VERBAL MEDITATION ON FOUCAULT'S NOTION OF DISCOURSE

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Abstract

The idea of discourse constitutes a central element of Michel Foucault's oeuvre*, and one of the most readily appropriated Foucauldian terms, such that 'Foucauldian discourse analysis' now constitutes an academic field in its own right. This post therefore sets out to describe Foucault's notion of discourse, and to define in broad terms the task of Foucaultian discourse analysis.*

Discourse is a generalization of the notion of a conversation to any form of communication. Discourse is a major topic in social theory, with work spanning fields such as sociology, anthropology, continental philosophy, and discourse analysis. Following pioneering work by Michel Foucault, these fields view discourse as a system of thought, knowledge, or communication that constructs our experience of the world. Since control of discourse amounts to control of how the world is perceived, social theory often studies discourse as a window into power. Discourse decides what is knowledge and what is not.

Within theoretical linguistics, discourse is understood more narrowly as linguistic information exchange and was one of the major motivations for the framework of dynamic semantics, in which expressions' denotations are equated with their ability to update a discourse context.

Keywords: *Foucault, Power, knowledge, Discourse, Politics, episteme*

It is not enough to speak the truth; one must be 'in the truth.'
- ***Michel Foucault***

Michel Foucault (October 15, 1926 – June 25, 1984) was a French philosopher historian. He held a chair at the Collège de France, giving it the title 'The History of Systems of Thought.' His writings have had an enormous impact on the humanities and social sciences and on applied and professional areas of study. He was a key figure of the Twentieth-Century French Philosophy.

Foucault adopted the term 'discourse' to denote a historically contingent social system that produces knowledge and meaning. He notes that discourse is distinctly material in effect, producing what he calls 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak'. Discourse is, thus, a way of organising knowledge that structures the constitution of social relations through the collective understanding of the discursive logic and the acceptance of the discourse as social fact. For Foucault, the logic produced by a discourse is structurally related to the broader episteme that is structure of knowledge of the historical period in which it arises. However, discourses are produced by effects of power within a social order, and this power prescribes particular rules and categories which define the criteria for legitimating knowledge and truth within the discursive order. These rules and categories are considered *a priori*; that is, coming *before* the discourse. It is in this way that discourse masks its construction and capacity to produce knowledge and meaning.

As a discourse fixes text with a specific meaning, it disqualifies other meanings and interpretations. Foucault speaks of this discursive process as reducing the contingencies that is the possibility of other meanings of text, in order to eliminate the differences which could challenge the meaning and power of the discourse.In every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality.

What Foucault sets out in broad terms is the task of discourse analysis, for it must 'account for the fact that [the discourse in question] is spoken about', and analyse the effects of power that are produced by what is said. Moreover discourse analysis must seek to unfix and destabilise the accepted meanings, and to reveal the ways in which dominant discourses excludes, marginalises and oppresses realities that constitute, at least, equally valid claims to the question of how power could and should be exercised.

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Foucault argues in *The Order of Discourse* that the 'will to truth' is the major system of exclusion that forges discourse and which 'tends to exert a sort of pressure and something like a power of constraint on other discourses' and goes on further to ask the question 'what is at stake in the will to truth, in the will to utter this 'true' discourse, if not desire and power?' Thus, there are both discourses that constrain the production of knowledge, dissent and difference and some that enable 'new' knowledge and difference(s). The questions that arise within this framework are to do with how some discourses maintain their authority, how some 'voices' get heard whilst others are silenced, who benefits and how - that is, questions addressing issues of power/ empowerment/ disempowerment.

Power works through discourses and discursive formations. In its policing of 'abnormal' behaviour, the power of the human sciences derives from what they claimed to be knowledge; it derives from their claims to expertise. Such a cluster of claims to knowledge is what Foucault calls a 'discourse'. To be more precise a discourse is a loose structure of interconnected assumptions that makes knowledge possible. Power is a key element in discussions of discourse.

All of the knowledge we have is the result or the effect of power struggles. Thus power, knowledge and discourse are interrelated to each other.

The philosopher George Santayana says, 'those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it' but Nietzsche's goal appears to be acceptance that the past repeats itself in every embodiment of the will to power.

Foucault argues that his books are discourses about discourse and not about man or thinking subject. Foucault's project of genealogy is a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledge, discourses, domains of objects, etc. without having to make any reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs its empty sameness throughout the course of history.

Foucault exposes the fact that all disciplines, be they scientific, legal, political or social, operate through a network of self legitimizing power and knowledge. He further maintains that power/knowledge functions in a way that makes its version of truth obvious to its participants. The claims of objectivity are impossible in a domain in which truth itself is always a discursive construct. Raman Selden says, 'people first decide what they want and then fit the facts to their aim. Ultimately, man finds in the things nothing but what he himself has imported into them.'

Foucault's use of discourse is linked to the idea of context, or, using language as an example. Discourse helps to understand what has been said by fitting it into a historical matrix with associated conditions of existence. Foucault's interest in discourse comes from his interest in history. Foucault said that the historical context of social life was more important without which there would be a timeless, unchanging order. Foucault aimed to restore the historical issues at the expense of the system, thus totally rejecting structuralism. Also, by looking for differences in social phenomena, rather than structuralist quest for unity, Foucault took an 'anti-humanist' stance, which attacked the subject by defining it by its content.

The term, 'discourse' is not rooted within a larger system of fully worked out theoretical ideas, but is one element in Foucault's work. In order understand Foucault's concept of power, knowledge and truth, it is necessary to discuss in detail his use of the term 'discourse'.One of the most productive ways of thinking about discourse is not as a group of signs or a stretch of text, but as 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' In this sense, a discourse is something which exists in and of itself and which can be analysed in isolation.

The study of discourse does not differentiate between those texts which are designated as non literary. The same idea has been exploited by the New Historicists while interpreting literary text and histories Truth is produced under the control of political, cultural, and economic dominating forces (e.g. the universities, army, writers, or the media.)

Truth is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and operation of statements. [01]

According to Foucault, the process of normalization or adherence to social norms is internalized in us through the mechanisms of disciplinary power. Foucault's rejection of modernism follows in important ways from his views that our selves are social constructions and that truth is an expression of political power. As a result, there is no objective account of reality to be gained through the exercise of reason. Foucault explains his theory of how power is created and transferred throughout an 'economy' of discourse in his work *Power/Knowledge*. It shows how power is transferred along conduits of dialogue according to the knowledge one has. Barry Allen says that it is only to have a statement pass among others as "known or true".

'Therefore, knowledge does not necessarily have to be true, but it only needs to be passed on as true for the statement to have an effect on the speakers in the discourse'. [02]

Foucault preferred not to claim that he was presenting a coherent and timeless block of knowledge; he says:

I would like my books to be a kind of tool-box which others can rummage through to find a tool which they can use however they wish in their own area… I would like the little volume that I want to write on disciplinary systems to be useful to an educator, a warden, a magistrate, a conscientious objector. I don't write for an audience, I write for users, not readers. [03]

Foucault's work is frequently referred to in disciplines as diverse as art, philosophy, history, anthropology, archaeology, communication studies, public relations, rhetoric, cultural studies, linguistics, sociology,

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education, psychology, literary theory, feminism, queer theory, management studies, the philosophy of science, urban design, museum studies, and many others.

Foucault's approach to representation is that he is concerned with the production of knowledge and meaning through discourse. For him, the production of knowledge is always crossed with questions of power and the body, and this expands the scope of what is involved in representation. Now we have traced the shift in Foucault's work from language to discourse and knowledge, and their relation to power. But there is a crucial question that one may ask: Where is the 'subject'? What language *is* for Saussure discourse *is* for Foucault -- it is 'language' that speaks to us. Foucault shares this position. For him, it is discourse not the subject which produces knowledge. Discourse is enmeshed with power, but it is not necessary to find a 'subject' like the king, the ruling class, the state - for power/knowledge to operate. Of course, Foucault was deeply critical of the traditional conception of the subject. His most radical proposition is that the 'subject' is *produced within discourse*. That is, the subject cannot be outside discourse because it must be *subjected* to discourse and also exists within the knowledge which is produced by discourse. So, the subject can become the object through which power is relayed, and should be located in the position from which the discourse can make a sense of it.

Archaeology rejects any notions of fixed unities or syntheses, such as continuity, tradition, book, or even oeuvre, in order to focus on the specificity of statements within particular discourses. This history of the discontinuous is the one that relies on differences, separations, and dispersions in order to produce a sort of map of the past. It attempts to conceive of the 'otherness' of the past within the time of our own thought.

Discourse is not regulated or formed by external factors. The rules of discourse are inherent.

The rules of the formation of a discourse, therefore, are to be found within discourse itself (04)

The analysis of the statement and of the formation of the statement are established correlatively. The fact of its belonging to a discursive formation and the laws that govern it are one and the same thing. Statements, therefore, are groups characterized by their mode of existence within a discourse:

...discourse [is] a group of statements in so far as they belong to the same discursive formation; it does not form a rhetorical or formal unity, endlessly repeatable, whose appearance or use in history might be indicated (and, if necessary, explained); it is made up of a limited number of statements for which a group of conditions of existence can be defined (05)

The rules decide what is 'proper' and 'improper', but the improper reveals, at the same time as it is shunted aside, those very rules that established it. This explains Foucault's interest in 'rare' and 'marginal' writers:

Discourse has its own rules of appearance and its own conditions of appropriation and operation, so that, from the very moment of its existence, it poses the question of power; "an asset that is, by nature, the object of a struggle, a political struggle" (06)

Foucault believes, 'Discourse ... is so complex a reality that we not only can, but should, approach it at different levels with different methods.' Hence, no single theory or method of interpretation by itself can grasp the plurality of discourses, institutions, and modes of power that constitute modern society. If a person's needs do not originate in an individual's 'inner nature' but are socially constructed, the same is even truer of *cognition*, the activity of understanding the world which is shaped by socially available *discourse* and objectified in books, artefacts, languages, institutions, etc. The word 'discourse' is central to Foucault of course:

We must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies. (07)

An argument cannot be criticized just in its own terms; analysis must reveal the unspoken 'outside' of discourse, and how discourse shapes relations of power by the implicit relations between the speaker and what is spoken. But it should be noted that 'discourse' is for Foucault, a social and material, rather than purely ideal or linguistic category: "it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together." Such a view leaves a room for agency *at the margins*, so to speak:

Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. ... (8)

It is from within the free play of his own discourse that Foucault speaks. If he can be situated within the modern episteme of the 'same' and the 'other' he is also at the beginning of a new age in which discourse itself may, perhaps, disappear in its radical form. Foucault's discourse dissolves itself in its own authority, opens itself up to a silence in which only things exist in their irreducible 'otherness', defying all attempts to reduce them to the 'same'. This why a summary of Foucault's thought is so hard to write; he mockingly tells us:

Discourse is not life: its time is not your time; in it you will not be reconciled to death; you may have killed God beneath the weight of what you have said; but don't imagine that, with all that you are saying, you will make a man that will live longer than he' (09)

Foucault's work is on the ways in which individuals are classified, excluded, objectified, individualized, disciplined, and normalized with the help of discourse.. Foucault himself became aware of this problem and shifted his emphasis from 'technologies of domination' to 'technologies of the self', from the ways in which individuals are transformed by others to the ways in which they transform themselves.

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