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BETWEEN DISCOURSE AND
POWER/KNOWLEDGE**

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Tracking Foucault: the Relationship between Discourse and Power/Knowledge

Cristian ZAGAN¹

Abstract

Discourse is today a dynamic key concept in various social sciences and humanities disciplines. Most of them relate the notion of discourse to Foucault's earlier works. There are mainly two reasons explaining this phenomenon. Firstly, this is due to the popularity of Michel Foucault and his works. Secondly, the notion of discourse is susceptible to a high degree of conceptual flexibility, that can be used to fill up some explanatory gaps where needed. Because of the diversity of meanings and with it, the confusion which the notion of discourse brings, a first approach aims at locating the technical definition given by Foucault. The second goal is to identify some of the meanings given to this term that refers to Foucault's work. Lastly, a short analysis will follow to determine the relationship between discourse and power/knowledge and what it entails.

Keywords:

Foucault, discourse, statement, event, power/knowledge.

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The foucauldian concept of discourse

On December 2, 1970, during the appointment as a professor of the Department of History of Systems of Thought, Michel Foucault delivered an inaugural lecture at the Collège de France. In this lecture, titled after its publication, *The Order of Discourse*, the French philosopher begins by saying:

"I wish I could have slipped surreptitiously into this discourse which I must present today, and into the ones I shall have to give here, perhaps for many years to come. I should have preferred to be enveloped by speech, and carried away well beyond possible beginnings, rather than have to begin it myself". (Foucault, 1981, p.51)

Now, after more than forty years, the widespread use of the concept of discourse which is assigned to Foucault makes him to be enveloped in the actuality of the discourse. The technical definition of the notion of discourse given by Foucault can be found in what is recognized as one of the most systematically written of his works, namely *The archaeology of knowledge*. Here, we can find Foucault describing the notion of discourse in more than one way. He presents three meanings. The first approaches the general use, where 'discourse' contains all signs and combinations of signs. The second meaning given portrays 'discourse' as an area that includes groups of phrases and sentences. The third sense, and the one which Foucault settles with, regards 'discourse' "as a group of sequences of signs, in so far as they are sentences" (Foucault, 2002, p.131). He then presents us with a definition:

"We shall call discourse a group of statements in so far they belong to the same discursive formation" (Foucault, 2002, p.131).

Moreover, Foucault refers to this definition of discourse in two famous lectures which he held soon after the publication of *Archaeology knowledge*. In the first of these lectures, called *What is an author?*, Foucault uses the terms 'discourse' and that of 'text' as synonyms, alternating from one to the other:

"My analysis is restricted to the domain of discourse... I have discussed the author only in the limited sense of a person to

whom the production of a text, a book, or a work can be legitimately attributed" (Foucault, 2002, p.131).

In the second lecture, entitled *The Discourse on Language*, Foucault clarifies the term of discourse under the same conceptual delimitations:

"Discourse is really only an activity, of writing in the first case, or reading in the second and exchange in the third... These activities never involve anything but signs" (Foucault, 2002, p. 72).

From the above conceptual delimitations we can see that Foucault proposed the notion of discourse in a very specific way, different to other meanings this notion previously possessed. Discourse, in Foucault's usage, has little to do with language, in terms of a linguistic system or grammar. Instead, it is related more with the notion of discipline, which can be referred both as a scholarly discipline and also as disciplinary institution of control. Scholarly discipline can be identified with what we call science, sociology, medicine, etc. When it comes to disciplinary institutions of control we can think of the hospital, the school, the prison, the military barracks, etc. Thus, Foucault gives a new meaning to the term discourse, which differentiates itself from the traditional usage in linguistic disciplines.

The foucauldian concept of discourse relates more to bodies of knowledge, which can be identified to specific periods of time and pinpointed in specific places. From this perspective we can also see that this is a critical approach, because it is focused on analyzing the conditions upheld historically and socially with the aim of identifying the possibility for a social critique. This association between discourse as knowledge and history dependency entails a constraining factor on what we, as subjects can think, speak and write about various given social objects and practices.

Another important aspect related to the foucauldian concept of discourse is that of using it as a mass noun or in plural. Foucault realized this problem and he was aware of the confusing it might produce:

"Lastly, instead of gradually reducing the rather fluctuating meaning of the term 'discourse', I believe that I have in fact added to its meanings: treating it sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a certain number of statements; and I have not

allowed this same word 'discourse', which should have served as a boundary around the term 'statement', to vary as I shifted my analysis or its point of application, as the statement itself faded from view?"(Foucault, 2002, p. 90)

The use of 'discourse' as a mass noun is explained by Foucault as a theoretician's shorthand when discussing general proprieties or common features of discourses. In the above quote Foucault also stresses out on the meaning of 'discourse' in relation with the term 'statement'. This term represents a key conceptual tool in he's development of a critical theory of discourse. For Alec McHoul and Wendy Grace (1995, p.35), the introduction of the term 'statement' (énoncé) by Foucault comes as shift in the analysis of discourse. For Foucault, the formal and empirical approaches focused only on the enunciation of discourse. In other words, the focus was only on the structures, forms and techniques by which we can recognize and produce language. Instead, what Foucault proposes is to shift this focus by asking the questions: what can be thought? what can be said? The role played by statements, in Foucault's view, is not as units of discourse, but of functions governed by rules in relation to discourse:

"The statement is not therefore a structure (that is, a group of relations between variable elements, thus authorizing a possibly infinite number of concrete models); it is a function of existence that properly belongs to signs and on the basis of which one may then decide, through analysis or intuition whether or not they 'make sense', according to what rule they follow one another or are juxtaposed, of what they are the sign, and what sort of act is carried out by their formulation (oral or written)' (Foucault, 2002, p.98).

Statements can be seen as basic elements of discourse, but not in a structuralist way. The conclusion reached by Foucault when analyzing statements very interesting as it is intertwined. Firstly, statements are not sentences because the same phrase with the same meaning can express different statements, i.e. statements with different truth conditions - depending on the group of statements that appear in that given phrase. On the other hand, statements are not speech acts. Some different speech acts can be seen as the repetition of the same statement.

One such example, given by Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (1982, p.45), depicts a stewardess which explains the airline's safety procedures in several languages. Therefore, a statement cannot be a grammatical entity restricted to entities.

Discourse and Power/Knowledge

For Foucault, statements and the rules governing them are not purely linguistic or material. Instead, they represent a sort of 'bridge' that connects the two. To be able to describe discursive rules we need to turn our attention to the specific historical conditions. This brings us to the notion of event and how, no matter how important or small it is historically, it must always happen under certain conditions of possibility. Therefore, following this logic, discourse always manifests in relationship with what Foucault's calls power relations.

Firstly, it is important to note that Foucault's view on the concept of power differs other the traditional concepts. Power is not something to be possessed by an individual, or a group and which can be used on those who do not possess it. Consequently, neither does discourse represent an effect of power usage in the traditional sense:

"Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everyone... Power comes from below; that is there no binary and all-encompassing opposition between ruler and ruled at the root of power relations, and serving as a general matrix - no such duality extending from the top down and reacting on more and more limited groups to the very depths of the social body. One must suppose rather that the manifold relations of force that take shape and come into play in the machinery of production, in families, limited groups and institutions, are the basis of wide-ranging effects of cleavage that run through the social body as a whole." (Foucault, 1979, pp. 93-94)

An important aspect in connection to discourses is that they are multiple in (at least) three ways. Firstly, cultures are shaped by many discourses, which they are in a constant competing relationship. Some types of discourse can end up "dominating" that culture, when they start to manifest into creating precepts that shape medical, academic or political institutions, thus infiltrating at different levels in the daily lives of the subjects. In some way Foucault warns about these types of

manifestation of discourse in modern time's science. Secondly, discourses change over time, by undergoing all sorts of transformations. That makes sciences to have a dynamic characteristic. So even if a scientific discourse is based on certain assumptions and rules allowing it to be defined by other forms of discourse, it will still acquire different forms at different times. Once these changes in a given discourse will occur, new rules can spread and they will disperse into new areas of life. However, they will transform the old discourses or even remove them from practical use. Thirdly, discourses are divided. Discourses are often complex and can be classified into subcategories, which are in turn separated and directed by certain rules. Depending on the perspective from which we look, we can speak of a 'scientific discourse' as a whole. At the same time we can talk about 'psychiatric discourse' as a subset of the whole. Continuing this process, we can finally talk about the different branches of scientific discourse, which can span over multiple domains. An example of this can be the racist-biological discourse, discourse which, unfortunately, benefited a great influence in the nineteenth century (Cuvier, 2013, p.50) and the first half of the twentieth century (Shipman, 2002, p.207). Foucault proposes a set of conditions of possibility in which a discourse is formed and develops. First, there must be some "surfaces of emergence" (Foucault, 2002, p.45). These can be identified with a social or cultural field, such as the family, the workplace, or even the religious community to which a subject is related with. A second condition that makes possible the formation and development of discourse is represented by authorities or 'boundary courts', examples being the various institutions of knowledge, such as legal and medical institutions. The third condition implies the existence of some "grid of specification" (Foucault, 2002, p.46), of classification and sharing of knowledge domains. An example of such grids can be recognized in the classification of different types of madness in psychiatric discourse. One of the most important positions to which Foucault takes on discourse is that it always assumes a restrictive characteristic. In other words, a discourse is not only limited to something, but at the same time discourse limits that something. And when that something is knowledge, the stake is one of the utmost importances, because discourse becomes a restriction factor and defines the knowledge to which a subject is trying to access. From this perspective, we can see why Foucault granted a special status to the

concept of discourse. Discourse is thus intimately involved in the process of knowledge through language. However, since all social practices imply certain meanings, and meanings influence or even forms behavior, all practices entail a discursive aspect. It is important to note that the concept of discourse used in this manner is not a linguistic concept. The foucauldian concept of discourse assumes language and practices. Thus, Foucault seeks through synthesis to overcome the traditional distinction between language and practice. Moreover, discourse produces and defines the objects of knowledge. Discourse leads the way in which a topic can be thought of or be discussed. Also, it influences the way in which ideas are implemented and used to regulate behaviors of subjects. Discourse allows certain means to discuss a topic, setting them as acceptable and understandable ways of speaking, writing or behavior in relation to topic and knowledge formation. Discourse is not constituted by only a statement, a text, or a source. The same discourse, characteristic to the way of thinking or to the state of knowledge of any period, will appear in a range of texts as forms of behavior in a number of different institutional domains in society. However, when these discursive events relate to the same object, share the same style and strategy and regularly supports institutional, administrative or political; they belong to the same discursive formation (Cousins & Hussain, 1984, pp.84-85). Thus, both meaning and meaningful practices are constructed within discourse. The idea that 'discourse produces objects of knowledge' and that anything else has no meaning outside of discourse is at first sight a disturbing theory that seems to be against common sense thinking. This should not be understood as the idea that nothing can exist outside discourse or of a discursive structure. Foucault does not deny that things may have a material existence, in the real world. What he claims is that nothing in the world has meaning outside of discourse. In terms of human interactions only inside a discursive frame we can find meaning to social configurations. The concept of discourse does not entail the existence of things, but the meanings which they are given to them. Therefore, Foucault argues that only discourse enables access to knowledge. This knowledge is limited to objects that have a meaning - through discourse. Topics like 'madness', 'punishment' and 'sexuality' appear only when there is a meaning in the discourses about them. Thus, the study of

discourses on madness, sexuality and punishment should include certain elements.

The first items are the statements about madness, sexuality, punishment, which provide a degree of knowledge about these things. The second element is the set of rules that prescribe certain ways to discuss these topics and to exclude others. These rules govern what can be said or thought about madness, sexuality and punishment in a particular historical moment. The third element is represented by subjects who personify the discourse. They are the madman, the criminal, the deviant. They often occur with certain attributes and descriptions, depending on how the knowledge base was built at that time in history. The fourth element is the authority that has knowledge on that topic acquired in that historic period. This authority is the personification of truth. The role of these practices is to adjust the behavior of the subjects. The last element is the awareness that different discourses will appear along different moments in history. These new discourse will suppress the old, giving rise to the emergence of new discursive formations. These, in turn, will create new conceptions of 'madness', 'punishment' or 'sexuality'. In other words, new discourses with authority and power, holding the "truth" that will introduce and regulate social practices in other ways.

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Biodata

Cristian ZAGAN is a 2nd year PhD student at the Faculty of Philosophy and Social and Political Sciences within "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University, Iași, Romania, working on a thesis about the relationship between discourse and power/knowledge in the philosophy of Michel Foucault. He has a bachelor and a master degree in the field of philosophy. His main academic interests focus on Nietzsche's and Foucault's works.