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Rethinking Discourse Analysis: Back to Foucault

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Abstract: Discourse studies, being widely spread in modern humanities, historically inherit the intellectual potential of French philosophy of 1960s. The study deals with the basic positions of the theory of discourse by Michel Foucault who interpreted discourse as the meanings distribution system. The impact of Foucauldian theory is grounded on its universality and systematic accuracy, while it contains a number of effects that could lead researchers towards discursive reductionism. The researcher concludes that return to Foucauldian ideas means re-articulating the problem of connections between the agent and the discourse.

Key words: Discourse analysis, institutional discourses, Michel Foucault, discursive practices, discursive formations

INTRODUCTION

What is known as discourse analysis or discourse studies have recently reached certain academic positions in humanities. The discourse analysis as the term was firstly introduced in 1952 by the American linguist. Harris (1952), who explained the methodology of distributive analysis of the textual unity to put forward the pioneer line for the text study.

However, the real ‘discursive turn” in social sciences and humanities is commonly associated with the French intellectual tradition of 1960s which integrated the Marxist philosophy, psychoanalysis and linguistics.

Discourse-analytical framework includes a wide range of research objects: from scientific rhetoric (Prelli, 1989; Ogurtsov, 1993) and social cognition (Keller, 2013) to city space (Richardson and Jensen, 2003) medical practices (Gotti and Salager-Meyer, 2006) and social protests (Leod and Detenber, 1999). However, both the high academic status and flexibility of discursive methodology to research goals do not always practically mean adequate understanding or application of discourse analysis as a methodological project. It is a rather common place for contemporary discourse studies to indicate the terminological and methodological vagueness, the latter generally linked to the use of the term “discourse”. Correspondingly, it is often when what is entitled as ‘discourse analysis” is regarded by many prominent authors as not alike (Dijk Van, 1997, 2006; Gee, 2005).

Up to now, the discourse analysis have had three main approaches established in the social science and humanities. One of them linguistic approach is claimed to be historically forepart and focuses on the dynamic aspects of language usage. It is rather commonplace for linguists to mark the linguistic approach as an autonomous tradition opposed to various others. For example, Chernyavskaya (2011) claims that there can be distinguished two correspondingly independent approaches to the discourse: a philosophical (rooting in ideas of Foucault and Seriot) and a linguistic one. Interestingly, she does not pinpoint the sociological and communicational traditions but she joins them with the philosophical approach.

Another approach which may be arbitrarily called communicational, aims at the linkage between the social reality and communicational processes and derives from Habermas ideas. Its primary interest is the correlation of social reality and its representation and construction in discourse practices and interpretation of discourse as a social practice. It demonstrates the attempts to coincide subjective mental and speech activity with the social phenomena. This approach is especially widespread in political and social sciences as the strategy to set the methodological relation between personality and society through discourses (Khmeltsov, 2004).

At last, the third approach is basically discursive which correlates to the French structuralism and deconstructivism as in researches of Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, etc. It also embraces the semiotic view on the discourse issues. It is distinct in the radical turn from linguistic phenomena towards metalingustic ones or in the interpretation of non-linguistic phenomena as linguistic “things”. To interpret discourse in such format helps researchers to apply the methodology to a wider field of extra-linguistic objects. Many researches of last decades base on this approach to study “the objects under discussions, the types of expression involved in action, and the notions under usage, and the strategies under construction” (Ogurtsov, 1993).

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Actually, regardless difference in the approaches, discourse analysis keeps its high significance. In such conditions, it is rather reasonable to refer to "academic roots" discourse theory and precisely, to the theory of discourse by Foucault (1963).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Main part: Why can Foucauldian methodological framework be important for actual discourse studies? Firstly, Foucauldian tradition deals with the analysis of distribution of discursive elements which needs description of cognitive, speech and communicational objects in such concepts as discontinuity, rupture, threshold, limit, series and transformation. The idea of distribution obviously dates back to the works by Harris (1954). The description would be possible only while revealing regularities under which objects, expressions, concepts and theories are constructed. This inspection helps overcome treating the discourse as a static monolithic construction that is a rather recurrent (and false) interpretation in contemporary discourse studies.

Secondly, conceptualizing discourse in Foucauldian manner also means its multilevel analysis when no discourse levels are isolated and independent. Foucault claims that neither every subject's position nor every discursive strategy is equally possible; they are such if they are permitted by preceding levels. Thus, ontological dimension of discourses (formation of objects) shapes the specifics of all other dimensions: nominated objects make one enunciations possible but another impossible.

Thirdly, Foucault proves that discourse and discursive practice under examination are not final like a result of spontaneous events or personal psychic acts. It means that discourses should be examined as possible scenarios that actualize due to certain regularities and as a resource to construct and change the reality.

Fourthly, what is specifically actual for contemporary discourse studies and what is under competence of Foucauldian methodology is the analysis of compatibility of different, especially institutional discourses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Discourse; distribution system: According to Foucault, discourse as a set of expressions is relevant to modes of thinking and speaking about different aspects of reality. Discourse includes a system of general assumptions which can be taken for granted by people, so as they become "unseen" or "appropriated" by individuals.

Discourses shape a set of discursive formations that are ordering reality in a particular manner. As Foucault stated, discourse and discursive formation are maintaining a certain regime of knowledge production and they constitute one ways of thinking about reality and exclude others. Thus, they determine who can speak when he or she can speak and with what authority and, vice versa, who does not have such rights. Analyzing discursive effects in the Foucauldian mode means answering the questions: "under what rules the expressions are possible", "under what rules the expressions are ordered", "under what rules we determine the expressions as true or false", "what rules are applied to construct cognitive world maps and classification schemes", etc.

Nevertheless, not all actual discourses emerge in the same manner and are equally sharing the same authority. At a particular historical moment, several discourses are functioning to dominate over others or to exclude others. Which discourse "gets the right" to present is the question of power. As Foucault claimed, "discourse is the power that needs to be taken". Foucauldian analysis regards power as a productive but not only as a repressive phenomenon: knowledge is produced in conditions of power nets. Paradoxically, the power can repress what we can know in certain situations. For example, human body as an object of medical knowledge is both a result and a part of the construction of medical discourse.

Discourse determines the system of knowledge since, it connects notions, meanings, representations, expressions into the entity. Foucault indicates the practice of such "connection" of heterogenic elements into entity as discursive practice.

Hence, discourse is also a "distribution system". A thematically and socially grouped complex of expressions needs neither spatial positioning, nor normative background, nor general notion structure. As Foucault explained, a stable field of expressions is characterized with spatial diffusions and diffractions, normative formulations of different levels and functions, structurally diverse (and contradictory) notions, matching of mismatched topics. In other words, a particular group of expressions system keeps particular forms of distribution and particular rules of "correlation in their simultaneous existence", "order of their appearance".

Discourse; multilevel analysis: The distribution system of a number of expressions in terms of a functional field is characterized with special regularities or "rules of formation" of different types of expressions, notions and topics and is marked by Foucault as "discursive formation". Accordingly, Foucault determines "rules of

formation" as the conditions under which the elements of a discursive formation are distributed. Discursive elements are objects, modality of expression act, notions and topics.

Actually, discourse analysis, as it was worked out by Foucault, is aimed to study such discursive regularities, forms of distribution, "isles of congruence", discursive practices and discursive formations in the scale of a sociocultural field. According to Foucault (1969)'s belief, any system can have other structure than it has in an actual moment while congruence of heterogenic elements (objects, types of expression, notions and topics) is always rational and profitable for a sociocultural or political power. Foucault expressed a more detailed logic of the analysis in the following analytical steps analysis of formation of objects; analysis of formation of expressions modality; analysis of formation of notions; analysis of formation of topical strategies.

All the four steps of analysis help reveal the regularities of "attachment" and "distribution" as basic mechanisms of discursive practice and discursive formation.

Thus, analysis of discourse means analyzing the diverse correlated levels presented by ontological, linguistic, cognitive and conceptual parameters.

Discourse as an eventual phenomenon: Discourse analysis means application of historical, sociological, linguistic, psychological apparatus to define the conditions and forces in which cognition, ideas and experience become possible. It also means that transformation of conditions and forces leads to transformation of cognition, ideas and experience. Regularities and principles of organization of human cognition are mobile themselves, and it means that any system of knowledge is also mobile and could have been different from what it actually is.

Discourse fixes rather the possibility (eventuality) than the reality. The cognizer and the object under cognition are both captured by a cultural situation in the form of "structure of experience", which means special social and, consequently, discursive hierarchies and discriminations. One expressions and actions are rejected as insane, while another as false or inappropriate, etc. Such "excommunication" is possible in certain cultural conditions and if they change, "the logic and objects of excommunication" change, too.

Compatibility of discourses: However, we should not over-appreciate the power of discourse. There is always a possible pass beyond the boundaries of a discursive formation to another discursive formation. Such passes are paradoxically less difficult if a discourse has firm boundaries and is obviously demarcated from other discourses. We can get to product a new knowledge if, for example, religious and scientific discourses are not or little compatible. However, if the bounds of institutional discourses are transparent, it is very difficult to construct a new knowledge. Societies with the rigid ideology have the firm succession of institutional discourses: pedagogy successes medicine, medicine in its turn successes law, etc.

From the other point, a social consensus and discussion of vital questions mean compatibility of institutional discourses. Here, we determine discursive compatibility as coincidence of key parameters of discourses under comparison. For example, if comparing religious and medical discourses, we observe the coincidence in the content, objects, modality of statements and topical strategies; thus, it means their principal compatibility. Nevertheless, if notions, objects and topics do not coincide, we can face a partial compatibility or non-compatibility of discourses.

Analysis of discourse "on the edge": Foucault (1994) permanently underlined that the complex of discursive norms is not intergrated into a discourse but exists at the boundary of it, on the edge where specific rules are determined and are determining the specific content and functionality of a discourse. Yet, the analysis of discourse "on the edge" has the risk of reductionism that means that "beyond the discourse" we could find only discourse. The discursive reductionism in Foucauldian theory is apparent on the stage of determining functions of speaker that are a set of perception, cognition and communication tools. What remains unclear is the nature of these tools: whether they are immanent to the discourse itself or they are outer for it? If they are immanent, thus, discourse analysis forms a logical circle, since to study discourses, we should use tools that are part of a discourse itself. However, if they are outer cognition elements, thus, we should have more or less systemized data on the content of other ("outer") discourses; still, in this case, our analysis is not primary and it cannot be aimed to study the grounds of discourse.

Such strategy of Foucauldian theory is visible in post-modernist conception of "total discourse" by Laclau (2014). This conception reveals the system of discursive effects of their reproduction, multiplication, etc., *ad infinitum*.

CONCLUSION

First, a researcher studying discourse entities should understand that (s)he deals with analysis of distribution systems. Such distribution can be described only in the context of rules regulating formation of objects, acts of statements, notions and theories.

Secondly, no levels of discourse are independent but inter-dependent. Therefore, the ontological level

(formation of objects) is the basis that determines specifics of all other levels of discourse; nominated objects make one statements possible and exclude others.

Thirdly, the problem of discourse is always a problem of something institutionally permitted and authorized for statements and what is kept in silence.

At last, development of Foucauldian theory means solving a very important issue of agents of discourse. Discursive practice and discourse are not transcendental but exclusively an individual does neither produce them. Actually, subjective measurement of discourse is an extremely topical aspect of the discourse approach in Foucauldian perspective. Thus, the return to Foucault means not only re-conceptualization of his ideas but also the solving of a vital question of agents.

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