Advanced Methods of Interpretation

Lecture IX

Discourse Analysis

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Test Questions

1. Explain Weber's concept of meaning. Why does he think it is important for sociological explanations?

2. Saussure spoke of the "arbitrariness" of the linguistic sign. What does it mean? Discuss the implications and limitations of this conception with regard to cultural sociology.

3. List and briefly explain the principles of interpretation in objective hermeneutics.

4. What are the arguments of Latour's regarding the infamous "Berlin Key"? Discuss and evaluate his analysis in the context of interpretative sociology.
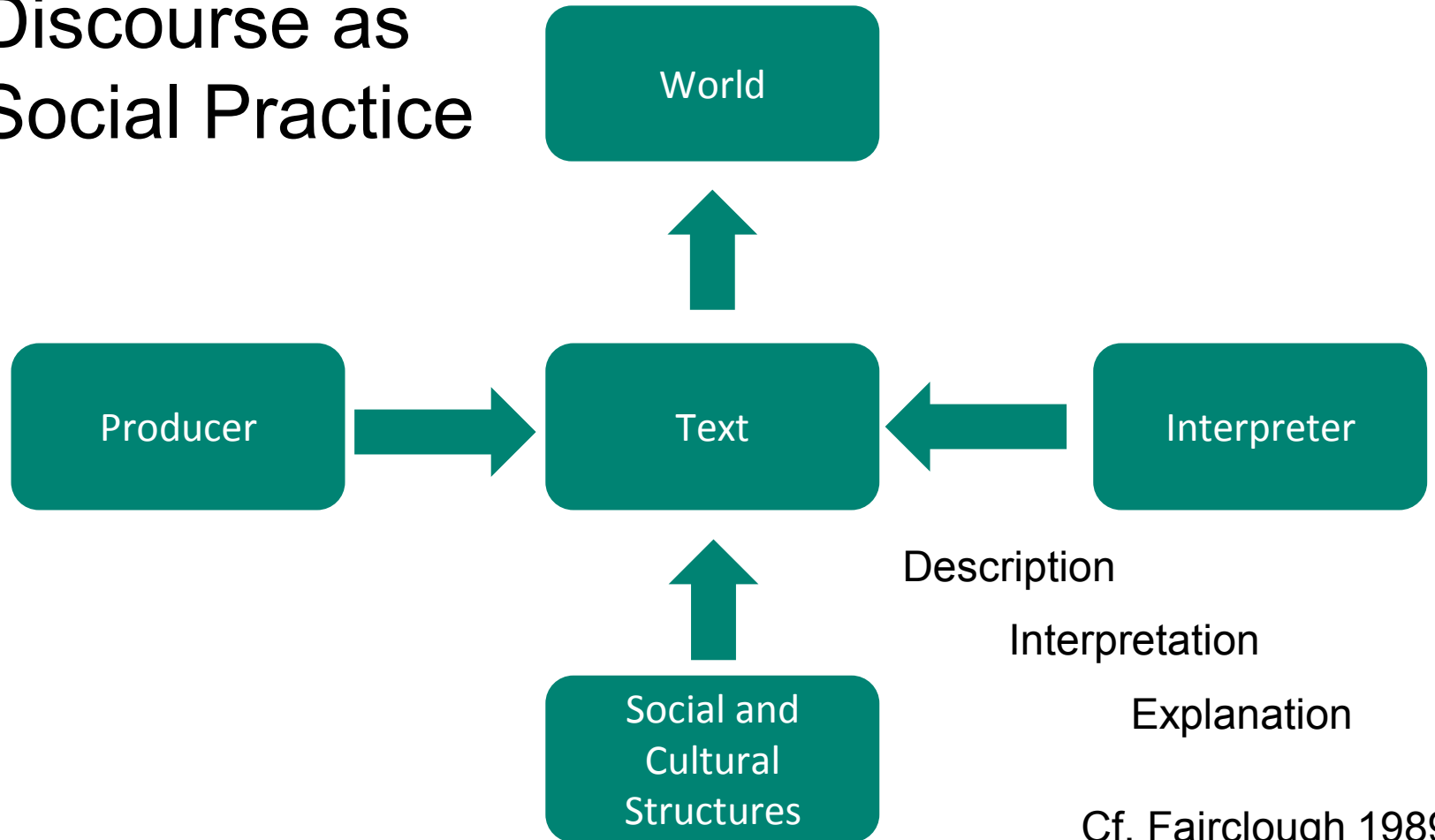
5. What is a discourse?

Summary

- Language and discourse as social and cultural forces

- Discourse as socially shared and structured system enabling and limiting individual speech

- Varieties of discourse (spoke, written, public professional)

- Narrative as a sequential structure of discourse

- Biographical Narrative between discursive construction and narrative representation

Discourse as Social Practice

World

Producer → Text ← Interpreter

↑ (from World)

↑ Social and Cultural Structures

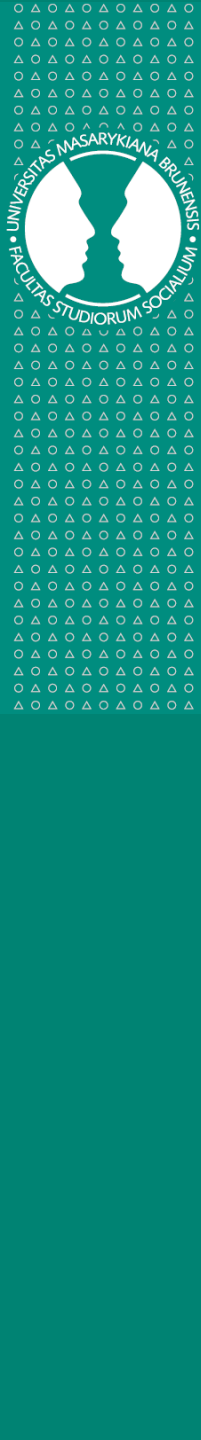Description

Interpretation

Explanation

Cf. Fairclough 1989

Public Discourse

- Sociology as the study of social facts, collective consciousness and public opinion (Durkheim)

- Public opinion is not the opinion of everyone or the majority, but something that is constructed in public discourses (according to cultural principles)

- Public discourses may not be representative, but they have an impact on policies and individual behavior

- Critical discourse theory: problematizing the illegitimate use of power or domination in discourse (Fairclough, van Dijk, Wodak and others)

Michel Foucault (1926-1984)

Foucault and Discourse

- Michel Foucault made a certain understanding of discourse and discourse analysis popular, but never developed a consistent methodology

- Critique of the human sciences → his methodology is objectivist and oriented towards the natural sciences

- Birth of the Clinic (1963) → still strong reference to structuralist methodology

- Phenomenology of the second-order → bracketing out problems of meaning and signification

Foucault: Beyond Hermeneutics and Structuralism?

- No "deep" interpretation meaning → statements have to be taken in their "literal" meaning

- No explanation via "deep" structure → the unity of the discourse is not guaranteed by an underlying principle, but grounded in the (rules of the) discourse itself

- However, in his empirical research, Foucault reinstates the transcendent/immanent dichotomy he wants to overcome (Rabinow & Dreyfus 1983)

Foucault's Elements of Discourse

- Discourse as an autonomous, irreducible reality (like "culture" in the strong program)

- Discourse as "meaningless", objective reality

- Statement as the smallest unit of the discourse (similar to speech acts as opposed to propositions)

- Exclusion of everyday speech acts from the analysis and focus on "serious" speech acts (i.e. everything that can be found in the archive)

- Rules of the discourse define the unity of the discourse

Order of Things (1967)

- Fields of knowledge and scientific discourses are structured by unconscious principles ("episteme", seemingly related to the idea of cultural totalities)

- History as a process of discontinuities and ruptures

- The history of the human sciences is characterized by two ruptures (17th and beginning 19th century)

- Not only empirical subjects, but also the concept of "man" is a historical and discursive product (thus, structural anthropology loses its universality)

Rules of the Discourse

- Rules of exclusion: Who is allowed to speak and what can be said?

→ Speech taboos, exclusion of speakers (e.g. madman), institutional and media structures

- Internal rules of classification, ordering and distribution

→ Commentary (repetition and sameness), author (individuality), discipline (limitation and openness)

- Rules regarding the participation in the discourse

→ speaker roles, discursive rituals, communities

Principles of Foucault's Analysis

- Principle of reversal: Not only what is said counts, but also what is cut out or left unsaid

- Principle of discontinuity: Discourse as dispersed regularity

- Principle of specificity: Every particular discourse imposes its "meaning" on the world (constructivism)

- Principle of exteriority: There is *no hidden meaning or principle governing the discourse*, but the discourse as dispersed regularity of statements organizes itself

Foucault's "Methods"

Archeology:

- Partly synchronic

- Regularity and dispersion of the discourse

- Distribution of power in the discourse

Genealogy:

- Mostly diachronic

- Continuity and discontinuity of the discourse

- Conditions of emergence for certain phenomena

Superficial Depth

Whereas the interpreter is obliged to go to the depth of things, like an excavator, the moment of interpretation is like an overview, from higher and higher up, which allows the depth to be laid out in front him in a more and more profound visibility; depth is resituated as an absolutely superficial secret.

Michel Foucault: *Nietzsche, Freud, Marx*

Laclau & Mouffe: Discourse

- Discourse analysis: not concerned with "*facts*, but their *conditions of possibility*"

- Discourse as general model of culture: No distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices

- Poststructuralist theory of discourse: instability of meaning and signification (Derrida)

- Difference and heterogeneity as starting point

- Identities can only be fixed temporarily and only by excluding "the other"

The basic hypothesis of a discursive approach is that the very possibility of perception, thought and action depends on the structuration of a certain meaningful field which pre-exists any factual immediacy.

Ernesto Laclau (2007: 541)

Laclau: Signification and Discourse

- Rejection of Saussure's homology of the sign → no strict correlation between signifier and signified

- *Symbolic overdetermination* of the sign → Multiple readings and interpretations are always possible

- Possibility of *floating* as well as *empty signifiers*

- *Hegemony* as temporary fixation of the relation between signifier and signified

- *Articulation* as discursive practice
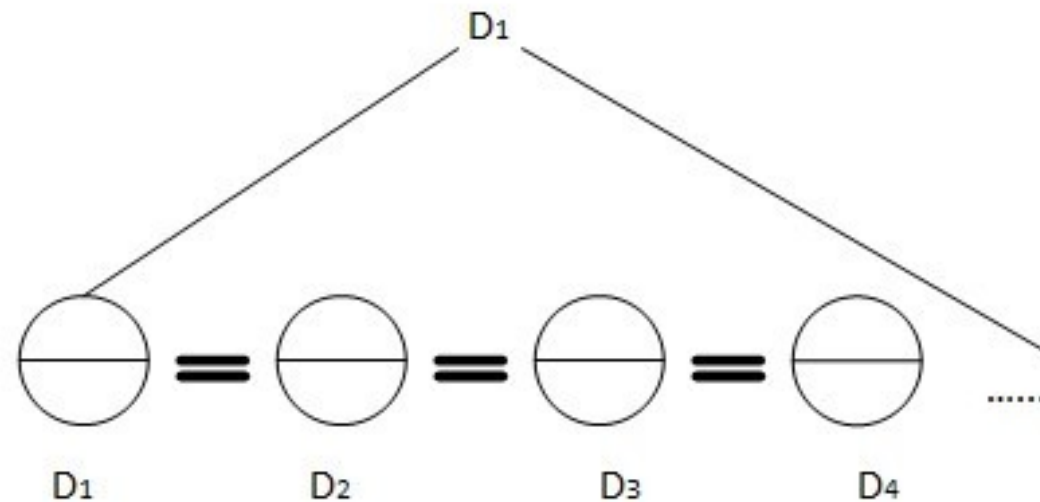
Laclau & Mouffe: Political Discourse

- *Antagonism* is fundamental: heterogeneity and struggle is at the very core of the social and of politics

- The logic of the political discourse is a *logic of equivalence*: simplification by means of an artificial homogeneity between struggles and subject positions

- Empty signifiers (e.g. "the people") are able to homogenize, precisely because they are meaningless

- Due to the antagonistic nature of the social, the construction of a radical "other" or "enemy" is a prerequisite of homogeneity

The Logic of Equivalence

Radical Democracy and Populism

Radical democracy (Laclau & Mouffe 2001):

- Radical democracy is build on the acceptance of heterogeneity and antagonism

- The struggle for democracy has to construct a counter-hegemony by forging chains of equivalence between different struggles and groups

Populism (Laclau 2005):

- *Populism* exemplifies the political logic by constructing collective identity and the homogeneity of the people

The Strong Program in Cultural Sociology and Discourse Analysis

- Binary codes and collective representations as cultural structures

- Discourse and narrative: making codes and representations fit to empirical reality

- Discourse and icons: visualizing codes and collective representations

- Discourse and performance: putting code and collective representations into action

Strong Program and Discourse

- Alexander's and Smith's neo-Durkheimian discourse theory has striking similarities to Laclau's and Mouffe's understanding of political discourse

- "Sacred" and "profane" as pure difference (Durkheim)

- "Sacred" and "profane" as empty signifiers that are temporarily filled and fixed by the discursive struggle

- Political struggle is about working the binaries, fixing their meaning, polluting your opponent

- Performance as articulation and discursive practice

Alexander: Codes of the Civil Sphere

	Civil (sacred)	Anticivil (profane)
Motives	Active	Passive
	Autonomous	Dependent
	Rational	Irrational
Relations	Open	Secretive
	Altruistic	Greedy
	Truthful	Deceitful
Institutions	Law	Power
	Equality	Hierarchy
	Office	Personality

Alexander (2006: 57-59; 2012: 101)

Discourse and Metaphor

- Metaphor as a non-arbitrary, iconic, linguistic sign

- Metaphors are grounded in experience (Lakoff & Johnson), but also shaped by culture

- Metaphors can be read as indicators and documents of a deep meaning structure (Bohnsack)

- Metaphors can be conceptualized as background representations and deep structures that organize discourses and practices (Lakoff & Johnson)

Lakoff: Political Discourse and Metaphor

Thesis I:
(unity)

The American political discourse is based on the metaphor of the nation as family

Thesis II:
(difference)

The polarization of the American political discourse can be explained by the different conceptions of family between conservatives and liberals

Lakoff, George (1996/2002): *Moral Politics*

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Family as Metaphor of the Nation

Family	State/Nation
Parents	Government
Children	Citizens
Family Morality	Moral Politics

According to Lakoff, conservatism and liberalism differ in their understanding of family and – as a result – in their political views.

Liberalism und Conservatism I

Family Model	Conservatism	Liberalism
Family morality	Strict father morality	Nurturing parent morality
Education	Authority	Dialogue
Explanation of Action	Individual character	Social forces
Attribution of Responsibility	Individual responsibility	Social responsibility
State conception	Minimal state	Welfare state

Liberalism und Conservatism II

Moral Politics	Conservatism	Liberalism
Polluted symbol	"big government"	"corporate power"
Government spending	Military, police	Social welfare, health care
Institution	Army	University
Fairness	Non-interference	Affirmative action
Abortion	"Pro Life"	"Pro Choice"
Crime	Punishment	Prevention

Thank you for your attention, criticism and further suggestions!

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