

ON THE DISCOURSE OF FREE TRADE: ENGAGEMENT AND CONFLICT IN AN ERA OF SOCIAL MEDIA, POPULISM AND FAKE NEWS

Geert Jacobs and Thomas Jacobs

(Ghent University/Saint Louis University)



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- Inequality → Creation of and struggle against inequality

- Education → Dynamics of learning
- Media → News production and uptake

Mar 6, 2017 - 03:10 p.m.



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ExxonMobil to invest 20 billion dollars to expand manufacturing in Mexico Gulf Coast

HOUSTON, March. 6 –

ExxonMobil Corporation, world's largest oil and gas company, announced on Monday that it will invest 20 billion U.S. dollars in a 10-year period to expand its manufacturing capacity in the U.S. part of the Mexico Gulf Coast, a major oil and gas producing area in the United States.

The White House
Office of the Press Secretary
For Immediate Release
March 06, 2017



President Trump Congratulates Exxon Mobil for Job-Creating Investment Program

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- President Donald J. Trump today congratulated Exxon Mobil Corporation on its ambitious \$20 billion investment program that is creating more than 45,000 construction and manufacturing jobs in the United States Gulf Coast region.

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White House plagiarizes ExxonMobil in an attempt to herald the oil giant

Updated 1853 GMT March 7, 2017



redefinition of discourse analysis:

from: the study of what is said and
written

to: include what is *not* said and written



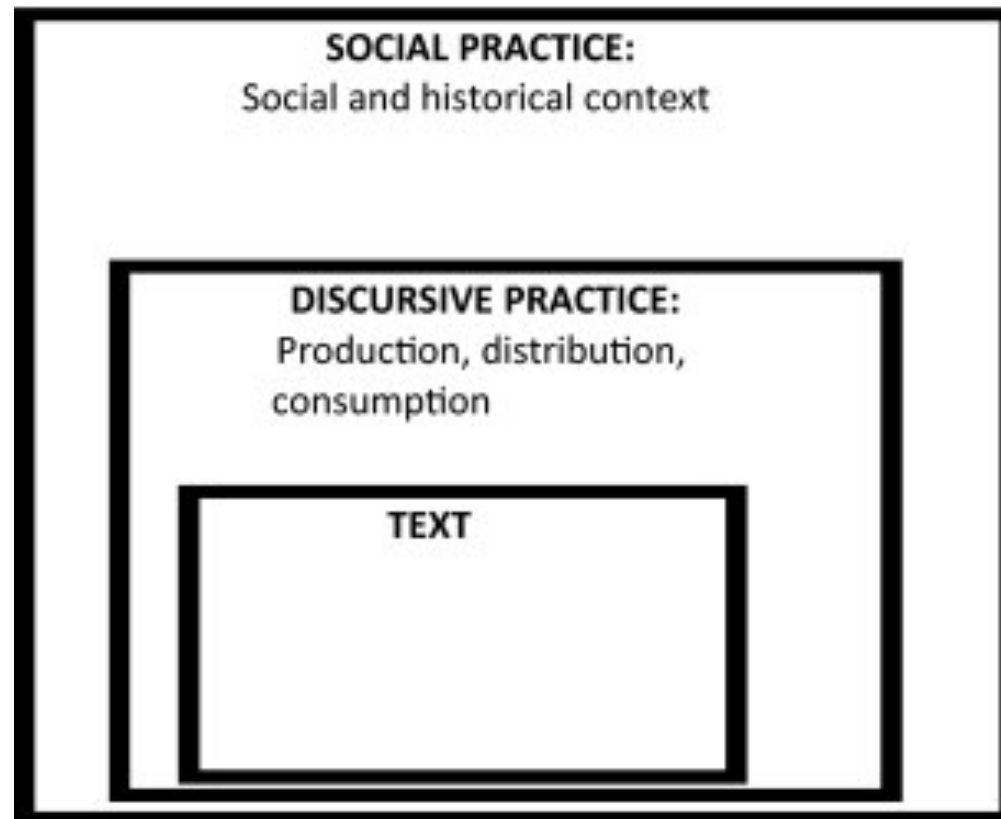
“The object of pragmatics is to
explicate implicitness”

- Östman, 1986

Pragmatics is primarily interested in “what happens in communication over and beyond the propositional information that interlocutors and text producers want to convey in their messages”. (Östman, 1995)

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Schrøder (2007)





“Why didn’t Fairclough talk to some of the people on the production team? It would not have taken an inordinate amount of time”. (82)



“Why second-guess the program experience of the audience? A simple focus group session would have done the job”. (82)

- Newsrooms
- PR
- Big Pharma
- Citizen science
- **Brussels-based free trade thinktank**



ECIPE

EUROPEAN CENTRE
FOR INTERNATIONAL
POLITICAL ECONOMY



... TO THE THREAT OF A “RETREAT TO PROTECTIONISM”

“Such a climate demands new efforts to **soberly** review current policies and present **independent facts-based** analyses of **concrete** cases.”





Published May 2018

How to make trade policy cool (again) on social media?

By: [Guest Author](#)

Subjects: [European Union](#) [WTO](#) and [Globalization](#)



Lucian Cernat, Chief Trade Economist, European Commission*

A recent [LSE blog](#) points out that economists, unlike other social scientists, are bad communicators. That's probably true. Although, as economists would like to say, it depends!

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“a communication deficit”

“initiatives and voices aiming at promoting free trade within society”



4 FINDINGS

1. Free traders become aware of the role that language and 'discourse play in public debates

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economists tweet less, mention fewer people, (...) and use less accessible language with more abbreviations and a more distant tone

also: differences in register and pronoun use

4 FINDINGS

1. Free traders are aware of the role of language
2. To combat “post-truth disinformation”, free traders decide to adopt post-truth strategies

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Learn from the anti-trade campaigners who are “very good at using simple, visual and often distorted messages on social media to appeal to people’s emotions”.

- #CETAcomes2town
- #TradeNOW



4 FINDINGS

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“It is an attractive communication tool: digital, easy to handle, and free of all conceited jargon usually surrounding political talks.”

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“NGOs employ better communication strategies than the European institutions.”

4 FINDINGS

1. Free traders are aware of the role of language
2. To combat “post-truth disinformation”, free traders decide to adopt post-truth strategies

“need to create a new narrative”, one that restores trust and “[addresses] people’s apathy, indifference and lack of time”.

4 FINDINGS

1. Free traders are aware of the role of language
2. To combat “post-truth disinformation”, free traders decide to adopt post-truth strategies
3. Free traders turn away from legacy media

reach out to a wider audience “at a rate that wouldn’t have been achievable just with a few advocacy events or a couple of newspaper articles”

4 FINDINGS

1. Free traders are aware of the role of language
2. To combat “post-truth disinformation”, free traders decide to adopt post-truth strategies
3. Free traders turn away from legacy media
4. In the eyes of the bloggers and ECIPE, the case for free trade remains undeniable

2015: 'THE SPIRAL OF SILENCE'

“a few anti-TTIP groups representing a small number of activists are waging a resolute battle against TTIP” on Facebook and Twitter

“an imbalance in online media penetration, with anti-TTIP campaign groups dominating the scene”



2015: 'THE SPIRAL OF SILENCE'

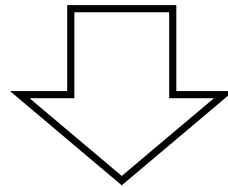
“there is a need for participation”

“it is time for the advocates of TTIP to make their voice heard beyond conferences and official hearings”



DISCUSSION

The hegemony of the free trade paradigm is crumbling.



There's a need to develop “initiatives and practices aiming at promoting free trade within society”.

DISCUSSION

A coherent strategy is missing:

- Dialogue driven strategy: willingness to engage, promote participation, reach new audiences
= *post-hegemonic*

versus

- Conflict-driven strategy: anyone who opposes free trade is still called “unpleasant”, “emotional”, “uninformed”, “smug”, “biased”, “misleading”, “wrong”, “populist”
= *holds on to the crumbling hegemony*

DISCUSSION



“to inform and convince people that trade is also a good thing”

CONCLUSIONS

- The struggle to develop a coherent communicative strategy at the heart of the thinktank is reflected and enacted in the metapragmatics of the blog posts.

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- The struggle to develop a coherent communicative strategy at the heart of the thinktank is reflected and enacted in the metapragmatics of the blog posts.
- Collaboration, engagement and participation are emerging as a new foundation.



Fassin (2013)

To investigate

- the understudied regions of society
(ILLUMINATE THE UNKNOWN)
- those spaces saturated by consensual meaning
(INTERROGATE THE OBVIOUS)

Thank you very much for your attention!



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