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The Current Relevance of Discourse Research

Preamble

Since this Introduction to Discourse Research first appeared in 2003 the field of the social science analysis of discourse has grown enormously and the number of approaches has also expanded. This seems to be especially true in the German-speaking world: here the recent boom in discourse research appears much more marked than in English or French speaking contexts. Evidence for this may be found in the recent appearance of a number of book series, survey works, networks, and a plethora of conferences, online journals and web-platforms as well as the countless monographs and collections that we cannot acknowledge fully in this short introduction. One of the most important trends of the past decade has certainly been the marked expansion of discourse research within linguistics, building bridges to the social sciences, together with the increasing interest in questions of the analysis of audio-visual data or multimodal data formats. If one compares the older and the more recent editions of some German introductions to Critical Discourse Analysis or Historical Discourse Analysis, it is possible to speak of a tendency towards the 'sociologizing of discourse research' and as such a clear indicator for the approach contained in the present book.

Collective Orders of Knowledge and Discourses

In the social sciences there is a basic agreement that the relationship between human beings and the world are mediated by means of collectively created symbolic meaning systems or orders of knowledge. The different paradigms differ according to the theoretical, methodological and empirical value they attach to this assessment. In analyses of the social significance of knowledge and symbolic orders, in recent years, the terms *discourse*, *discourse theory* and *Discourse Analysis* have gained enormously in importance. This is particularly true of the large-scale reception of the works of Michel Foucault. To a considerably smaller extent the claim may also be made of developments within the interpretative paradigm (located in sociology). The boom in discourse-oriented theories and research may be witnessed on an impressive scale in various disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, for example in history, linguistics, literary studies, education and politics, or in sociology. Reference to the term 'discourse' occurs when theoretical perspectives and research questions relate to the constitution and construction of the world in the concrete use of signs and the underlying structural patterns or rules for the production of meaning. Discourses may be understood as more or less successful attempts to stabilize, at least temporarily, attributions of meaning and orders of interpretation, and thereby to institutionalize a collectively binding order of knowledge in a social ensemble. Discourse theories or discourse analyses, on the other hand, are scientific endeavours designed to investigate the processes implied here: social sciences' discourse research is concerned with the relationship between speaking/writing as activity or social practices and the (re)production of meaning systems/orders of knowledge, the social actors involved in this, the rules and resources underlying these processes, and their consequences in social collectivities.

Discourse theories and discourse analyses differ in their reference to the use of language or signs from other treatments of language in the social sciences, such as the sociology of language, or the ethnomethodologically based conversation analysis, because these are neither interested in social-structural formations in linguistic usage nor in linguistic usage as a form or performance of action. And unlike Jürgen Habermas's *Discourse Ethics* (Habermas 1991a), which has sometimes also been labelled a discourse theory, it is not a matter of formulating ideal conditions for processes of

argumentation.[1] What is at the heart of the perspective on social science Discourse Analysis presented here is more the analysis of institutional regulations of declarative practices and their performative and reality-constituting power. While *discourse theories* develop general theoretical perspectives on the linguistic constitution of meaningfulness of reality, *discourse analyses* concentrate on the empirical investigation of discourses. The term Discourse Analysis, however, does not refer to any specific method, but rather to a *research perspective* on particular research objects that are understood as discourses. What this means, in concrete terms, in relation to research questions and translation into methodological practice, depends on the disciplinary and theoretical background. The concept of discourse is therefore related, within the narrower field of discourse research, to different phenomena, and heterogeneous research goals are connected with its use. Discourse theories and discourse analyses are mostly understood today as qualitative, hermeneutic or interpretative perspectives or are attributed to these categories in methodological survey treatments (Hitzler and Honer 1997; Flick 2009). Despite the heterogeneity of approaches in discourse theory and Discourse Analysis, four features may be taken as the lowest common denominators in the use of the term discourse. Discourse theories and discourse analyses:

- are concerned with the actual use of (written or spoken) language and other symbolic forms in social practices;
- emphasize that in the practical use of signs, meanings of phenomena are socially constructed and these phenomena are thereby constituted in their social reality;
- claim that individual instances of interpretation may be understood as parts of a more comprehensive discourse structure that is temporarily produced and stabilized by specific institutional-organizational contexts; and
- assume that the use of symbolic orders is subject to rules of interpretation and action that may be reconstructed.

For discourse research, with its base in the social sciences and its focus on the institutional regulation of collective orders of knowledge, the structure and practice-oriented theoretical views of Pierre Bourdieu (1990a) and Anthony Giddens (1986) are important. Giddens, for example, understands

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[1]On *Discourse Analysis* see Chapter 2.2 and Brown and Yule (1983), Gee (2010).

action (and therefore also communicative action) analogously to Ludwig Wittgenstein's theory of language games as realizations of structural patterns (rules); these exist in the concrete performance of an action which actualizes them, confirms them in their validity and projects them further, but which is also able to question, undermine or transform them. The actual event is thus not a direct consequence of the underlying structures but a result of the actively interpreting interaction between social actors and these patterns. For this reason concrete language usage differs in its possibilities for world (re)interpretation, from the rigid systems of structuralism (see Chapter 2.1).

It would be too hasty to derive the growing interest in discourse-theoretical and discourse-analytical perspectives solely from science-internal processes. Indeed, here there is also an expression of the scientific reflexion of heterogeneous social changes and processes of transformation that in recent times have been given the label *knowledge society*, whose importance for the development of modern societies has been stressed, for example, by Giddens (1991). With the increase in systematic knowledge production, public awareness of the contingency of this knowledge has also grown. This is why Helga Nowotny has indicated that facts lose their unambiguity, that is their unambiguous classifiability (Nowotny 1999). Similarly, in other areas of social studies of science and technology, an increase in hybrid phenomena has been observed, and these cannot be unambiguously attributed to nature, society or technology (Latour 1993). It is precisely for this reason that discourses are of high social importance as processes and as attempts at attributing and stabilizing meaning. Apart from the exponential growth in the production of knowledge there is a second empirical reason for the boom in discourse research: the enormous expansion in professionalized communication processes and technologies, that is, the strategic and instrumental processing of linguistic practice in the most varied realms of social action (Keller 2005a).