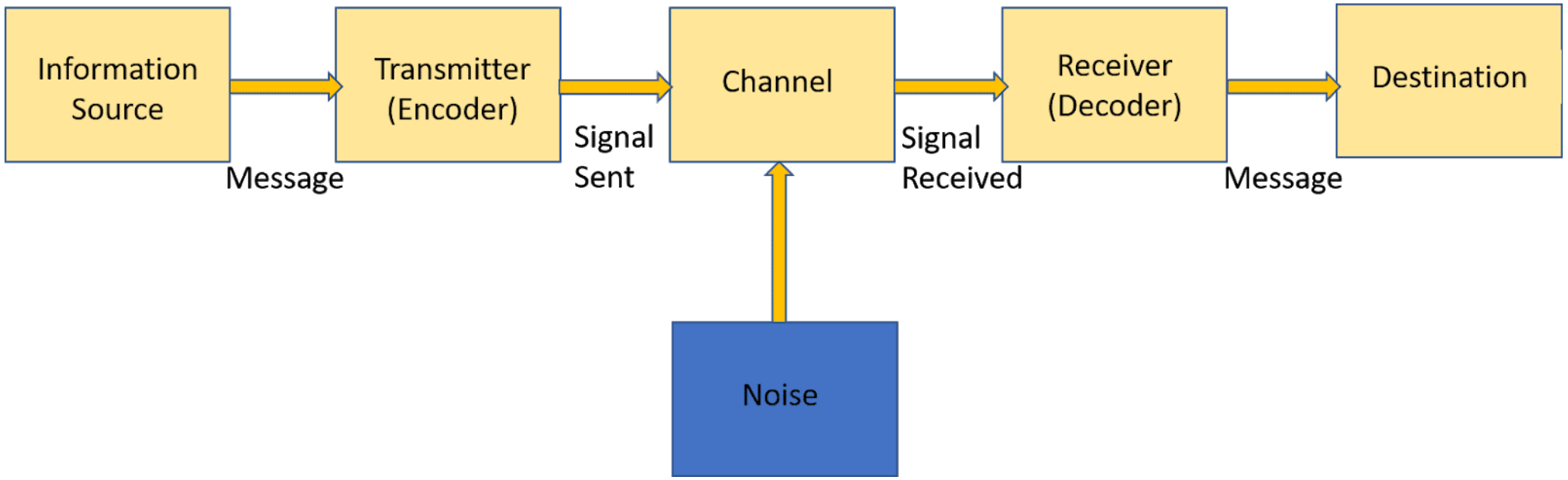
Three scientific models of communication

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SHANNON AND WEAVER MODEL OF COMMUNICATION



MODEL 1: Shannon & Weaver (1945)

- Highly intuitive, corresponds to the scheme of communication that we imagine most naturally
- Communication as a one-on-one activity, takes place between two actors
- Communication as a closed and linear process, receiver is often a passive vessel, can at best give « feedback »

- Encoding/decoding are technical and formal processes, can be interrupted by
  - technical problems (e.g. lost signal or connection)
  - semantic problems (e.g. the message is send in a language not spoken by the receiver)
  - effectiveness problems (e.g. the message uses a jargon or code that the receiver struggles to understand)

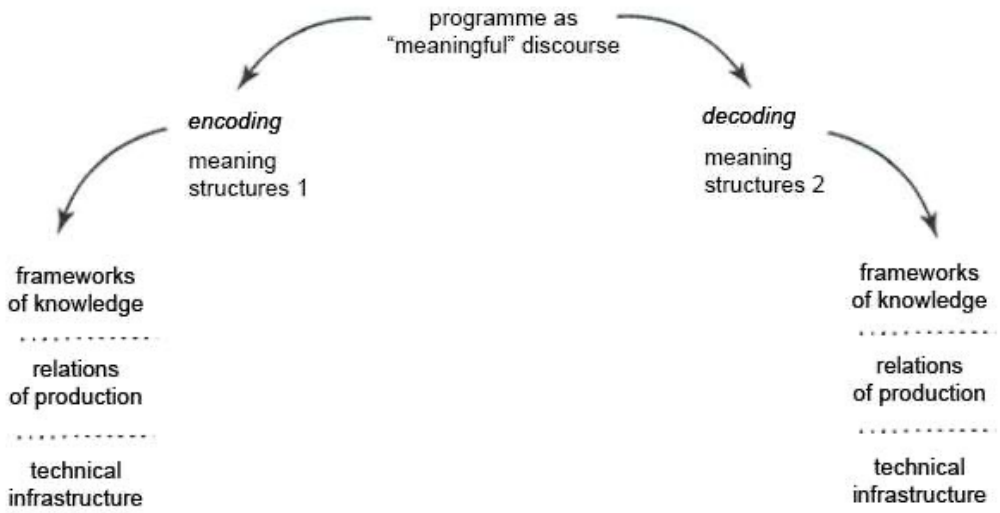
Research questions

- Technical: how is the communication realized?
  - What tools, channels, mechanisms are used to communicate? How are these tools set-up? What characteristics and traits do the they need to possess for communication to work?
  - How do these tools, channels, mechanisms facilitate the communicative activity? How do they make the communication possible?
  - …
- Formal: does the communication « work » ?
  - Is the message encoded and decoded correctly? Are there no translation errors? Do the interlocutors speak the same language?
  - Is the message transmitted efficiently, or is there « noise »? Do the interlocutors use the same code, jargon, vernacular?
  - …

Implicitly omnipresent in scientific research

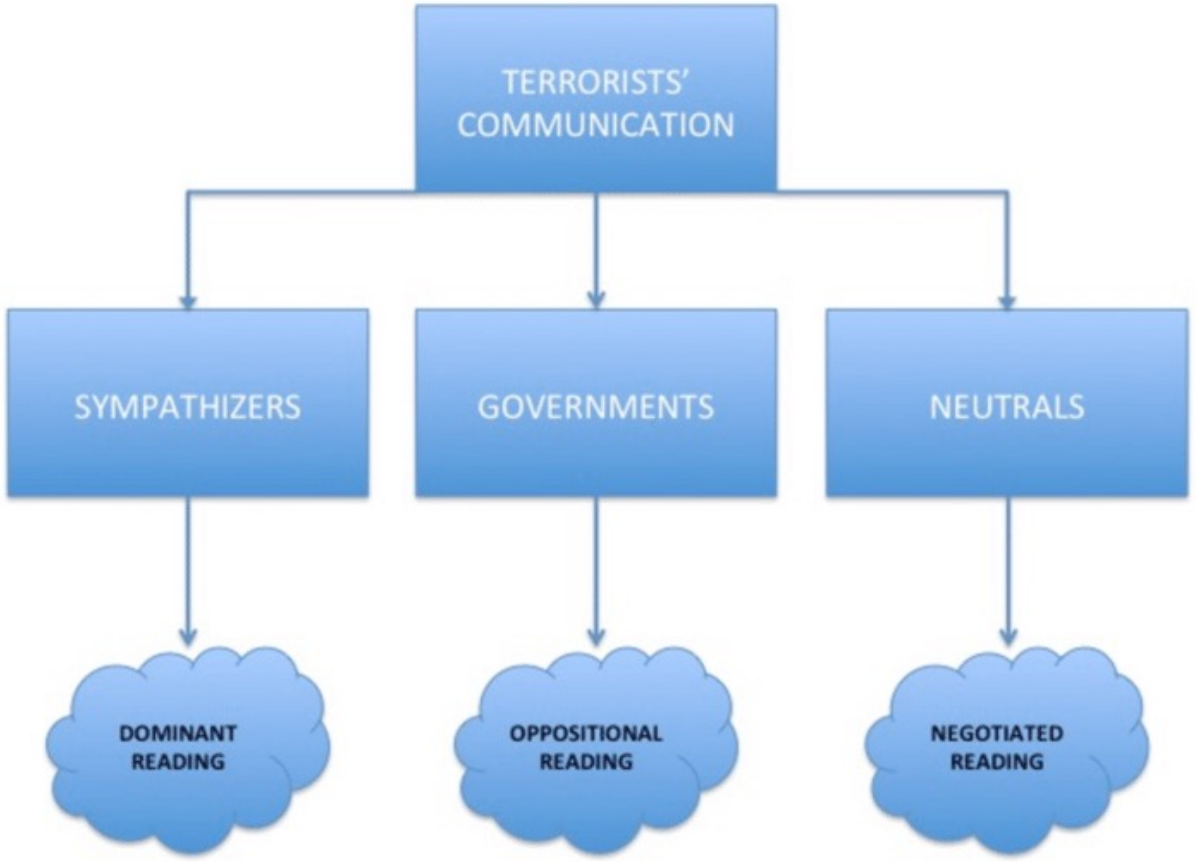
- Political polling: message from the public to the polling company, try to get the message across as clear as possible
- Judicial interpretation: message from the judge to the public, try to interpret the judgement as correctly as possible
- Market signals: message from the market to the producers and the consumers, try and make sure that the signal is as pure as possible
- …

MODEL 2: Stuart Hall (1980)



Stuart Hall

- Mass communication rather than one-on-one communication: message can have different audiences
  - Different audiences encode/decode a message differently ➔ different readings are possible Encoding/decoding depends on cultural/social/economic **CONTEXT** (frameworks of knowledge, relations of production, cultural capital, habitus,…)
- Encoding and decoding require active participants, who can influence and affect the message being communicated
- Message-centred, rather than linear and closed process



The message of a terrorist organization is read differently by:

- Its sympathizers, who will decode the message the way it was encoded
- People who are unaffected by the terrorist group, who will decode the message partially as it was encoded, but partially in a manner determined by their own context
- The government and the victims of the terrorist organization, who will interpret the message antagonistically and may change the meaning of the message

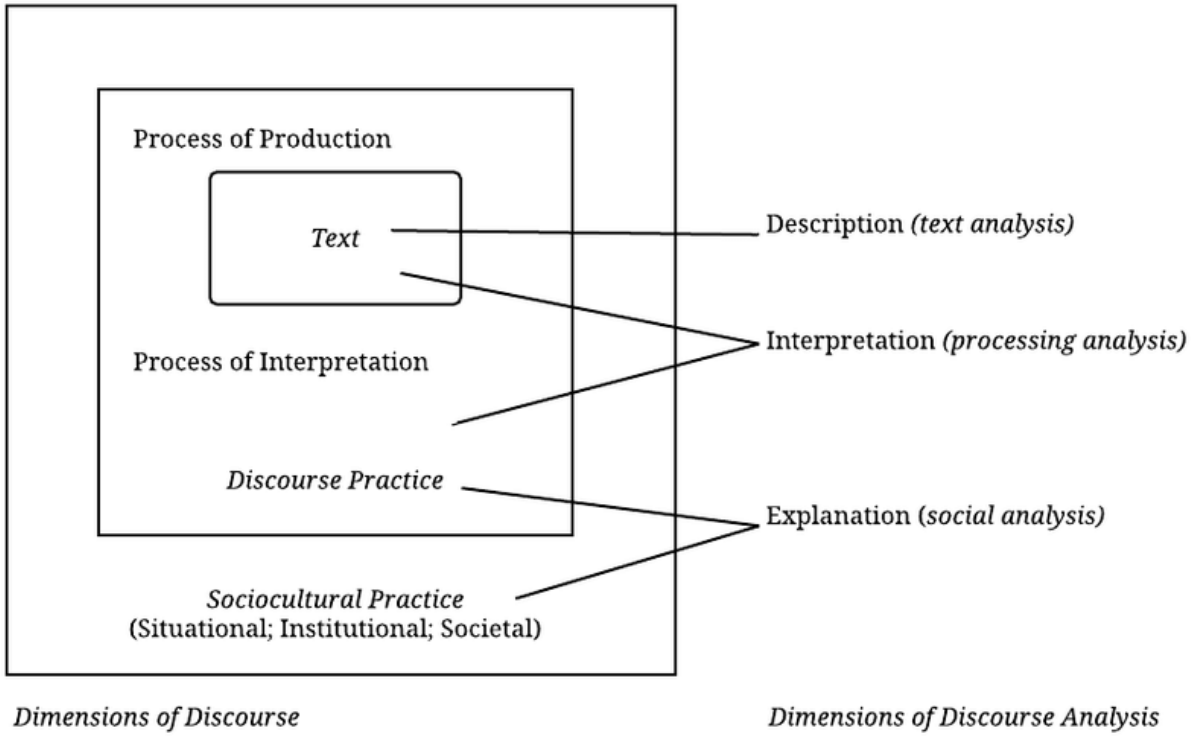
Research questions

- Mass communication
  - Why is a message encoded in a certain why? In which cultural/social/economic context was the message encoded? How did this context affect the encoding?
  - Which groups are targeted by the message? In which cultural/social/economic context was the message decoded?
  - How do different groups receive and decode a message in the public sphere? How did the context affect the decoding?
  - …
- Cultural readings
  - How do certain cultural/social/economic contexts constitute certain frames of interpretation and *epistemes*?
  - Are interpretations shared by and/or limited to a particular (sub)culture

Often used in « cultural » studies

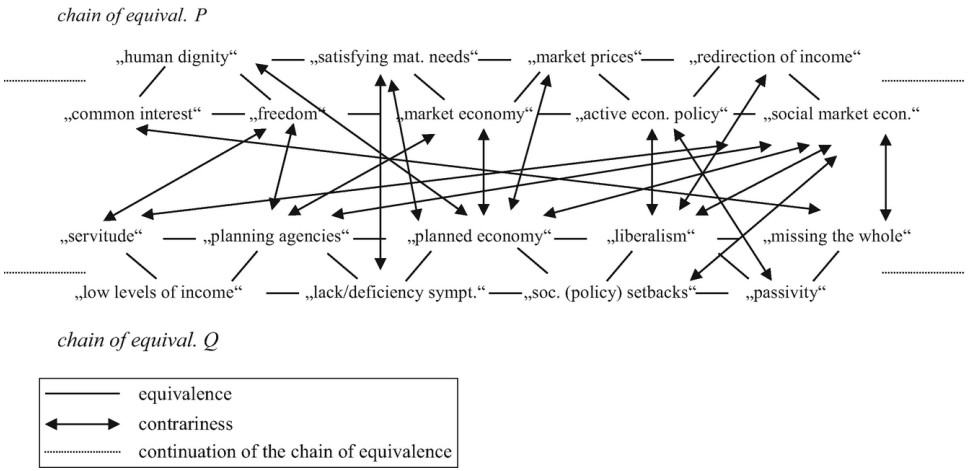
- Sociological research on subcultures
  - E.g. Hebdige, D. (2012). *Subculture: The meaning of style*. London: Routledge.
- Ethnographic research in anthropology, media studies,…
  - E.g. Van Hout, T., & Jacobs, G. (2008). News production theory and practice: Fieldwork notes on power, interaction and agency. *Pragmatics*, *18*(1), 59-85.
  - E.g. Axel, B. K. (2006). Anthropology and the new technologies of communication. *Cultural Anthropology*, *21*(3), 354-384.
- Research on propaganda
  - E.g. Baines, Paul R., and Nicholas J. O'Shaughnessy. "Al-Qaeda messaging evolution and positioning, 1998–2008: Propaganda analysis revisited." *Public Relations Inquiry* 3.2 (2014): 163-191.
- Research on social media
  - E.g. Eisenlauer, V. (2013). *A critical hypertext analysis of social media: the true colours of Facebook*. A&C Black.
- Judicial cultures???

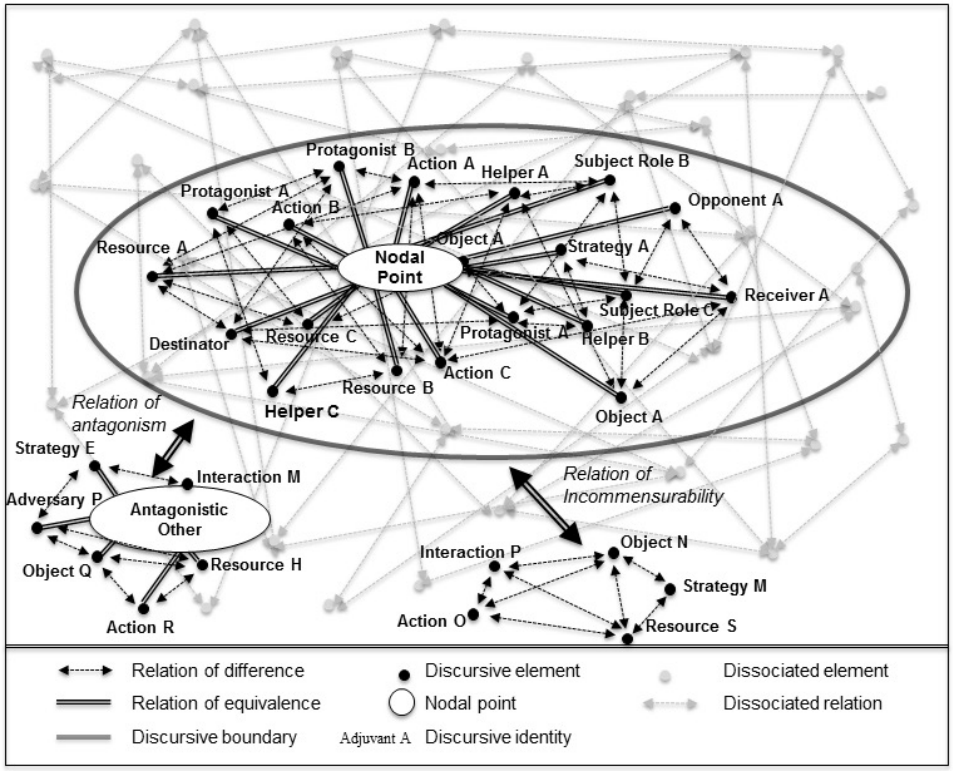
MODEL 3: Discourse



Fairclough's model of discourse sees a message as something produced and interpreted in a concrete situation, which is in turn part of a broader sociocultural context. Both its situational performance as well as the broader context affect the message. (Fairclough, N. (2013). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. London: Routledge.

Poststructuralist Discourse Theory is interested in mapping how concepts and signifiers are related to each other in a message? Are concepts different from each other, or are they linked to one-another? Which notions are invoked, which ones are marginalized?





- Focus primarily on the message itself
  - How is the message constructed?
  - How does the message construct the social world in which it intervenes?
  - What effect does the message's social-constructive efforts have on the world in which it intervenes?
  - ...
- More structuralist than Hall, Shanon, and Weaver: less attention to actors, meaning of a message depends on the structures in which it finds itself
  - i.e. less attention to what is « meant » or to a particular « reading », more to how the message is part of a public debate or conversation
  - Other messages in this public debate or conversation affect the meaning of a message, and vice versa

- Structure of message and context
  - How is a message configured? What is its internal structure?
  - How does the message fit within the context in which it is articulated?
- Effect of the message
  - How does a message constitute a political intervention?
  - Does the message reproduce, challenge, or subvert dominant forms of meaning? (hegemony!)
- Ask about things like
  - « hegemonic struggles » (whose interpretation wins dominance? Why?)
  - « power relations » (how does a message create certain subjectivities/mindsets/mental images? What effect do these exercise on the people that are inscribed in them?)
  - « performativity » (a message as something that is done in a certain context
  - …
- Often critical, deployed in research that is explicitly and consciously normative!!

Methodology

- Different forms of « discourse analysis »
  - Forms of context-driven textual analysis in which the analyst explicitly formulates a certain interpretation
  - E.g. Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough), Poststructuralist Discourse Theory (Laclau and Mouffe), Discursive Psychology (Edwards & Potter), Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse (Keller),…: all different ontological and epistemological assumptions, different conceptual frameworks,…

- No model is right/wrong, all are idealtypes
- All models function as perspectives, that allow us to see certain things, while obscuring others
- Different models can be specified, modified, combined with one-another,… Many different interpretations and articulations exist of each model
- *In my opinion*: lots of potential for innovative social-scientific research using models 2 and 3!