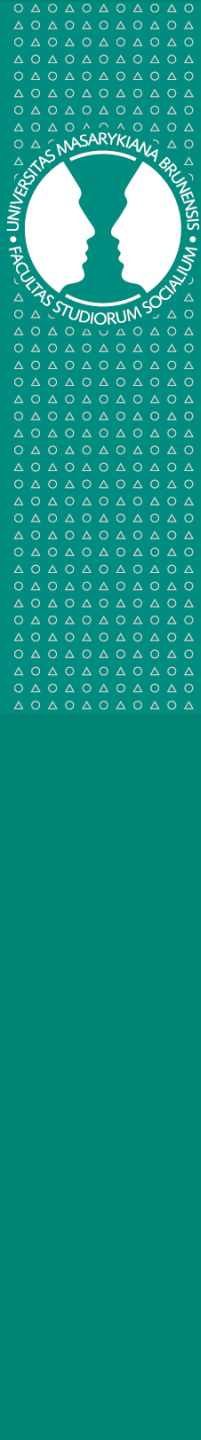
b) No “that” → no report?

Abbreviated report?

1) I told him “I am sorry for the humiliation...”

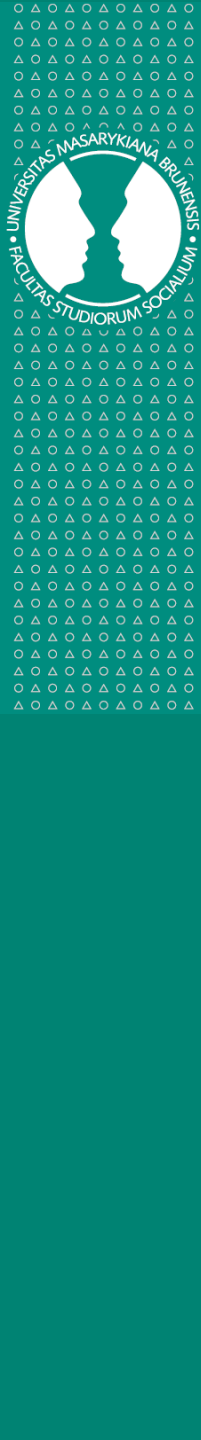
2) I told him I was sorry for the humiliation...

3) I told him (that) I was sorry for the humiliation...



“... I was sorry...”

1. I was sorry that he interrupted you at your talk (a)
  2. I am sorry that I interrupted you at your talk (b)
  3. I am sorry that he interrupted you at your talk (a)
  4. I was sorry that I interrupted you at your talk (b?)
- 
- a) “I am sorry” as an expression of sorrow (emotion)
  - b) “I am sorry” as an apology (not always responsibility)
  - b?) “I was sorry”, past tense, a little strange, but can still be regarded as apology (stressing it’s done)



## “... I was sorry for”

1. I am sorry for interrupting you at your talk (b)
  2. I am sorry for your loss (a)
  3. I was sorry for him loosing his job (a)
  4. I was sorry for interrupting you at your talk (b)
- “for” doesn’t specify the meaning of the speech act
  - it can still be either an expression of sorrow (a) or an apology (b)



“I was [...] sorry for the humiliation suffered by the Iraqi prisoners, and the humiliation suffered by their families.”

- Object is specified: “humiliation suffered by the Iraqi prisoners”, “humiliation suffered by their families”
- Object is characterized as an subjective experience (“humiliation suffered”)
- It remains unclear who committed the humiliation





“I told him I was equally sorry that...”

- The same story
- “equally” as a marker of equivalence between both expressions



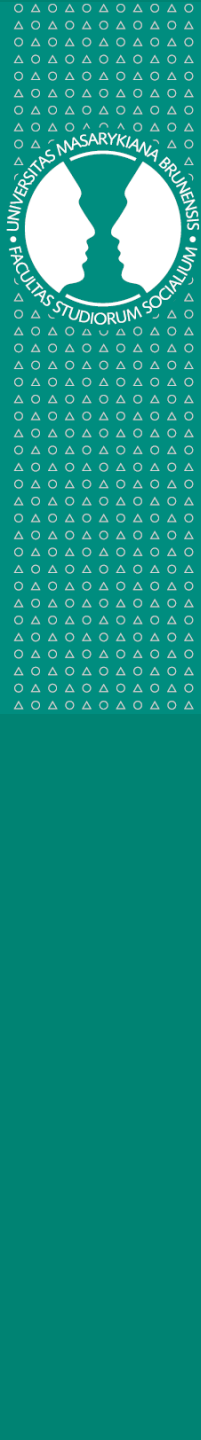
“... I was ... sorry that people um – have been seeing those pictures, ...”

1. I am sorry that people weren't able to get to the concert, because I broke the bus (b)
2. I am sorry that people weren't able to get to the concert, because of the thunderstorm (a)
3. I am sorry that the children have been seeing those pornographic pictures that somebody left (a)
4. I am sorry that the children have been seeing those pornographic pictures, because I did not hide them well enough (b)



“I was ... sorry that people ... didn’t understand the true nature and heart of America”

1. I am sorry that my children didn’t understand how to behave in public
  2. I am sorry that my students didn’t understand Weber today
- Cognitive vs. normative dimension of understanding



“I was equally sorry that people have been seeing those pictures, didn’t understand the true nature and heart of America”

1. I was sorry that people have been seeing those pictures
2. I was sorry that people didn’t understand the true nature and heart of America
3. I was sorry that (the/some) people **who** have been seeing those pictures, didn’t understood the true nature and heart of America



“I was equally sorry that people have been seeing those pictures, didn’t understand the true nature and heart of America”

Question: Is this an apology?

Substitution test: “I was sorry” → “I apologized”

“I apologized that people have been seeing those pictures, didn’t understand the true nature and heart of America”

Answer: No

Consequence: Because it’s “equally sorry” this also applies for the first “sorry”



“I told him I was sorry for the humiliation suffered by the Iraqi prisoners, and the humiliation suffered by their families. I told him I was equally sorry that – that people um – have been seeing those pictures, didn’t understand the true nature and heart of America.”

- Apology as “inauthentic” performance (Bush as hypocritical, subjective/documentary meaning)
- The “inauthentic” performance shows the structural strains of the Bush Administration (objective or latent meaning)
- Why was this performance publicly accepted as “apology”? (manifest meaning trumps literal meaning)



Thank you for your  
attention

and in advance for criticism and  
further suggestions!

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