Discourse Analysis

Pedersen, Ove K.

Document Version
Final published version

Publication date:
2009

License
CC BY-NC-ND

Citation for published version (APA):
Pedersen, O. K. (2009). *Discourse Analysis*. Department of Business and Politics. Copenhagen Business School. Working Paper / International Center for Business and Politics No. 65

Link to publication in CBS Research Portal

Discourse Analysis
Ove K. Pedersen

Discourse Analysis
© Ove K. Pedersen

International Center for Business and Politics
Copenhagen Business School
Steen Blichers Vej 22
DK-2000 Frederiksberg
Phone: +45 3815 3585
E-mail: cbp@cbp.cbs
www.cbs.dk/cbp

Entry to Betrand Badie and Dirk Berg-Schlosser (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Political Science*, London, Sage (under review).

The aim of discourse analysis is to reveal the ontological and epistemological premises which are embedded in language, and which allows a statement to be understood as rational or interpreted as meaningful. Discourse analysis investigates whether – in statements or texts - it is possible to establish any regularity in the objects which are discussed; the subjects designated as actors; the causal relations claimed to exist between objects (explanans) and subjects (explanadum); but also the expected outcome of subjects trying to influence objects; the goal of their action; and finally the time dimension by which these relations are framed. Discourses thus comprise the underlying conditions for a statement to be interpreted as meaningful and rational. At the same time, discourse analysis is the study of rationality and how it is expressed in a particular historical context. Discourse analysis is part of the Constructivist (or Social Constructivist) approach within the humanities and social sciences. It assumes that basic assumptions with regard to being, self and the world are constructed by individuals living in a historical and cultural context which is produced and reproduced by their speech acts.

There is no mainstream definition of discourse within the social sciences. Neither is there any generally accepted understanding of what discourse analysis is, or which methods(s) its practitioners should use. Consequently, it is difficult to give a precise description of what characterizes discourse analysis. This entry reviews several forms of discourse analysis and their application to politics. Three approaches are distinguished, all of which are called discourse-analytic`s, but alternate in their approaches to what a discourse is and what the aim of analysing discourses is. The first approach is the discourse-analytical, the second is the discourse-theoretical, and the third is the critical discourse analysis.

Varieties of Discourse Analysis

Analyses of discourse have been carried out within a variety of social science disciplines, including linguistics, anthropology, sociology, international relations, communication studies and political science. Although the concept of political discourse has been used for centuries to describe political debate or deliberation in political theory and philosophy, it is only within the last 40 or so years that there has been a theoretical and methodological interest in how to study the relationship between language and political action. This started in the 1960s in Europe as part of a philosophical renewal of the humanities (including the social sciences) later to be known as structuralism and post-structuralism, or in more general terms as the Linguistic Turn. In the 1970s it spread to the USA with studies of how political concepts and political news play a role in the construction of social problems. Today there are several approaches to how to understand the role of language in politics. Among these are conceptual histography (*Begriffsgeschichte*), the history of political ideas, and the theory of narration. They all differ from discourse analysis by the fact that their object of study is concepts, narration and ideas and not discourses. The most important difference among discourse analytical approaches is between those which seek to understand discourse as a contingent form of knowledge and use discourse analysis to see how knowledge and the production of knowledge have changed over time; and those which take for granted that "the world" is a product of how we categorise it through our statements, and therefore looks upon discourse as a universal type of social action, and use discourse analysis to establish a general theory of discourse. Although discourse analytic approaches emphasise the connection between discourse and power; they differ in how they attach the concept of discourse to other concepts such as knowledge, ideology, ideas and truth.

Discourse analysis

This understanding of discourse and *discourse analysis* is closely connected to Michel Foucault and his publications from 1963 to 1971. In this period Foucault studied the history of language and how words (or language) were placed in relation to things (or what is observable) at various periods in history. Foucault was concerned with the fact that from the mid-1800s, the human sciences began to analyse language and to argue that all human actions and social formations are somehow related to language, or can even be understood as constructed in (or by the use of) language. For Foucault, then, discourse analysis is not some independent theory or method, but a way in which the human sciences perceive the world. Foucault shows how language was turned into an empirical object for scientific studies, and views discourse analysis as a historically specific manner in which the human sciences relates to reality. Hence for Foucault, the scientific interest in language is a historical event, the end of the modernity period, where man stood at the centre of scientific interest, and the start of a new period, where language became the central object of study. It is in this context that Foucault introduces the concepts of *archives* and *archaeology* in an attempt to portray discourses as historically determined forms of knowledge which, together with other discourses, enters into a form of institutionalised rationality (an archive). The archive, in consequence is a historically determined knowledge horizon, a framework for how ideas are produced and sustained and for how knowledge is accepted (as being trustworthy) or not. Ideas are created in discursive events, which subsequently – by historical analysis – can be understood to have added new positions to the archive or to have transformed already existing positions in the archive. At the same time, the archaeology is the knowledge we possess about the history of the various forms of knowledge, and of the limitations and possibilities which exist for creating knowledge and generating ideas. These limitations and possibilities are not exclusively linguistic. They are also extra-discursive and institutional. Discourses are supported by institutions and together with various technologies (for e.g. disciplining or sanctioning) they constitute a historically determined rationality.

Discourse theory

In contrast to Foucault *discourse theory* aim at developing a universal theory of discourses. Discourse theory sees all social phenomena as discursive constructions, and assumes that all social phenomena can be studied by discourse analysis. It is in this sense that discourse theory turns social phenomena into language, and language into an object for discourse analysis. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe are the best examples. They have advanced discourse theory by deconstructing other theories. First, with inspiration from structuralist linguistics, they emphasise that the smallest unit in a discourse (langue) is the sign, and that discourses includes a system of signs characterised by every sign being different from other signs. Second, with inspiration from post-structuralism, they emphasise that signs are infused meaning through articulation (signifiè) while the content of signs (significant) is always contingent and never fixed. Finally, with inspiration from Neo-Marxism, they stress that the articulation is embedded in a political process. In their definition, discourse is a system of signs which are allocated meaning through articulation. The articulation on one hand is understood as a conflict between persons whose object is to achieve political status by imposing a particular taken-for-granted understanding of the world. On the other hand discourse analysis is used to map or trace this process as a political process. The task of discourse analysis is to find the nodal points which give other signs their meaning, and to observe the process through which the allocation of meaning is taking place. In political theory, for example, "democracy" is a nodal point around which conflicts are constantly taking place. In contrast to Foucault's discourse analysis, the concept of ideology (or objectivity) plays an important role in discourse theory. All discourses are ideological because they appear as objectivity, the taken-for-granted, and thus

conceal alternative realities. Also in contrast to Foucault the concept of knowledge does not enter into the vocabulary of discourse theory. Where Foucault can study how knowledge *has become* an archive with his archaeological (diachronic) approach, the discourse theoretical (synchronic) approach is analysing how meaning *is created by* politics. And finally where Foucault sees institutions as supporting knowledge and therefore capable of having an independent (non-discursive) status, in discourse theory institutions are understood as discursive constructions without any extra-discursive status.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis emphasizes the necessity of establishing methods for empirical investigation of relations between discursive and non-discursive practices. In this sense it distinguishes itself mainly from discourse theory. The work of Norman Fairclough is central. For Fairclough, discourse is a communicative act, but also a social practice. Discourses constitute social phenomena, but are also constituted by social phenomena in the form of social (or political) practice. Any use of language (a communicative action) therefore consists of a discursive practice where discourses are produced or consumed; and a social practice or an institutional context of which a communicative action is a part. The communicative action can draw on (consume) or create (produce) discourses, but will always be part of an order of discourse, where several discourses are articulated simultaneously. The communicative act is linked to social practice through the use of genres or conventional text types; the news media can, for example, draw on interviews as a genre, while the family can use the dinner table conversation in the same manner. Fairclough combines linguistic textual analysis with macro- and micro-sociological analysis of texts and conversations, using a comprehensive research design which recognises five components (problem formulation, choice of empirical methods, transcription, analysis and results), each extended by specific methods and checklists.

In contrast to the theory of discourse, the critical discourse analysis distinguishes between discourse and institutions as two different types of social phenomena. It studies how discourse and institution interact in the constitution of a social world, and how discursive practices are institutionalised or are moved from being linguistic utterances to set conditions for stable social relations. While critical discourse analysis attempts to uncover the ideologies which contribute to the production and reproduction of power, it also has a political aim: It looks for how a discourse limits our understanding of the world (i.e. function as an ideology) but also for how they contain several competing discourses and therefore the possibility of dominant ideologies to be contested. The Neo-Marxist concept of hegemony is used in this context. Ideology is understood to be embedded in discursive practice, and discourses to be more or less ideological, where the ideological discourses are those which contribute to maintaining (or establishing) a power relation.

Discourse Analytical Approaches to Politics

Discourse analysis has developed rather rapidly from emphasising the ontological (constructivist or anti-realistic) approach to build up methods and tools for studying language and texts. Most recently, the question of method has come to occupy a central position, as has the requirement of being able to evaluate the validity of findings produced by discourse analysis. Still, the discourse analysis remains an alternative – critical – approach to mainstream political science and other social sciences. It assumes that political science, like other social science disciplines, is a form of knowledge which constitutes a historically constructed understanding of what can be studied as politics (an ontology), and a historically constructed interpretation of what are assumed to be true

statements about politics (an epistemology). It reflects on political science as a discipline and on the role of the discipline in constructing a certain form of political order (or polity). It finally applies concepts like polity, politics and policy in ways different from mainstream political science. In contrast to the realism which characterizes mainstream political science, discourse analysis is built upon an anti-realistic, or constructivist approach, perceiving any form of political order to be embedded in language (and institutions) and articulated by the use of speech acts. Thus, for discourse analysis, the conflicts through which what *politics is* (and what is non-political) are defined, therefore are an important dimension to every type of polity and thus also an important object for political science to study.

The most important contribution from discourse analysis to political science is within the theories of power. From Thomas Hobbes to Robert A. Dahl, power has been seen as the ability to affect, to limit or to control the behaviour of people; or for A to compel B to do something which B would not otherwise have done. In contrast to this view, discourse analysis understands power as entrenched in the-taken-for-granted. Foucault speaks about the productivity of power and perceives power as one of the technologies by which individual and collective identities are constructed, and in which the understanding of self and of communality comes to be taken-for-granted or to be understood as meaningful and rational. Where mainstream power theory (Dahl, for example) takes for granted that A and B exist each with their own set of preferences, Foucault sees the constitution of subjectivity and of the relation between A and B as the productivity of power. He – together with the two other types of discourse analysis - looks for the "hidden power" embedded in both individual and collective identities and for the underlying conditions for interests, expectations and interpretations to be understood as rational. Apart from regarding power as ontological, the three approaches therefore agree that it is also epistemological. Power is not only the ability to affect the behaviour of others. It is also the productive force by which A and B are constructed with each their set of interests, and with each their set of expectations and interpretations.

By combining the critical with the analytical approach, discourse analysis is characterised by standing at the crossroad of several approaches in the study of politics. It opens avenues which bring political science into close relationship with history and institutional theory, but also with linguistic and narrative theory. Underlying the three discourse-analytical approaches are two approaches to time and space. The first is the diachronic, where the question is raised how epochs come into being, and what, over their long history (the *longue durée*) makes types of political orders different from each other. The diachronic understanding generates a history of polities, their periods and geography, which also allows discourse analysis to sit at the crossroad between history as a scientific discipline (archaeology) and political science as the history of political orders. Foucault is an example in point. He describes the history of bio-politics, and by doing so also establishes the historiography of a specific type of political technique called governance. The second is the synchronic understanding of time, where the question is raised how political orders are constructed and changed by the means of politics. By studying how politics constructs political orders, the short-term and long-term perspective is connected, and the history of political orders is combined in the study of how polities are constructed through changes in understandings of what politics is. The combination of the two makes it possible to study the history of political orders as a precondition for the study of political change. Fairclough is an example in point. He describes how an ideology becomes dominant, and how social conflicts are taking place within the context of dominant ideologies. He also studies how discursive practices are institutionalised, and how discursive practices proceed within a context of institutions. The synchronic process-tracking thus generates insight into the political processes as conflicts over dominance, which positions the discourse

analysis at the crossroad of institutional theory (and theories of institutional change) and political science as the theory of politics (or political change).

Within the last few years, institutional theory has become aware of the role of ideas in explaining institutional change. Attempts are made to understand how ideas are causally powerful in explaining the form and content of institutional change. The ideational account of institutional change is thus moving institutional theory in the direction of discourse analysis. This applies in studies of economic ideas and their role in defining economic crises, for example in the 1970s and 1980s. It applies to studies of the role of socio-economic understanding in establishing preconditions for institutionalised processes of compromising and consensus making in the post-war period in the Nordic and other small western European countries. It also applies to policy studies of how environment, energy, social and labour market policies are established and become changed within epistemic communities. And finally, it applies to studies of European integration and international relations. In this way, both approaches have focused on the role of speech acts and texts in analysing the articulation of politics; and while different concepts are put to use (ideas or discourse), both approaches take it for granted that language matters, just as it is accepted that politics takes place through the construction of interpretative frameworks. This finally places discourse analysis at the crossroad of theories of narration and political science as a theory of political communication. Within mainstream political science there is a growing interest in the role of the genres (drama, history, epics) in producing political news or in how polities are framed and named. The use of narratives in political argumentation is explored in understanding news as a political institution and public policy as agendas for political discourse. Within political science it is also becoming common to study the organisations by which ideas are produced (or consumed) and the epistemic communities through which ideas are debated and disseminated. The role of institutional entrepreneurs in universities, think tanks, expert systems and the media using narratives to frame and name political problems is becoming an important topic.

Ove K. Pedersen

See also Discourse, Power, Hegemony, Foucault, Social Constructivism, Institutional Theory, Institutional Change, and Political Communication.

Further References

Edelman. (1988), *Constructing the Political Spectacle*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Fairclough, N. (2003). *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*. London: Routledge.

Foucault, M. (1966). *Les Mots et les Choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines*. (The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences) Paris: Gallimard.

Foucault, M., (1969). L`archèologie du savoir. (The Archaeology of Knowledge) Paris: Gallimard.

Hay, C. (2002). *Political Analysis. A Critical Introduction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Kögler, H.H., (1999). *The Power of Dialogue. Critical Hermeneutics after Gadamer and Foucault*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Laclau E. and C. Mouffe (1985). *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics.* London: Verso.

Pedersen, O.K. (1991). "Nine Questions to a Neo-Institutional Theory in Political Science." *Scandinavian Political Studies* 14(2): 125-148.

Wetherell, M. S. Taylor, and S.J. Yates, (2001). *Discourse Theory and Practice. A reader.* London: Sage.

Wetherell, S. Tayolor, and S.J. Yates, (2001). *Discourse as Data. A Guide for Analysis.* London: Sage.