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Three concepts of discourse: Foucault, Laclau, Habermas

KEYWORDS

Michel Foucault, Ernesto Laclau, Jürgen Habermas, discourse, theory of language, linguistic turn

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to examine three currently dominant concepts of discourse, developed by Michel Foucault, Ernesto Laclau and Jürgen Habermas. I argue that these concepts of discourse constitute neither a coherent methodological agenda nor a coherent theoretical vision. That means that the reference to discourse will always imply engaging with a particular theoretical framework. I briefly discuss the theoretical traditions from which these concepts emerged and point to the essential elements which the respective concepts of discourse derived from these traditions. Concluding, I examine differences between and similarities in the discussed concepts, whereby I address, in particular, the relationship between discourse and everyday language, the notion of subjectivity and the concept of the social world.

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The aim of this article is to examine three currently dominant concepts of discourse developed by Michel Foucault, Ernesto Laclau and Jürgen Habermas. I purposefully relinquish the term "theory of discourse" as at the core of my argument is the idea that such a theory is, in fact, non-existent. An essential challenge that social sciences scholars who use discourse analysis face is locating their own research in a broader methodological framework in which a particular concept of discourse was formulated. As a result, theoretical choices involved in research, such as, for example, the notion of subjectivity, the concept of the social world and the relationship between discourse and everyday language, are essentially influenced by this framework. I argue that the concepts of discourse discussed in the following offer neither a coherent methodological agenda nor a coherent theoretical vision;

consequently, references to the concept of discourse will always imply engaging with a particular theoretical framework. My aim is to outline the theoretical traditions from which these concepts emerged and to point to the essential elements which the respective concepts of discourse derived from these traditions. Concluding, I examine differences between and similarities in the discussed concepts, whereby I address, in particular, the relationship between discourse and everyday language, the notion of subjectivity and the concept of the social world.

Introduction: The linguistic turn

The works of Ferdinand de Saussure and Ludwig Wittgenstein had a formative impact on the philosophy and theory of language in the 20th century. Their insights and thinking prompted the inclusion of the study of language and linguistic questions into the social sciences. Admittedly, Saussure's and Wittgenstein's concepts arose from entirely separate theoretical traditions, yet when examined in combination, they fostered a new approach to language in which "language is no longer regarded as peripheral to our grasp of the world in which we live, but as central to it"[1]. This conceptual shift in which language-related terms underpin thinking about the social world has come to be called the "linguistic turn." The turn entails a serious examination of two seemingly contradictory positions: the idea that language (signification) is independent of traditional vehicles of meaning, such as forms (concepts) and sensible objects, and the idea that language is a social product.

The former results from abandoning the classical concepts in which language is based on an "essential" relationship between names and transcendent forms (Plato[2], Leibniz[3]) or between names and objects (Locke[4]). In the literature, this position is referred to as representationalism (designativism) (Taylor[5]) or nomen-

[1] Roy Harris, *Language, Saussure and Wittgenstein: How to Play Games with Words* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), p. ix.

[2] Plato, *Cratylus*, trans. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998) , 383a-b.

[3] Gottfried W. Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, trans. and eds. Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett (Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 282.

[4] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), Book III, Chapter 2, § 1, p. 402.

[5] Charles Taylor, "Theories of Meaning." In Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers, Volume 1* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 249, 254.

claturism (Saussure[6]). Though in many ways dissimilar, the two varieties of this position possess one common property: they link meaning to a non-linguistic, physical or mental reality. Representationalism proposes that, in the name-form-object triad, the name *substitutes* either the form or the object of reference for communication purposes. Saussure argued that meaning depends on the place a sign takes in the system of signification (language). This is a reversal in relation to the classical concepts of language as words no longer serve as a "technical" addition to forms and objects, simply "reflecting" reality, but are, instead, essential factors in the process of cognition. Language itself is framed as an autonomous entity vis-à-vis both the subject and the reality which it refers to. Insisting that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary,[7] Saussure states that the reference to objects play only a secondary role in the process of signification.

Admittedly, Wittgenstein does not offer an equally emphatic statement, yet the dependence of meaning on the whole (context) of language is unmistakably asserted in his framework: "The sign (the sentence) gets its significance from the system of signs, from the language to which it belongs. Roughly: understanding a sentence means understanding a language."[8] Importantly, however, Wittgenstein tended to emphasise more the social context of meaning production, as he used the term "language game," which involves not purely linguistic aspects but also "actions into which it [language] is woven"[9], or "an activity, or (...) a form of life"[10]. Wittgenstein relies on the notion of "forms of life"[11] in order to explain that language is not only subject to the rules of logic but also shaped through human practice. Saussure partially agrees and underscores the social character of language (*langue*),[12] in the sense of its objective and common presence in the minds of language users, but he considers speaking (*parole*) – as an individual and particular process – to be only an imperfect reflection of *langue* as an abstract and autonomous entity[13].

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[6] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin, eds. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), p. 65.

[7] *Ibid*., p. 67.

[8] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and the Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the 'Philosophical Investigations'* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), p. 5.

[9] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), §7.

[10] *Ibid*., §23.

[11] *Ibid*., p. 226.

[12] Saussure, *Course,* p. 9.

[13] Roman Jakobson, "Language and Parole: Code and Message," trans. Marcia Howden. In Roman Jakobson, *On Language* , ed. Linda R. Waugh and Monique Monville-Burston (pp. 80-109) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 89-90.

One can say that Saussure and Wittgenstein generally agreed that language is both social and autonomous phenomenon, but each of them put stress on something else. Saussure's assumption concerning autonomy of language had far-reaching consequences for the social sciences as it helped theorists, especially structuralists, explore language as a model of the social world which, like a looking glass, reflected social practices and social relations, such as kinship relationships, culinary customs, ideologies, mythology, etc. Such practices were insightfully studied and described by Levi-Strauss, Barthes and Lacan. Structuralists regarded language as an autonomous being in which specific mechanisms and processes of meaning production could be distinguished. As a result, because the social world was viewed as based on the processes of signification, language had to be regarded as a constitutive element of social reality. Moreover, some theorists embraced a more radical position associated with Saussure's bipartite concept of sign (in which meaning was determined by an arbitrary differential relation between the *signifiants*), namely that language does not simply provide "labels" for objectively existing objects, that words not only articulate but also shape notions and objects distinct to a respective language.

Though academically appealing, structuralist model of an abstract and autonomous language could not account for the living and real social processes that affect language and its use (*parole* was for Saussure a phenomenon of secondary importance). The concept of game was of paramount relevance to initial theorisations of "discourse" that helped open the system of language to its outside. In his seminal "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," Derrida criticises the Saussurian concept of a closed system/structure, which limits the unrestrained *game* of meanings. To illustrate this closure, he draws on Lévi-Strauss's oppositions of *bricoleur*-engineer and nature-culture, which, as Derrida insists, perfectly represent "centralist" thinking. According to Derrida, only the elimination of the centre would usher in "discourse," i.e. the language functioning by the rules of an unrestrained game[14]. The metaphor of game embodies a patently Wittgensteinian moment, i.e. the opening of language to its social context.

Embraced and developed by Wittgenstein and Saussure, the concept of game helps explain, partly at least, these two seemingly contradictory modes of thinking. Both Wittgenstein and Saussure use the concept of game to explain their own, non-traditional understandings of grammar. In the traditional understanding,

[14] Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." In Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference,* trans. Alan Bass (pp. 351-370) (London and New York: Routledge), pp. 351-356.

grammar was intimately associated with a legislative activity, often involving the recognition of identity and sovereignty of European nations.[15] Later labelled as "normative," this approach assumed that the codified rules of grammar formed the basis of the proper use of language. Consequently, certain language practices, well-established though they might have been, were not necessarily regarded as grammatical if they did not conform to the codified rules. Wittgenstein and Saussure, however, rely on the concept of the game to elucidate their understanding of grammar. In Wittgenstein, the relation between grammar and language is identical to the relation between the description of a game (rules) and the game itself.[16] Consequently, the command of a language does not consist in being able to explain its grammatical rules but, rather, in speaking the language itself, i.e. in being able to communicate with others. Similarly, mastery of tennis does not consist in enumerating its rules but, instead, in actually swinging the racket on the court.[17]

On this approach, the rules of the game or of grammar are appropriate to the game or grammar itself and serve no purpose outside of the game or language. Therefore, the rules of grammar, like the rules of any game, are both arbitrary and autonomous. Grammar is a convention grounded in the actual practice of using words. If I suddenly begin to use a word unconventionally, it does not imply that I speak improperly, but rather that I speak of a different thing, just as changing the rules of chess while playing implies switching to another game, but not a wrong one. As long as such moves are possible, there is no reason to judge the use of rules based on their compatibility with a certain abstract pattern; all the more so as such judgement would have to comply with certain rules of grammar, i.e. everything that is viable for explanation, evaluation and justification can be explained, evaluated and justified in language, which means that language itself cannot be explained, evaluated or justified. This insight is supported by Wittgenstein's claim that "grammar is not accountable to any reality. It is grammatical rules that determine meaning (constitute it) and so they themselves are not answerable to any meaning and to that extent are arbitrary."[18] Given this, language can be regarded both as profoundly social because its rules of use are determined by social practice and forms of life, and, at the same time, as autonomous because language is not submit to external rules.

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[15] Harris, *Language*, p. 62.

[16] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Grammar*, trans. Anthony Kenny , ed. Rush Rhees (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), p. 60.

[17] *Ibid*., p. 62.

[18] *Ibid*., p. 184.

Only these two properties of language considered in conjunction triggered explorations of discourse which were propped by varying, often overtly contradictory, theoretical perspectives. Today, the three most influential approaches to discourse can be found, I believe, in Michel Foucault, Jurgen Habermas and Ernesto Laclau.

Theoretical traditions

Foucault

Though famously reluctant to admit to his theoretical inspirations, Foucault was known for his inclination to present contrived and embellished accounts of his intellectual pursuits.[19] He was immensely annoyed at the labels he was given time and again, such as a structuralist, a poststructuralist, a crypto-Marxist or a postmodernist. He equally resented being framed as a social theorist, a psychologist, a sociologist, a poet or a literary theorist preoccupied with transgression. In "Life: Experience and Science" ("La vie, l'experience et la science"), one of his few attempts to give an ordered account of his own theoretical development, Foucault distinguished between a philosophy of "knowledge, of rationality, and of the concept" and a philosophy "of experience, of meaning, of the subject."[20] The distinction encapsulates responses to the lectures Husserl gave in Paris in 1929, falling roughly into two different interpretive frameworks: one initiated by Sartre, heading towards hermeneutics and existential philosophy (Heidegger), continued by Merleau-Ponty and productive of competition and a layered mesh of relationships between structuralism, phenomenology and Marxism; and the other proposed by Cavailles, who would go on to apply Husserl's phenomenology to the philosophy of mathematics. His thought was picked up and developed with merely tangential attention to Husserl's phenomenology by Canguilhem and Bachelard, producing what Foucault called "a philosophy of the concept" within in terms of a unique, epistemological history of science.

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[19] Michel Foucault, "How Much Does It Cost for the Reason to Tell the Truth," an Interview with Gerard Raulet, trans. Mia Foret and Marion Martius. In Michel Foucault, *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews 1981-1984*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996), pp. 348-362.

[20] Michel Foucault, "Life: Experience and Science," trans. Robert Hurley, in: *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*: *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, Vol. 2, ed. James D. Faubion (pp.465-78) (New York: The New York Press, 1998), p. 466.

Foucault definitely falls under the "the philosophy of the concept" category.[21] Rationality was the focal point of epistemological history as presented by Bachelard and Canguilhem. According to Bachelard, science is the greatest manifestation of human rationality; therefore, the study of scientific concepts is the best source of knowledge of human rationality. Two issues are of utmost relevance to this study. First, according to Bachelard, whose understanding on history is informed by the concept of "recursion,"[22] all historical reflection on science must be normative and must take into account the current state of scientific development. This model repudiates viewing the history of science from the perspective of cosmic time and employs concepts such as "epistemological obstacle," "error," "break" (or "rupture"),[23] etc. The second issue concerns rationality as such. In retrospect, we are capable of evaluating the errors and progress of rationality as well as recognise that human rationality, rather than being monolithic, is comprised of various "regions of rationality" (*les régions rationelles*)[24]. The consequences of the study of epistemological history play a crucial role in Foucault. His thought easily lends itself to being classified as the history of rationality; in this case, rationality is examined, importantly, in conjunction with other sciences that Foucault called the humanities (psychiatry, psychology, medicine, biology, linguistics, economy, law). Evoked above, the "errors" or "obstacles" in the history of modern rationality consist of insanity and also of disease, misdemeanour, crime and sexuality, a range of subjects that Foucault was going to examine in his following works.

Another crucial context for Foucault's thought is, indisputably, Nietzsche's philosophy, particularly his concept of genealogy, which takes into account the social and political aspects of morality. Nietzsche, as Foucault elucidates, regards his historical analysis as a search for the "genealogy" of concepts, in contrast to a search for "origins," including the role of the corporeal and the political influence in examining scientific and moral concepts. The ideas of historicity of scientific concepts, pluralism of rationality and historical analysis of events, including the impact of authority and institutional environments, proved deeply formative of Foucault's notion of discourse.[25]

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[21] Foucault, "How Much…," pp. 350-1.

[22] The concept is used by Canguilhem in reference to Bachelard, see Georges Canguilhem, *La formation du concept de réflexe aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Paris: Vrin, 1957), p. 166.

[23] See, e.g. Gaston Bachelard, *The Formation of the Scientific Mind: A Contribution to a Psychoanalysis of Objective*, trans. Mary McAllester Jones (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2002), p. 24.

[24] See Gaston Bachelard, *Le rationalisme appliqué* (Paris: PUF, 1949), Chapter VII.

[25] Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." In Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 139-64.

Habermas

Jürgen Habermas' framework seems to have been the last great synthesis of contemporary philosophy, an all-encompassing synthesis, as a matter of fact, since it included the traditions of both continental and analytic thought. In the following, I focus on the theoretical traditions crucial to Habermas' understanding of discourse rather than on the totality of theoretical inspiration behind his thought.

The first source of Habermas' concept of discourse is Kantian transcendentalism, in which philosophical inquiries concern less empirical objects and more their "conditions of possibility." The Kantian moment is actually recognisable in all concepts of discourse. Laclau inscribes his concept of discourse in the transcendentalist tradition of philosophy[26], and Foucault employs the concepts of *archive*[27] and *historical* a priori.[28] Obviously, the latter indicates a radical departure from the project of Kantian transcendentalism, which is characteristic not only of Foucault but also of Laclau. The historicity of *a priori* for Foucault is undoubtedly a consequence of embracing the historicist position of Bachelard and Canguilhem. For Kant, the conditions of possibility of knowledge of an object were transcendental, common and applicable to knowledge of all possible objects. In discussing this issue, Habermas considered that commitments made within discourse had universal validity[29]. In this context, the idea of the autonomous free will which founds morality and is expressed in the categorical imperative is a crucial Kantian motif in Habermas' thought. In Kant, this principle is universal as it is an expression of human freedom and reason which puts formal limits on itself and is consequently compelled to submit to them. As such, it represents human autonomy rather than of submission to an external rule (heteronomy). These insights are particularly conspicuous in Habermas' last works, in which explorations of discourse involve the "principle of universalisation" and the "principle of discourse." These principles will be described in a more detailed way in the following section.

Another significant theme in Habermas is the notion of the contractual character of society. Accordingly, Habermas shows himself as an heir to thinkers such

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[26] Ernesto Laclau, "Discourse." In *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy*, eds. Robert E. Goodin, Philip Pettit and Thomas Podge (pp. 541-547) (Oxford et al.: Blackwell, 2007), p. 541.

[27] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), p. 128.

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 127.

[29] Jürgen Habermas, "Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action," in Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press)p. 121; see Jürgen Habermas, "Philosophy as Stand-In and Interpreter," in Habermas, *Moral Consciousness*, p. 19.

as Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and Kant while his thought ties in with liberalism in a broad sense of the term. Informing liberal frameworks, the idea of the social contract is explanatory and legitimising. This means that it both explains the origins of the political community and lends validity to the exercise of power (legitimisation), stating that the primary founding act of every society is consent or agreement of citizens. Within this tradition, the act is hypothetical and regulatory. Similarly, Habermas relies on the concept of an "ideal situation of discourse" or an "ideal speech situation"[30] as a counter-factual form of communication, intentionally assuming a certain ideal conjuncture. Its purpose is to develop a basic critique of distortions in and departures from the rational ideal.

In terms of the analytic concept of language, Habermas draws upon numerous sources. His key inspirations include the concept of speech acts and the distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary acts proposed by John Austin [31] as well as Wittgenstein's concept of "rule following".[32] Austin's notion of illocution supports Habermas' claim that the communicative use of language, as the original mode of language use, is prior to instrumental and strategic uses.[33] Wittgenstein's reasoning about following a rule underpins his argument about the intersubjectivity of social actions (the "private language argument")[34].

Laclau

Ernesto Laclau drew on three major theoretical inspirations to develop his "discourse theory." Particularly important were an anti-economist current within Marxism, associated chiefly with Antonio Gramsci, and Gramsci's concept of hegemony. Contrary to Marx's notion of necessity and inevitability of the historical process, which, as a result of contradictions within capitalism, leads to Communism, Gramsci posits hegemony as essentially contingent. This entails evading economic reductionism, especially pronounced in Marx's later work. The "contingent"

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[30] Jürgen Habermas, "Introduction: Some Difficulties in the Attempt to Link Theory and Praxis," in Jürgen Habermas, *Theory and Practice*, trans. John Viertel (pp. 1-40) (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974), p. 19; Jürgen Habermas, "Communicative Action and the Detranscendentalized 'Use of Reason,'" in Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (pp. 24-76) (Cambridge and Malden: Polity, 2008), p. 44.

[31] See John L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), p. 108.; see also Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action: Reason and Rationalization of Society*, Vol. I, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), p. 288-94.

[32] Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, §185 - §242.

[33] Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, p. 288.

[34] See Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Lifeworld and System. A Critique of Functionalist Reason,* Vol. II, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), pp. 18-20.

elements, pointed out by, for example, Kautsky, Bernstein and Sorel, include the role of intellectuals in the historical process, the idea of the general strike, etc.[35]. The notion profoundly changed the views on politics and the concept of the subject of historical change. Hegemony, according to Gramsci, is a process of creating a new collective identity. This differs from the Marxian framework, which affords a privileged status to the proletariat (the subject of revolution is pre-determined). Hegemony is dependent not so much on the position in the relations of production as on intrinsically political activities within state and civil society. According to Gramsci, the seizure of power is impossible without gaining hegemony, i.e. the moral and intellectual leadership within society, which is based on consent rather than force.[36] As such, it is a democratic variant of Marxism.

The structuralist concepts of language were another source of inspiration for Laclau. Laclau built primarily on the frameworks proposed by Saussure, Althusser and Derrida. Generally speaking, the common ground of these approaches is the concept of language as a system, i.e. the idea that language is a complete "system of differences," relatively independent of extralinguistic reality. As already mentioned, this implies that signs (*signifiers*) can mean something without referring to external objects, but derive their meaning from relations to different signs. Derrida's critique of the structuralist idea of a closed system, which encouraged portraying discourse in terms of "openness" or impossibility of a closed system, proved significant for Laclau. Althusser's Freud-inspired idea of "overdetermination,"[37] which assumed a "relative autonomy" of the superstructure vis-à-vis the base, seemed to convey a similar thought. In this context, Laclau essentially builds on Lacan's analyses of subjectivity, in which the subject's full identification is precluded by the "absence" of the real[38]. The term "nodal point," which Laclau borrowed from Lacan, represents a partial fixation of meaning. The possibility of a partial fixation is, according to Lacan, the condition of a change in meaning.[39]

To conclude this section, let us look into the discussion between Habermas and Foucault, which never occurred as a matter of fact but came to be analysed in

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[35] Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London and New York: Verso), Chapter I.

[36] Antonio Gramsci, "Modern Prince," in Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. and eds. Geoffrey N. Smith and Quintin Hoare (London: Lawrence & Wishart Limited, 2005), pp. 160-161.

[37] Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London and New York: Verso, 2005), pp. 87-128.

[38] Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 27.

[39] Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, p. 112.

various accounts,[40] foregrounding methodological differences between their respective approaches. Foucault respectfully talked about the Frankfurt school on several occasions,[41] highlighting the affinities between the Frankfurt philosophers and himself. However, he never discussed Habermas' thought whereas Habermas offered a severe criticism of Foucault in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (*Der Philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*).[42] The dispute revolved around the possibility of critique. Put briefly, the question posed by Habermas was: If there is no normative basis, can there be critique in the first place? Habermas claimed that critique required referring to a normative ideal which embodied human rationality; for him it was communicative rationality expressed in discourse. Given this, all attempts undertaken by Foucault to formulate a genealogical/archaeological critique had to include, inevitably, a normative element. Therefore, Habermas regarded Foucault as a crypto-normativist in that he cultivated certain normative concepts, such as the idea of freedom, without actually admitting it. How Foucault could respond to that charge would be a good question here, yet he certainly did not assume any privileged, universal position in the social/political which could ultimately justify critique. In my view, Foucault's interests, as evinced by his indebtedness to the French philosophy of science, lie elsewhere, i.e. his object was to expose forms of domination and exclusion across the history of humanity, in particular the role of science in relation to power. Therefore, discourse is not a normative ground for critique, but an instrument of historical analysis. Its purpose is practical to the utmost; namely, by presenting the contingent and historical origins of certain concepts and distinctions (e.g. the concept of madness), Foucault's aim is to reduce domination, which could be regarded as pursuing "moderate emancipation," though defined in different terms than in Marx or Habermas. In Foucault, emancipation is not the attainment of originary human rationality as, according to Bachelard and Canguilhem, human rationality is historical and diversified; instead, emancipation "opens room, understood as a room of concrete freedom, that is possible transformation" [43] in a particular discipline and a particular field of human activity.

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[40] See Michael Kelly (ed.), *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press 1994); Samantha Ashenden and David Owen (eds.), *Foucault Contra Habermas: Recasting the Dialogue between Genealogy and Critical Theory* (London, Thousand Oaks and New Dehli: Sage, 1999).

[41] Foucault, "How Much…," p. 353.

[42] Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), Lectures IX and X.

[43] Foucault, "How Much…," p. 359.

Concepts of discourse

In this section, I describe the concepts of discourse proposed by Foucault, Habermas and Laclau, addressing their essential elements. I focus on how respective concepts inscribe themselves within theoretical formations, regarding methodological choices, definitions of the research objects and the aims of study.

Foucault

Three notions that are pillars on which Foucault's concept of discourse rests are "discursive formation," "archive" and "discursive practice."

Discursive formation is a system of dispersed statements within which an analyst can recognise regularity.[44] It is an essential insight, showing the difference between structuralism and Foucault's framework. Emphatically, formation is not a structure which underlies or is hidden in the "statements" (*énoncés*)[45] and is accessible only through hermeneutic interpretation. A formation is constituted by real statements ("discursive events") in their dispersion and natural regularity, which can be captured only by archaeologists. A possibility to transform discourse is also presupposed, which entails recognition of other relations and other regularities in the dispersion of discourse.[46]

Identifying regularity in dispersion helps the archaeologist to reconstruct the *archive*,[47] which is understood as a field of transformations of statements or as a "historical *a priori*"[48] of a given discursive event. The archive determines which statement could "occur" and which were excluded as erroneous; it is a certain condition of the occurrence of actual utterances. Therefore, the archive is not transcendental, unlike in the Kantian model, but historical and temporal instead. In his argument, Foucault employs the concept of "positivity."[49] The conditions under which utterances could occur can be examined exclusively *a posteriori*; otherwise such investigation would be speculation or metaphysics. For example, Foucault's analyses of insanity, the rise of medicine and the development of the modern prison system are attempts at grasping the historical conditions of possibility of a unique current rationality, i.e. that which has led us to think of ourselves in this

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[44] Foucault, *Archaeology*, p. 199.

[45] *Ibid.*, p. 114.

[46] Niels Akerstrom Andersen, *Discursive Analytical Strategies: Understanding Foucault, Koselleck, Laclau, Luhmann* (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2003), pp. 13-14.

[47] Foucault, *Archaeology*, p. 128.

[48] *Ibid.*, p. 127.

[49] *Ibid.*, p. 126.

rather than any other manner. Grasping the conditions of possibility of our own mode of thinking presupposes a certain contingent moment, as it results from the fact that the way we think was produced in an interplay of circumstances and factors which could have played out differently. In one of his later texts, Foucault defined his critical approach as "the art of not being governed quite so much."[50] This admission implies that his project of "modest emancipation" does not pursue the complete liberation of humanity but rather seeks a model of government in which domination could be most reduced.

The concept of *discursive practices* is closely linked to the *archive*. Identifying discursive practices is practically identical to identifying discourse as such, which Foucault perceives as a certain practice, i.e. following the rule, as discussed by Wittgenstein. Foucault defines discursive practices as "anonymous rules" of generating utterances, which can be accurately defined and are not an effect of factors external to discourse but a result of a certain practice proper to discourse. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault defines discursive practices as a "body of anonymous, historical rules, always determined in the time and space that have defined a given period, and for a given social, economic, geographical, or linguistic area, the conditions of operation of the enunciative function."[51] Importantly, besides the purely linguistic rules behind the production of statements, Foucault underscored also the role of non-discursive (economic, political, institutional) practices[52] in constituting discursive formations. Foucault labelled such practices as „extradiscursive dependencies."[53] Foucault insisted that "the autonomy of discourse and its specificity nevertheless do not give it the status of pure ideality and total historical independence."[54] This claim has provoked widespread criticism.

Laclau

Comparing the above outline of Foucault's analysis of discourse with Laclau's concept of discourse suggests that the latter entirely appropriates the concept of discursive formation as a regularity in dispersion.[55] However, Laclau does not endorse the Foucauldian distinction between discursive and non-discursive

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[50] Michel Foucault, "What is Critique?" in Michel Foucault, *The Politics of Truth*, trans. Lysa Hochrtoth & Catherine Porter, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (pp. 41-81) (Los Angeles: Semiotext€, 2007), p. 45.

[51] Foucault, *Archaeology*, 2002, p. 117.

[52] *Ibid.*, p. 68.

[53] Michel Foucault, "History, Discourse, and Continuity," trans. Anthony M. Nazarro [pp.33-50], in *Foucault Live*, p. 38.

[54] Foucault, *Archaeology*, pp. 164-5.

[55] Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, p. 105.

practices and understands them simply as different aspects of social practice (linguistic and behavioural) that include "articulatory practices,"[56] which he defines as processes of creating nodal points that serve to fix meaning.[57] As such, Laclau seems to recognise only discursive practices, regarded as practices of articulation. This, however, does not mean that Laclau denies the existence of physical objects outside of discourse. What it means is that all objects are constructed as objects of discourse, i.e. physical objects exist in reality and independently of our will, but when they are inscribed with meaning, they instantly become elements of discourse.[58] Therefore, everything becomes discourse insofar as it is an object of the signifying process.

An important concept which Laclau used in his later works is an "empty signifier." Basically, an empty signifier is a signifier without a signified and, as such, it serves to signify that which is impossible to signify.[59] Such "loosening" of meaning occurs when an emerging political identity attempts to define itself by differentiation from its outside that threatens it and is its negation. As a result, some signifiers lose of their meaning (they become equivalent and are subsumed in the "logic of equivalence"[60]), followed by a hegemonic struggle for one of them to represent all related to them identities. In order to make that possible, the signifier must be voided of its distinct meaning and, in a sense, become "empty" so as to comprise a possibly broad semantic field. For example, the myth of an endangered nation is capable of enlist various forces and social groups. The recent events in Poland, where such an appropriation of the concepts of nation and patriotism is taking place, have shown how effective "an empty signifier" can be.

Although Laclau's concept of discourse has a lot in common with Foucault's, the contexts and purposes of their respective analyses of discourse differ. If Foucault seeks to explore discourse as a form in which knowledge and its relations to power are manifested, Laclau perceives discourse as a direct arena of a hegemonic struggle over meaning making, in which the subject's identity is constituted. What the two approaches share are the pronounced, albeit differently defined, emancipatory investment and the absence of normative reflection.

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[56] *Ibid.*, p. 105.

[57] *Ibid.*, p. 113.

[58] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, "Marxism without Apologies," in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990), p. 101.

[59] Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London and New York: Verso, 1996), pp. 36-7.

[60] Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, p. 129.

Habermas

Habermas does not offer any particular definition of his concept of discourse since discourse is not in and by itself an object of his explorations. Rather, Habermas discusses discourse as part of his broader considerations which concern primarily the justification of moral norms and political decisions made through deliberation. Habermas puts stress on the practical aspect of discourse, which is reflected in his lexicon and use of such coinages as "discourse ethics" and "practical discourse." Habermas admits, however, that the principles of discourse are formal, idealisational and counter-factual, which in turn, validates the universal character of discursively established agreements.

Habermas' understanding of discourse is grounded in the theory of communicative action. The theory presupposes that, besides purpose-oriented actions (characteristic of instrumental rationality), there are also communicative actions which involve processes of reaching an agreement through "common situation definitions."[61] According to Habermas, such actions are irreducible to and, even, primary vis-à-vis instrumental actions. As already mentioned, this is a conclusion of the analysis of Austin's concept of illocutionary and perlocutionary acts which showed that in order for an utterance to become a result-oriented action, it must first become a communicative action, i.e. it must be comprehended. Consequently, Habermas states that the understanding-oriented language use is the original use of language and that instrumental uses are parasitic in relation to it.[62] The model of action based on communication and understanding is, according to Habermas, a reference point for all social actions, which should include people's natural pursuit of agreement.

In order to ground social life in communicative actions as defined by Habermas, a "discourse ethics" is necessary. The "communicative practice of everyday life," which is based on certainties and customs,[63] neither warrants that we will coordinate our actions grounding them in understanding nor ensures rationality of these actions. Therefore, we must reach beyond everyday life by critically examining everyday communication, that is by subjecting all our axioms and certainties of everyday knowledge to critical analysis. Only the concepts and beliefs which have undergone the procedures of *justifiaction* and *argumentation* can be included in discourse, and only then will the attained understanding be

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[61] Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. I, p. 286.

[62] *Ibid*., p. 288.

[63] Jürgen Habermas, "A Reply to my Critics," in John B. Thompson and David Held (eds.), *Habermas: Critical Debates* (pp.219-282) (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), p. 272.

rational and universal. In order to become discourse, language must meet the following conditions:

"(3.1) Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse.

(3.2) a. Everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatever.

b. Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse.

c. Everyone is allowed to express his attitudes, desires and needs.

No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights as laid down in (3.1.) and (3.2)."[64]

Within discourse, there is no possibility of exclusion, privileged arguments, manipulation or coercion to accept an argument. No limitations, except the "force-of-the-better-argument" principle, apply. The conditions are purely formal and, if fulfilled, the assertions will be regarded as rational and universal, according to the universalisation principle (U) and the principle of discourse ethics (D)[65]. According to (U), each person must freely accept all the expected consequences of an introduced norm. According to (D), each justified norm would be accepted by all the people involved if they could participate in a "practical discourse."

An example will be useful to sum up the outline of Habermas' concept of discourse.[66] Imagine that someone intends to challenge my validity claim of truth (and sincerity) by questioning my identity during a conference. In response, I may provide different justifications of my claim, produce my identification and birth certificate, present witnesses and undergo a polygraph test. Still, all these justifications can be questioned. According to Wittgenstein, each series of justifications must come to an end sooner or later (it "reaches bedrock"), and when it does, I must simply state that this is the way I act... [67]. The imaginary example presents an absurd and irrational situation which suggests that sometimes not questioning the validity claims can be more rational than questioning them. There are situations in which accepting certainties is entirely rational. Defining rationality as the capability of participating in a game of reason seems highly problematic in such context.

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[64] Habermas, "Discourse Ethics," in Habermas, *Moral Consciousness*, p. 89.

[65] Habermas, *Moral Consciousness*, pp. 120-2.

[66] See James Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key: Volume 1, Democracy and Civic Freedom* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), p. 51.

[67] Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, §217; see also §219.

Conclusion

To sum up, I will point to a few similarities in the concepts of discourse discussed above and to their obvious differences, focusing on four issues pertinent to my argument: the relationships between discourse and everyday language, the notions of subjectivity and the social world and the position of these concepts within broad methodological frameworks. As far as the relationships between discourse and everyday language or everyday communication are concerned, both Foucault and Habermas are not interested in what we could call "everyday speech" or "everyday communication." If Foucault disclaims the affinities between his understanding of enunciation and Austin's and Searle's concepts of speech act,[68] the likely reason is that he is interested in "greater" enunciations which have undergone an institutional test, i.e. in utterances which in some way "aspire" to truth. [69] It does not mean that Foucault is interested only in scientific enunciations; rather, he investigates those that have become part of a greater institutionalised discourse (e.g. the case of Pierre Riviere[70]). For Habermas, similarly, an ordinary, everyday conversation has little or no meaning until its validity claims are put into question and its participants begin to present reasons and arguments to justify them. Scientific discourse perhaps best exemplifies the general functioning of discourse, yet different situations in which our enunciations must be justified can easily be imagined. For Laclau, discourse has a much broader meaning as he considers every practice of signification to be part of discourse. Discourse is everything that has meaning, and, as such, it comprises the majority of the social. Consequently, Laclau's concept seems the most "democratic" one.

Similarities in Foucault's and Laclau's notions of discursive formation have already been evoked. Their concepts of subjectivity ("subject positions") can be compared in a similar way, where participation in discourse is constitutive of the participating subject. In his later works, however, Foucault emphasises also the subjective efforts of self-constitution against discourse ("technologies of the self," "care of the self"). Here, he approximates Habermas, who adopts the Kantian concept of a rational and autonomous subject.

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[68] Foucault, *Archaeology*, pp. 83-6.

[69] Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul K. Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1982), pp. 45-8.

[70] See Michel Foucault, *I, Pierre Riviere, Having Slaughtered My Mother, My Sister, and My Brother…: A Case of Parricide in the 19th Century*, trans. Frank Jellinek (New York: Pantheon Press, 1975).

The notions of the social world and the political are understood in a similar way as the concepts of subjectivity in the three frameworks, expressing fundamental difference between Foucault-Laclau's approach and Habermas's approach. Foucault and Laclau subscribe to the antagonist/agonist notion of discourse and of the political, where agreement and understanding either are a result of a hegemonic game (Laclau) or remain fictional (Foucault). For Habermas, however, understanding and agreement form the foundation of society's moral and legal norms as well as the normative basis for critique.

To conclude, the three concepts differ obviously in their methodological premises. In Foucault, discourse is a methodological instrument used in historical analysis. Foucault never discusses discourse in ontological categories. According to Laclau, discourse constitutes an ontological framework of the struggle for hegemony and, as such, is a condition of the social. The transcendental element is also apparent in Foucault, yet it only serves him as a genealogical step towards resistance to domination, exposing the contingent and historical character of particular configuration of power. In Habermas' works, discourse is framed as an ideal, counter-factual situation ("the ideal speech situation") which helps legitimise the decisions made in a public debate.