

Theories and methods of discourse analysis: opening the black box of the research process.

It is not an easy thing to 'open the black box' of discourse analytical and/or discourse theoretical research. I will try to throw some light into the metaphorical 'black box' of my own research practices by discussing some considerations I believe to be essential in any research design within the transdisciplinary field of discourse studies.

As such I build partially on publications with my colleagues Geoffroy Patriarche and Benjamin Decleen, in which we tried to be as explicit as possible about the ontological, epistemological, and methodological choices made in two separate research projects. We tried to say something about the sort of choices *anyone* designing a CDS will need to make.

These considerations have to do with the way discourse scholars construct their 'problematic', their 'data set', design and conduct their 'analyses', come up with 'explanations' and articulate forms of 'critique'.

While these considerations are not only relevant for discourse scholars, I would argue that no matter what definition of discourse one works with, they are issues that need to be addressed, by novices in the field, but also by experienced researchers, over and over again.

To make this point, I will draw on examples from my own work, as well as from work conducted in collaboration with colleagues, to shed some light on the 'black box' of my research.

Black box? What kind of black box?

It seems suitable to start with a little discourse analysis of the 'black box' metaphor though. The black box metaphor suggests that research processes often remain too vague, too obscure, under-discussed, under-acknowledged or simply ignored. We are often left in the dark about key decisions in the research process.

The goal of this PhD school is to shed light on the 'epistemological choices in communication studies and the social sciences'. Choices whose outcome we can see in the form of research reports and books, but that do not always receive sufficient attention in published documents.

What does this 'black box' refer to then? What is the target domain of this metaphor: the research process as a whole? The mind of the researcher? The preferred meanings of messages we seek to investigate? Something else?

The 'black box' metaphor has often been used in science, computing, engineering, cybernetics, and systems theory, to conceptualize the obscure ways in which "inputs" are processed into "outputs" without any knowledge of the "internal workings" of the system. The 'system' would be the 'black box'.

In cybernetics, marketing, and mathematics, analyzing a system with a 'black box approach' often implies experimenting, and a process of making hypotheses about the causal mechanisms occurring in the black box. Logarithms and AI software are often discussed as black boxes. Also, both system theorists and behaviorists have discussed the mind as an example of a black box.

Discourse theorists and analysts often go a step further. For instance, poststructuralist discourse theorists agree that the workings and existence of the mind and its intentions cannot be accessed in a straightforward way. They would also argue that symbols and messages are inherently opaque: they do not really *contain* meanings.

Most approaches in critical discourse theory and analysis problematize the idea that we can get access to people's 'true' identities, meanings, and 'minds' by studying language and other symbolic systems. At the same time 'discourse' – however defined – does provide an empirical entry point into the interpretive processes of research subjects.

This means that discourse scholars need to content themselves with a study of *traces, indices, markers* of subjectivity that social actors leave in discourse, to guide each other's processes of interpretation. Human beings often rely on the reflexive properties of discourse to indicate how they prefer to fix the meanings of self, other and society.

Nevertheless, what social actors '*really* mean' or 'intend' always remains in the black boxes of human brains, technologies, and texts of various kinds. Social actors merely act *as if* they really share meanings, contexts, and definitions of reality. In the end, context – as my own supervisor said it – is never really shared. A reasonably satisfying outcome, a degree of coordination, whereby actors temporarily carve out contextual boundaries for interpretation, is the best one can hope for.

In discourse studies, meaning is studied as an *effect*, as a function of linking symbolic forms and meanings, enunciated, or articulated in concrete contexts. In this sense, discourse is an opaque surface, the idea of 'content' being illusionary, itself a discursive construction. As such, the black box metaphor also applies to discourse itself. Discourse does not *contain* meaning.

What does all of this imply at the methodological level? Methodological sections in articles and books attempt to guide readers towards preferred interpretations. They contain traces of the researcher's subjectivity. Methodological chapters are attempts to render the way a researcher makes sense of his or her texts, interviews, or audio-visual data, explicit.

In this sense, methodological discourse is a discourse like any other: it serves to contextualize, to construct an (academic) identity, to define reality, to arrest or fix the flow of meaning, at least in temporary ways, even if many, if not most, decisions remain implicit and unacknowledged. Even if many choices remain locked up in a 'black' box.

Let us now move on to a discussion of some key considerations that discourse scholars need to deal with in designing and carrying out their projects. Let's take a metaphorical peek in this black box of critical discourse theory and analysis.

1) The assemblage, construction, or articulation of a problematic

a) What concept of discourse will structure your analysis?

Everything starts with the discourse concept you will work with.

Many novices simply start out because they want to investigate the discourse 'of' a politician, a party, a specific type of text, often about a specific issue like climate. Often, they follow a lay understanding of discourse understood as a verbal interactions or texts about a specific topic or context. Such intuitive understandings quickly reach their limits as they are confronted with some typical questions:

- How should I distinguish between different discourses?
- What aspects of language, what symbols, what practices, should I focus on?
- How should I contextualize the statements and representations?
- How does discourse relate to identity, ideology, power, and/or reality?

The literature offers a disorienting number of answers to such questions. Disorientation, perhaps even a sense of panic or vertigo, is what most people feel, once they realize that critical discourse studies is a transdisciplinary domain of inquiry, and that theory and method are fundamentally intertwined. Others simply get excited. But whatever the reaction, a theorized understanding of discourse quickly becomes indispensable.

Very quickly scholars who take their first steps in the field of discourse studies will realize that discourse analysis is not a ready-made method with guidelines and instructions they simply need to apply.

Discourse Studies has developed into field of inquiry where discourse theoretical and discourse analytical approaches meet. Some authors in this field consider discourse as a matter of verbal interaction. For others it refers to linguistic structures larger than a sentence. Structures that allow a text to cohere. Still others see discourse as a matter of symbolic sensemaking central to the reproduction and challenging of ideologies and/or power relations. For others it refers to an ontological principle that structures socio-political reality.

Johannes Angermüller made a useful distinction between discourse theory on the one hand and discourse analysis on the other hand. Discourse analysts would then study talk and text in relation to context, whereas discourse theorists would develop abstract theories to conceptualize reality, power, and subjectivity. The field of discourse studies emerges in and through the confrontation and dialogue between discourse theoretical and discourse analytical approaches.

Critical scholars of discourse often draw on discourse theory *and* discourse analysis. The distinction between DT and DA is a bit misleading though. *Every approach to discourse* comes with *theoretical assumptions* about the entities that (re-)produce it and the various functions it performs. Every approach to discourse can be interpreted as a theory of self and society. The distinction between discourse theory and analysis refers first and foremost to the level of abstraction involved.

My preferred way of thinking about discourse is based on both discourse theory and discourse analysis. It draws on the poststructuralist discourse theory developed initially by Laclau and Mouffe, and developed by authors like Jason Glynos, David Howarth, Yannis Stavrakakis and Nico Carpentier. But I also take inspiration from discourse analytical approaches such as linguistic pragmatics – the study of language-in-use – or CDA.

I understand discourse as a practice of articulation. Discourse can be studied as a process of linking signifiers into meaningful structures. The meaning of the elements or signifiers involved thereby undergoes subtle and not-so-subtle changes. Laclau and Mouffe put it this way:

We will call articulation any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice. The structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice, we will call discourse (Laclau & Mouffe 1985).

The elements involved can be signifiers of any kind. You may think of specific words (pronouns, verbs, metaphors, ...), but you can just as well think of material symbols, practices, places, buildings, social identities, political demands, or ideologies.

Laclau and Mouffe developed their notion of discourse to highlight the relational and instable character of meaning. What it means to be liberal, socialist, feminist, or human will depend on the way such signifiers get (not) articulated with each other.

For Laclau and Mouffe, the ‘real’ can only be understood as a discursive phenomenon. Even if there is a raw reality out there, humans can only make sense of it in and through discourse. Note that Laclau and Mouffe do not reduce discourse to a matter of language use. They build on the Lacanian axiom that once humans enter the symbolic realm, they irrevocably lose their unmediated access to the real.

Laclau and Mouffe are political philosophers. They developed an abstract discourse theory but never provided any principles, guidelines, tips, or tricks to investigate concrete verbal, textual or audio-visual practices. Neither did Foucault. It was up to later generations of discourse scholars to fill the methodological deficit left by these authors. I turned to linguistic pragmatics to account for the reflexive, contextualizing and performative functions of discourse.

Why pragmatism and pragmatics? When human beings reproduce discourse, they do not merely articulate or link elements with each other. They also *do* things with words. They contextualize and reflexively challenge or confirm each other’s ways of making sense of each other and the world. In the process they reason, argue, lie, make jokes, legitimize, and attack each other, constructing entire interpretive realities in the process.

I therefore propose to conceptualize discourse as an articulatory practice in a double sense of the word: it is indeed a practice of linking elements to each other, but it also involves reflexive and performative practices of de- and re-contextualization. Take the following excerpt about climate activism published on the Flemish nationalist website Doorbraak:

Thanks to the climate activists a culture war is looming. This can only be avoided if the concerns of those who feel disadvantaged by the climate preoccupations of the cosmopolitan elites will actually be taken seriously. ... We have to ask ourselves what groups are abusing the climate agenda for an anti-capitalist culture war. (Lode Goukens, Doobraak, 16/11/2021)

This text can indeed be studied as a string of signifiers (e.g., 'activists', 'culture war', 'elites') linked to each other according to an antagonistic logic. However, it is also possible to ask what the text does.

Note that the author provides explicit instructions for his readers, indicating how he would like them to interpret the actions and agenda of the climate activists, as part of an anti-capitalist culture war. Elsewhere the author labels climate activism as eco-communism. Through these process of articulation, the meaning of these signifiers get fixed in particular ways.

b) Identifying discourse(s)

The concept of discourse as articulation allows for a study of the way different actors (re)produce and challenge each other discourses. It allows us to analyze how actors define (the meaning) of identities, values, practices, organizations, institutions, and society in general.

The question is how you move from an analysis of individual statements and articulatory practices to an analysis and identification of the various discourses that structure both the self-understandings of subjects and their socio-political realities.

A literature review is a useful and necessary point to start with, for several reasons:

- It allows you to identify *existing* academic and non-academic discourses pertaining to your research object.
- It allows you to identify potential blind spots in the body of knowledge.
- It provides knowledge required to contextualize the phenomena under investigation.

Perhaps even more importantly, it sensitizes researchers to the contingency of seemingly commonsensical discourses circulating in the public sphere.

c) Developing a Problematization

Critical discourse scholars need to develop research objects *as problems* before they can be analyzed. They construct problematics by asking themselves how academic and non-academic actors define and problematize specific aspects of reality.

Put differently, critical discourse scholars need to identify and problematize existing problematizations.

An example may be in order. In a research project I conducted with Geoffroy Patriarche, we got interested in the way the European Organization for Viewers Interests articulated its concept of 'media and information literacy' with a particular view on critique, citizenship, democracy.

Our academic literature review allowed us to identify competing a variety to MIL related discourses. Academic literature can be approached as a discursive field where academic actors and communities compete over the meaning of terms such as 'critique' and/or 'citizenship'.

The literature review also allowed us to identify the concepts of media literacy mobilized by EAVI, as well as its silences and omissions. Moreover, it allowed us to position the organization in relation to a wider discursive field.

However, an academic literature review may not be sufficient to problematize the discourses that seek to define reality.

Media and Information literacy is not only an academic concern. Many CSO's, educational institutions and policy makers contribute to the development of MIL as a practice, concept, and policy domain.

Nevertheless, an academic literature review certainly offers a good and indispensable starting point to problematize the actors that do or do not problematize a particular issue, in particular ways.

2) Data collection

Laclau and Mouffe define discourses as structured totalities resulting from articulatory practices. The problem is that no discourse can be studied in its totality. Discourses – in the sense of Laclau and Mouffe – do not have any clear boundaries. They are open systems.

Discourse scholars are forced to approach discourse via a detour. They need to constructed data sets or corpuses, designed as proxies for the discourses they are really interested in. It is therefore essential to make a distinction between the discourse(s) you seek to understand and the corpus you will subject to empirical analysis.

I will not provide a set of instructions on how to construct a corpus or data set. However, it is important to collect or construct a number of texts that guarantees a sufficient variety of articulations, and a corpus that remains manageable enough to identify meaningful patterns.

Mundane considerations related to time, space, and other resources available to the researcher will also impact on corpus construction. Familiarity with the language and accessibility of the data can also impact on corpus construction. Your corpus may include written texts, transcripts of audio-visual data, social media data, or images.

It may also be the case that you decide to construct corpora around specific cases. You may want to compare discourses produced by specific individuals, actors, institutions, or media, for contrastive or comparative purposes.

The resulting corpus should likely contain traces of the types of discourse you are interested in. This means that the data set should contain indicative or representative samples of the discourses that interest you. The dataset should enable you to identify, describe, analyze, and critique the discursive phenomena that take away your interest.

Even if you focus on the discourse (re)produced by a single actor you will be faced with the fact that all discourses are always also re-articulations or reproductions of other discourses. Neologisms are very rare. In our case study of EAVI it was very clear that the organization (re)articulated the voices of a multiplicity of other actors it did not necessarily agree with.

For instance, while EAVI did not conceptualize media and information literacy as a critique of political ideologies, it did post links to videos of explicitly critical intellectuals such as Noam Chomsky (videos about the engineering of consent) or Adam Curtis (his documentaries on *The Century of the Self*).

Laclau and Mouffe understand discourses as a structured totality of articulatory practices, but these totalities are open structures whose boundaries and characteristics can always be re-defined, depending on the practices of articulation involved.

Even the most carefully constructed corpus will therefore remain a messy spaghetti of potentially relevant discourses, for the researcher to identify, describe and pick apart.

It is the task of the analyst to redraw the boundaries that constitute his or her object of investigation, to explain and/or problematize how social actors seek to (re)construct reality.

3) Data Analysis

This brings us to the question of analysis.

a) Choosing relevant units of analysis

What do you analyze when analyzing practices of articulation? What are the units of analysis you should look at? The perfectly unsatisfying answer I have to this question is ... it depends. More precisely, it depends on your discourse concept, research questions and corpus.

Working with I concept of discourse as an articulatory practice I tend to design research questions that force me to focus on the interpretive functions performed by selected discursive elements. The type of element involved varies according to my research focus.

Some example may be in order.

When a Flemish nationalist politician claimed that 'racism is (a) relative (concept)', this sparked outrage and controversy in the media. I got interested in the way critics reacted, what types of critique they articulated.

Put differently, I wanted to identify the problematizations of racism, as well as the so-called relativity of racism, as constitutive features of the debate.

One of the research questions I designed was the following one:

What function(s) do these critiques of statements asserting racism's relativity perform in relation to the implicit and explicit definitions of racism articulated in the text?

I often design research questions that force me to describe and name the relations between discursive forms and functions, or between discursive elements.

In this case the forms or elements involved are 'critiques aimed at the idea that racism is relative' on the one hand, and definitions or uses of the term racism, on the other hand.

A second example. In a project on critiques aimed at labor unions and the right to strike, Benjamin De Cleen and I identified union critical statements and analyzed how these delegitimizations were articulated with views on politics and society.

A third example. In my doctoral thesis, I analyzed how Moroccan-Belgian activists in Flanders articulated their concepts of politics and integration with, a preferred sense of self and society. I thereby devoted particular attention to the interpretive logics that structured the practices of articulation involved.

In principle, the unit of analysis can be located at the level of words, labels, sentences, speech acts, narrative structures, or at any other level of analysis. The most important thing is to find a potentially productive *entry point* into your corpus, that allows you to analyze your data systematically, in line with your discourse concept, and objectives.

Another important criterion is coherence: what aspects and levels of discourse allow the texts and statements under investigation to cohere, to make sense. Recurrence can be relevant too: what discursive elements and choices reappear within and/or across texts?

b) Preliminary explorations: a plea for inductive and abductive readings

Informed choices concerning relevant units of analysis require preliminary explorations of data. There is no way around it for discourse scholars. You will need to read, re-read, and re-read a lot of text. Using software can help you to structure and explore your data but reading remains unavoidable. The question is *how to read*.

I argue in favor of an abductive reading or analysis. The purely inductive mode of analysis as proposed in classic grounded theory does not make sense from a discourse theoretical perspective. Neither does a purely deductive approach whereby we would merely verify to what extent we can identify a pre-established list of discourses in our corpus.

At the same time, inductive research strategies can be useful in the sense that they force you to pay close attention to your data. For instance, in a project on labor unions, we started out by inductively identifying and coding union-critical statements. These statements and codes were then inductively grouped into 'families' of delegitimization strategies.

For instance, many critiques basically attacked unions as conservative and unrealistic anachronisms, creating a binary opposition between conservative organizations – dinosaurs – stuck in the past on the one hand, and progressive, reform-oriented actors who are ready to accept the necessary austerity measures.

The added value of a discourse analysis, however, does not lie in this type of inductive description though. One needs go much further than a description of what each actors says. Discourse scholars need to abductively articulate their theoretical concepts with the statements under investigation.

One 'abducts' the original statements made in texts or interviews and pulls them into a theoretical discussion that generates new meanings, insights and problematizations. And the other way around. It is a constant going back and forth.

The interpretive work of the discourse scholar is – like any other stage in the research process – a practice of, ... articulation.

d) The black box of self-understandings

The risk with abduction is that we may reach conclusions that our research subjects may never agree with. We may end up dominating their voices, imposing our own views onto the data under investigation. How then, can we take the self-understandings of social actors into account? Fully knowing that their real 'intentions' remain confined to a 'black box'.

The answer lies in the reflexive features of language, discourse and communication. Discourse can bend back onto itself. We can use language and communication to say something about language. We constantly provide pointers to provide our readers and listeners with hints on how they should interpret what we say, write and do.

We can use such metadiscursive hints as proxies for what actors 'mean'. In the end, hints, indices, and traces are all we have to make sense of the way other make sense. This principle has important consequences for the researcher. Discourse scholars *should* construct new meanings. But the original discourse needs to remain recognizable.

David Howarth pointed out that every step in the research process involves practices of rearticulation, from the initial problematization to the writing of the final report. This means that at each stage of the research process new meanings can emerge. This is unavoidable, so the challenge is to make sure that *in addition to the meanings that you generate* the original formulations remain recognizable.

e) Explanation and Critique

Critical discourse scholars do not limit themselves to a mere reconstruction of the discourses under investigation. They also reflect on the role discourse plays in the ideological reproduction and contestation of relations of power.

Of course, the meaning attached to terms such as ideology, power and critique will vary according to the specific type of discourse theory or analysis adopted. My understanding of these terms is heavily influenced by poststructuralist and post-Marxist frameworks, such as those developed in Essex-style discourse theory.

This means that I do not really seek to uncover 'hidden' meanings. The point is rather to establish new, theoretically, and empirically informed links, that add a layer of meaning on top of the patterns inductively identified in the texts. The point is to problematize existing problematizations.

Discourse theorists seek to demonstrate the contingency of identities and discourses, exploring the social and political implications of articulatory practices. In the end the whole of social reality rests on decisions that have once been made to structure society in this and not in that way.

In the critical discourse study, I conducted with Benjamin De Cleen, this meant demonstrating that critiques aimed at labor unions often end up reinforcing an implicit political-economic view that delegitimizes the institutionalized political role that syndicates have played in Belgium after WWII.

Take the following quote taken from a union-critical commentator in the newspaper *De Standaard*, articulated in the wake of a series of anti-austerity strikes. Ruben Mooijman starts dreaming about the mission statement of an ideal labour union:

The union embraces a harmony model. It sees employers and employees not as adversaries, but as stakeholders whose interests partially run parallel to those of their members. Also, it presupposes that they too (their members) strive for a healthy economy with well-oiled companies who are consequently capable of producing labor and wellbeing. (Mooijman, DS, 28/05/2016)

This type of critique rests on a very restrictive definition what politics is and what it should be. Such dreams of harmony and consensus often place political legitimacy in the hands of elected politicians and technocrats. It reduces the critical role of civil society organizations such as syndicates to a minimal, cooperative, or advisory function. Put differently, it proposes a radically different institutional structure than the one existing today.

The ideological fantasy underpinning all of this is the dream of a conflict-free society, whereby politics should be in the service of smoothly functioning market economy. Not all critiques aimed at labor unions were this explicitly informed by a neoliberal agenda. However, the polyphony of union-critical voices we encountered created a very fruitful context for voices for the proponents of neoliberal reforms.

Conclusion

It is possible to argue that *empirical research* is scientific only to the extent that it explicitly addresses such choices, no matter on what principles and philosophies of science involved.

At the same time, transparency will always remain an elusive dream, something to be chased but always out of reach. The best one can hope for is that we succeed in letting others make sense of the way we arrive at our conclusions, in creative and compelling ways.

To the extent that such choices are rendered explicit we can render this box more transparent. But the metaphor remains a metaphor, limited in what it can say about the research process.

Bibliography

(Zienkowski 2017)(Zienkowski and De Cleen 2020; Zienkowski and Patriarche forthcoming; forthcoming) (Howarth 2000; Angermuller, Maingueneau, and Wodak 2014) (Flowerdew and Richardson 2020)(Verschuieren 2011)(Stavrakakis 1999; Carpentier et al. 2010)(Flyvbjerg 2001)(Laclau and Mouffe 1985)(Jef Verschueren 1999)

Angermuller, Johannes, Dominique Maingueneau, and Ruth Wodak. 2014. 'An Introduction'. In *The Discourse Studies Reader*, edited by Johannes Angermuller, Dominique Maingueneau, and Ruth Wodak, 1–14. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Carpentier, Nico, Iliya Tomanić Trivundža, Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Sundin Ebba, Tobias Olsson, Richard Kilborn, Hannu Nieminen, and Bart Cammaerts. 2010. 'Deploying Discourse Theory: An Introduction to Discourse Theory and Discourse-Theoretical Analysis'. In *Media and Communication Studies: Intersectoins and Interventions*, 251–66. Tartu: Tartu University Press.

Flowerdew, John, and John E. Richardson, eds. 2020. *The Routledge Handbook of Critical Discourse Studies*. New York: Routledge.

Flyvbjerg, Bent. 2001. *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again*. 2008th ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Howarth, David. 2000. *Discourse*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Jef Verschueren. 1999. *Understanding Pragmatics*. 2003rd ed. London: Arnold.

Laclau, Ernesto, and Chantal Mouffe. 1985. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso.

Stavrakakis, Yannis. 1999. *Lacan and the Political*. London: Routledge.

Verschueren, Jef. 2011. *Ideology in Language Use: Pragmatic Guidelines for Empirical Research*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Zienkowski, Jan. 2017. *Articulations of Self and Politics in Activist Discourse: A Discourse Analysis of Critical Subjectivities in Minority Debates*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Zienkowski, Jan, and Benjamin De Cleen. 2020. 'The Polyphonic Critique of Trade Unions: Unpacking the Logics of Union Critical Discourse'. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2020.1769699>.
- Zienkowski, Jan, and Geoffroy Patriarche. forthcoming. 'Critical Discourse Studies for Research on Media and Information Literacy Projects: An Illustrated Discussion of Seven Methodological Considerations'. In *Handbook of Media Literacy and Media Education Research Methods*, edited by Pierre Fastrez and Normand Landry. London / New York: Routledge.