

# Discourse Analysis and Social Critique

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Among those branches of qualitative social sciences that deal with the study of discursive phenomena and structures, a variety of approaches—collectively referred to as Critical Discourse Analysis, explicitly formulate a scientific agenda which is closely linked to social critique. This claim for an active positioning of research and researchers within the ongoing discourse pose some methodological and ethical problems. Methodological problems concern the question of whether or not it is possible to show the links between the actual analytical research practice and the impetus for social change associated with it. Ethical considerations may question the validity of a research program that seem to cross the border of ‘manufacturing opinion.’ This article tries to examine some methodological programs of the Critical Discourse Analysis with special regard to the outlined co-foundation of critical and empirical methodological principals and tries to show how a genuinely critical approach to discourse study can and should be part of further methodological discussions.

In this article, I would like to present some thoughts concerning the concept of *critique* as it is elaborated within the field of discourse studies and more precisely, in the field of Critical Discourse Analysis. I think that these concepts can be adopted within other branches of social sciences in order to define a more general project of those practices such as critical research. The following remarks are written from a theoretical perspective, which clearly trace back to the work of Michel Foucault. Foucault, as one of the influential authors within the tradition of discourse theories, refers to the term critique as the art of not being governed in a certain way (Foucault, 1992, p. 12). This claim is linked to Foucault’s program of critically reconstructing discursive practices in which subjectivity is constituted within specific configurations of power and knowledge (Foucault, 2005). Following Foucault, the empirical study of discursive practices can be conceived as an attempt to analyse social phenomena as being to an important extent discursively configured. Any articulation of specific knowledge about social practices is at the same time a discursive (re-)configuration of the social structures it observes. Thus there is no such thing as ‘pure’ knowledge of social laws and structures. The researcher has to understand him or herself as a critical analyst of the same power relations that structure social fields. Analysis itself is then understood as an act of interfering with the discursive order that governs a certain field of action (see Reisigl, 2003) and thereby as a political act which cannot be separated from its implications within the social (and political) world. The critical discourse analyst embraces this challenge while at the same time methodologically reflecting on the consequences that this has. A clear understanding of the socio-political aspect of social research and especially of what we mean by ‘being critical researchers’ has to be at the centre of such a reflection. On the following pages I will try to summarize some of the ways in which this issue has been addressed within Critical Discourse Analysis.

While most of the general assumptions outlined above have been widely adopted, though with different terminology, within the social sciences, the conceptualization of

critique as an element of scientific methodology has often been neglected. An explicit attempt to incorporate critique within an empirical methodology for the social sciences, however, has been developed by proponents of the so called 'Critical Discourse Analysis.' From the various and—concerning their theoretical background—quite heterogeneous branches of Critical Discourse Analysis, I would like to refer to two conceptions. I will start with the discourse-historical approach to Critical Discourse Analysis (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). As this approach does not resort to Foucault as its main theoretical framework but draws upon the Critical Theory formulated by Jürgen Habermas (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001) it cannot be directly incorporated within the perspective taken here. It does, however, provide a basis for a clear understanding of the role of critique and its functions within the research process. In contrast to the discourse-historical approach, the Duisburg School of Critical Discourse Analysis, elaborated by Siegfried and Margarete Jäger and their team (Jäger, 2001a), provides a formulation of critique which draws upon the central Foucaultian concepts of power and knowledge. This approach tries to formulate a critical position, which avoids the traps of the classic model of *Ideologiekritik* (Diaz-Bone, 2006). Both approaches share—despite their theoretical and methodological differences—interest in a critical project that is simultaneously methodologically well grounded and reflected, as well as socially engaged in the aforementioned sense.

First, I will discuss some important elements relating to the theoretical discourse perspective which is taken in this article. The underlying thesis is that relevant aspects of social structure and practice are governed by speech, and more precisely language practices, as acts of articulating, and also performing, meaning. Thus, language is not simply a medium carrying meaning, but a constitutive practice. It is itself something that is fought with and fought about, as Foucault puts it. Because of this basic assumption, it is not sufficient for discourse analysis to show what a given discourse or social practice 'means' but it has to investigate how meaning is constituted through discursive practice and what is included or excluded in this process. Language constitutes social reality by creating a matrix that governs what can be said and what cannot be said (Jäger, 2001b, pp. 83). Thereby language sets the frames of meaning, within which individuals and groups act.

As a consequence of this approach, the analysis of these discursive practices of articulating meaning has to deal with the question of power relations within discourse. This is, because as the articulation of orders of meaning is directly linked to social positioning and dominance, inequalities of access to and influence in certain fields are distributed by these very articulation processes. Foucault suggests that the subjects of the social struggles for meaning cannot be grasped as fully self conscious founders of a sequence of acts, but that the 'actors' are themselves constituted exactly in and by their collective and antagonistic discursive practices (Foucault, 2005). The subject is not at the foundation of the social order but rather 'subjected' to a collectivity which, in turn, is structured by language and language practice.

I want to elaborate this essential point a bit further. Following Foucault's argument, social/discursive relationships do not form a freely floating exchange of free and self conscious speakers, but are interwoven by a net of subtle and differencing relations of power. Each form of discursive positioning takes place along an axis of domination/subjugation (equality being just one very specific possibility along this

axis). The concrete forms of dominance are not linked a priori to certain speaker positions, but rather—like any discursive identity—configured within specific discursive orders. Power, in a Foucaultian sense, is not a privilege that certain subjects possess or lack, but a fundamental condition of any discursive, which means social, constitution of subjectivity (Foucault, 1994). There is no escaping power and the (re-)articulation of power relations are at the core of any social practice, including the practice of research as will be discussed below.

Note that from the above paragraphs it should be clear that critique in the context of this particular theoretical framework relates to language and language practices and has to address specific relations of power as the starting point of its intervention. In this manner, critique has to be understood as language practice itself, as its *modus operandi* is the articulation of meaning. Thus, critique is a form of discourse, one that is held over other discourses. It forms a certain kind of meta-discourse that seeks to re-articulate and thereby transform certain relations of power, and in doing so, generates effects of power. There is no ontological gap between the criticising discourse and the criticised discourse. This point will be taken up again.

Further, as Foucault defines critique as ‘the art not to be governed in a certain way,’ he is not implying that one can or should just take down ‘those who are in power.’ Rather, the art consists of intervening with those (discursive) practices that legitimize the actual order.

The specific position of science within this framework is also worth mentioning here. Like other forms of social activities, science is understood as discursive social practice. It is not understood as a set of norms governing the acquisition and distribution of knowledge, but rather as an ongoing discourse *over* social discourses, a second order discourse which is governed by specific rules like any other discourse. These rules are elaborated and constantly transformed in the process itself and do not have a value a priori to the practice of research. The concern here is not the problem of accuracy of scientific results within a model of correct description, but the production and reproduction of the scientific discourse in relation to any ‘other discourse’ which it analyses (Jäger, 2001a, pp. 215).

Finally, as mentioned above, the discourse that ‘we’ as researchers hold about certain social practices cannot claim a special position for itself which is ontologically distinct from the one we intend to analyse. Social research and critique participates in the struggle for meaning and subject positioning at the same level as any other discourse. Furthermore, both social research and critique have to be aware of their role within the constant articulation and re-articulation of social orders of meaning. There is no higher legitimization that scientific discourse could claim for itself. There are, however, different forms of producing and evaluating scientific knowledge. The impact of scientific interventions within the field of social practice must therefore be open to the same critique which it imposes on those discourses which are their subject of interest.

In the following pages the project of social research as a critical undertaking will be outlined in relation to the theoretical discourse positions I have tried to explain above. As the scope of this paper does not allow for a detailed description, a preliminary sketch will have to suffice. The discussion about social critique is a long standing one with a

wide range of differing positions. Therefore, the aim of this paper is not to introduce 'new' insight, but rather to prolong the discussion about the status of social critique as a methodologically founded form of scientific practice within the context of some recent research methodologies. I further hope to inspire forthcoming debates regarding a critical position as it seems to be one of the more challenging problems of methodological discussions, which are, if it is broached at all, often swept over too quickly within methodological debates.

## A TYPOLOGY OF CRITIQUE

Within the framework of the discourse-historical approach to Critical Discourse Analysis, elaborated by Ruth Wodak and others, a precise definition of *social critique* as constitutive part of the research practice is given. Martin Reisigl and Ruth Wodak (2001) distinguish three forms of critique within the social sciences. With these three forms the authors present an internal distinction of elements of critique which are often used falsely or without the necessary precision. I will start out with a short presentation of this concept which, as I indicated above, does not align with a strict Foucaultian background but more with Habermas' Critical Theory. Concerning the theoretical implications of Reisigl's and Wodak's concept, critical remarks have been brought forth by Siegfried Jäger whose own approach to Critical Discourse Analysis follows the tradition of Michel Foucault (see for an overview Jäger, 2008). I will present a short confrontation of these two concepts in order to define an internally structured model of social critique within the methodology of Critical Discourse Analysis, which can be used with some terminological precision for the empirical study of (discursive) social phenomena. Note that such a short overview of current concepts, as this paper presents, cannot accurately account for all the theoretical and methodological heterogeneity within the field of Critical Discourse Analysis.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Discourse-immanent Critique

Reisigl and Wodak (2001) use the term *discourse-immanent critique* to designate the internal consistency and logical (argumentational) stringency of a discourse.

*"Text or discourse immanent critique' aims at discovering inconsistencies, (self-) contradictions, paradoxes and dilemmas in the text-internal or discourse-internal, for example, logico-semantic, cohesive, syntactic, performative, presuppositional, implicational, argumentation, fallacious and interactional (e.g. turn-taking) structures." (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 32)*

In a more narrow sense this form of critique does not imply a social-critical or political function as it is primarily concerned with what the actual meaning of this particular discourse is in the first place. It wants to answer questions like: What does this mean? How does this make sense? And, are there contradictions, ambiguities or semantic, cohesive, argumentational etc. problems that arise from the discourse as it is? Reisigl and Wodak (2001) make it very clear that even in this early stage of a critical discourse undertaking the position of the researcher (e.g. his or her knowledge and expectations about the subject in question) matter in the sense that his or her particular position

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<sup>1</sup> A more detailed examination would have to include at least Norman Fairclough's approach as well as the work of Teun Van Dijk (see Fairclough 2001, Van Dijk 1977).

functions as a kind of filter for what can be obtained from the text. However, this knowledge is at this stage nothing more than a horizon against which inconsistencies and ambiguities of the given articulation—measured discourse internally, e.g. with respect to the general line of practice—can be diagnosed.

## 2. Socio-diagnostic Critique

While the first form of critique does not involve social context or possible social and political implications and functions of the investigated discourse, these dimensions are at the centre of attention in the second form of critique.

*“In contrast to the still widely unpolitical ‘immanent critique’ the ‘sociodiagnostic critique’ is concerned with the demystifying exposure of the – manifest or latent – persuasive, propagandist, populist, ‘manipulative’ character of discursive practices. It aims at detecting problematic [from the researchers point of view, MW] social and political goals and functions of discursive practices, at uncovering the responsibilities and the speakers’ – sometimes – disguised, contradictory, opposing, ambivalent or ‘polyphonic’ intentions, claims and interests, which are either inferable from the (spoken or written) discourse itself or from contextual, social, historical and political knowledge.” (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, pp. 32)*

The aim of such a critique is to elaborate the social, political field of reference for the given discourse. Words like “diagnostic,” “detecting” or “exposure” mark the enlightenment-oriented approach, which is characteristic for this form of critique. This problematic aspect is conceded by the authors who clearly distance themselves from a ‘know-it-better attitude’ in their analysis. Although Reisigl and Wodak (2001) explicitly state that they envision a research position of relative distance and not one of absolute authority over the discourse systems that are studied, Siegfried Jäger (Jäger 2001a, Diaz-Bone 2006) points to the fact that the rhetoric of exposing or detecting does nevertheless imply an outside position of the interpreter who approaches his or her subject from a safe distance. According to Jäger, such an approach still remains within the standpoint of *Ideologiekritik* (critique of ideologies) which is characteristic of traditional approaches inspired by Critical Theory (Diaz-Bone, 2006). In opposition to this view, which would still be based on an objective claim for truth, Siegfried Jäger (Diaz-Bone 2006) positions his approach of a *relative relativism*, as he calls it in the cited interview. With Foucault Jäger argues against marginalizing the problem of truth by simply stating that there is no such thing as truth and considering any further discussion obsolete. On the contrary, the aim is to situate the problem of truth within the discourse itself. In other words, truth should be viewed as a contingent effect of certain discursive practices that are constituted within specific and discursive constellations. The solution then would not be to ignore one’s own position as a discursively predetermined locus of speech or try to methodically ‘eliminate’ one’s subjective position within the field of discourse, but rather to get involved actively in a practice of truth articulation in the sense of an ongoing struggle on the field of truth. Such an approach locates the scientific practice in the middle of the discursive struggles as part of a general practice of producing and re-producing orders of meaning that underlie our social relations.

As indicated before, Reisigl and Wodak (2001) do face the problem of using formulations which imply that the researcher’s standpoint is outside of discourse—that

is, the social orders of meaning. Even though they explicitly distance themselves from such a position (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 33), the danger of misinterpreting their conception as an attempt to preserve a special position of critical distance and 'higher' relevance for the researcher seems to be implied in the way they elaborate their categories (see the above definition).

If one tries to preserve the aim of a "socio-diagnostic critique" on the basis of the aforementioned Foucault-inspired critique, the political character of this form of intervention becomes even clearer. "Detecting" socio-political references and functions within a given discourse becomes an intervention within the field of the discourse and has to be conceptualised as a relevant articulation within the struggle for truth. The researcher is thereby part of the political discourse he or she tries to understand and describe. The implications of any act of description within the described field must then be part of the critical undertaking and part of the researcher's reflexions.

### 3. Prospective Critique

The third form of critique, as Reisigl and Wodak (2001) explain it, is finally reserved for what would probably be called common sense critique. It centres on the development and formulation of practical alternatives on the basis of the analysis of the discourse in question.

*"While the two aspects of critique mentioned above are primarily ... related to the epistemic and cognitive dimensions of 'seeing through', of 'illuminating' and 'making transparent' ... the 'prospective critique' is associated with the ethico-practical dimension. Inasmuch as it is contra-present and seeks to become practical and to change and transform things ... it is political in the action related sense of 'politics'. ... Such an engaged social critique is nurtured ethically by a sense of justice based on the normative and universalist conviction of the unrestricted validity of human rights and by the awareness of suffering, which both take sides against social discrimination, repression, domination, exclusion and exploitation and for emancipation, self-determination and social recognition ...." (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, pp. 33)*

The first paragraph of this definition, once again, clarifies the problematic character of this formulation of critique. The attempt to distinguish 'pure description' from engaged action on the practical or ethical level, fuels Sigfried Jäger's argument that points to a hidden objectivism within this model. Being able to clearly determine the division between presenting facts and articulating one's own discourse position seems somewhat arbitrary and implies that one could separate the stage of pure description within the research process, engaging in the struggle only in a second step when starting to present alternatives. If one understands the discourse (the one that we hold as researchers) as truth articulation, as described above, it becomes clear that 'pointing to *these facts*' is already an act of truth constitution—of manufacturing an effect of facticity which is in relation to its discursive origins itself contingent.

Albeit the objections, that can be made against the distinction between describing facts and formulating alternatives from the perspective of the position of the researcher, I still think that the distinction can serve a pragmatic purpose insofar as it allows the

separation of different modi of articulation within the research process, that would lead to misunderstandings if, for example, mixed up in the presentation of research results.

### **THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE RESEARCHER—ONE LAST REMARK**

At the end of this short overview I would like to take up the question of the perspective of the researcher once more. As could be seen in the model by Martin Reisigl and Ruth Wodak and the critique brought forward by Siegfried Jäger, the perspective of the researcher has to be reflected in relation to the specific field of discourse of which he or she is part of while articulating scientific knowledge about social practices. In the process of reflection it has to be clear that each articulation itself is discursive and that there is no ontological difference between what social actors articulate and what a researcher has to say about these articulations. As there is no hierarchically superior legitimacy that scientific articulation could claim, the question of what a foundation for the formulation of scientific knowledge (and critique) could look like then arises. I would like to refer to a short article here that deals with this question from a philosophical perspective. Hakan Gürses develops a *topography* of critique in which he elaborates *topoi* that are taken by those who try to formulate critique (Gürses, 2006). These *topoi* can be understood as a contrast foil for critical intervention. Gürses names three central options. The *topic critique* refers to certain norms, theories or conventions in order to measure up its subject. Those norms can either be external to the criticised discourse (e.g. when one criticises a totalitarian system on the basis of democratic principles) or discourse-intern (for instance the reference to human rights within western democracies, see the definition of prospective critique by Reisigl and Wodak, 2001, above). The *utopian critique* finds its foundation within a future or generally non-existent discourse, the principle of which it anticipates and installs as a measure for current ongoings. Any form of an 'ideal' construct of society (like the 'classless society' of traditional Marxist theories) could be subsumed under this type. Finally, the third form of critique is called *idiotopic critique*. Here the starting point for critique is formed by the singular and concrete experience (of disadvantages, repression etc.) of the criticising subject. Within the workers movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century this moment would be the collective experience of the exploitation of the working class.

This typology of references, to which the critical articulation can cling, seems to be an interesting contribution to a methodologically elaborated concept of critique insofar as it allows not only to clarify the 'objective' side of critique (its object, the ontological status of the criticised discourse), but also to elaborate the 'subjective' side, the position of the criticising subject.

With his description of *topoi* for a critical intervention Gürses points to the danger that derives from an institutionalisation of critique. Such an institutionalisation consists in the reification of ones own *topos* of critique, which leads to the abandonment of the dynamic and transformative aspect of critique (this can be witnessed in, for example, the reification of the collective experience of the working class—neglecting specific contexts and transformations of this experience—and the problems to which it led in the history of Marxist critique). Following this, Gürses poses the question whether there could be an *atopic critique* which would not need a (fixed) *topos* at its foundation. As far as I can see this seems to lead in a similar direction as Jägers call for a relativist relativism. Although a positioning (a field of references) is essential for effective critique, this *topos* would be

conceptualised as contingent, as a temporary position within an ever changing discursive whole. The transformation of this position would be the aim of the articulation of critique. In contrast to the notion of a fluent critique, the reification of ones own position of truth would reaffirm the element of discursive order at which critique is aimed at and which hinders the re-articulation of truth relations. Critique as truth articulation would then have to avoid the pitfall of staying within one topic 'fortress.' This fluent conception of critique can only be fully recognised by a form of scientific articulation that is open to get involved in the intricacies of discourse and to re-articulate itself incessantly as matters change. It seems to me that research should be exactly that.

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