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A DISCOURSE ON DISCOURSE: AN ARCHEOLOGICAL HISTORY OF AN INTELLECTUAL CONCEPT

Abstract

Over the last 30 years, the term discourse has spread throughout both the social sciences and the humanities. There is a widespread consensus that the current usage of the term 'discourse' originated with Foucault. This paper has three related goals: first, it demonstrates that the current usage of 'discourse' did not originate with Foucault, and in some ways contradicts his own limited technical usage. Second, an intellectual history is presented that explains where the term originated — in French and British theory of the 1960s and 1970s — and how it was propagated and transformed by Anglo-American cultural studies theorists. By extending this intellectual history through the 1990s, the paper documents how Anglo-American scholars increasingly began to attribute the concept to Foucault, and how this has contributed to two important misreadings of Foucault. In conclusion, this history is drawn upon to explore and clarify several competing usages of the term in contemporary cultural studies.

Keywords
discourse; cultural studies theory; Foucault; structuralism

The problem

Over the last 30 years, the term discourse has spread throughout both the social sciences and the humanities. A term becomes a trend when it satisfies an intellectual law of supply and demand; the expansion in scope, and propagation across disciplines, of the term 'discourse' indicates that it satisfies an
intellectual need. This article tracks both the supply and demand sides of this Anglo-American trend: where the current usage originated, why it is so frequently attributed to Foucault and what its success tells us about our own intellectual climate. I show that the concept is often associated with Foucault in ways that lead to misreadings of the historical and intellectual context of some of his works. By providing an archeological history of the concept of discourse, the article helps to clarify the many competing usages of the term in contemporary cultural studies.

By the 1980s, British and American writers had begun to comment on the intellectual popularity of the term 'discourse', and its confusing, multiple and conflicting usages. In 1984, cultural studies scholars were commenting on the accusation of "discourse babble" that began to surface a few years ago when the term first erupted' (Henriques et al., 1984: 105). In 1990, anthropologists Abu-Lughod and Lutz wrote: "Discourse" has become, in recent years, one of the most popular and least defined terms in the vocabulary of Anglo-American academia — as everyone readily admits, defining discourse precisely is impossible because of the wide variety of ways it is used' (Abu-Lughod and Lutz, 1990: 7). Of course, these writers were not referring to the relatively unproblematic standard usage of the term that dates back to the 1940s; in the standard usage, discourse refers to a unit of language larger than a sentence, and discourse analysis is the study of these sequences of sentences (Brown and Yule, 1983; Harris, 1952; Levinson, 1983: 286–94). Instead, these writers were commenting on a broad usage of the term that one frequently encounters in cultural studies and in social theory, "broad" because it encompasses much more than language.

This broad usage of the term 'discourse' is widespread and typically appears without attribution, indicating that the usage is established and unproblematic. The few writers that attribute the broad usage refer to Foucault. That these attributions are typically quite casual — lacking page numbers, quoted passages, and sometimes even lacking references to any specific work — indicates that the Foucault attribution is as established and unproblematic as the usage itself. Here are some examples of the broad usage from several fields that have been influenced by cultural studies theory, with the attributions to Foucault that accompany each:

Post-colonial theory: discourse is a system of domination: 'Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient ... Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. I have found it useful here to employ Michel Foucault's notion of a discourse, as described by him in The Archaeology of Knowledge and in Discipline and Punish, to identify Orientalism' (Said, 1978: 3).

Anthropology: discourse is a culture or an ideology. Abu-Lughod and Lutz (1990: 9) use the term 'to do the theoretical work of ... two terms that it replaces: culture and ideology', saying that this usage is a 'much wider Foucaultian sense' (no work is referenced).

Sociolinguistics: discourse is a speech style or register. Following current practice, we will apply the term "discourse" (a term derived from Foucault) to the many different ways of speaking that are associated with different social contexts, different speaking positions' (Lee, 1992: 51); the accompanying footnote indicates (Foucault, 1971, 1972).

Psychology: discourse is a physical or bodily practice. ‘Giving an injection or cutting a body are discursive practices. For Foucault (1972), discourses and practices should be treated as if they were the same thing’ (Parker, 1990: 199).

Feminist theory: discourse is a type of subject. Mills (1997: 62) refers to the discourse of middle-class femininity, defining it to be the ‘utterances, texts, gestures, behavior’ that form ‘the parameters within which middle-class women could work out their own sense of identity’; Mills provides a general reference to Foucault (no work referenced).

This diverse group of scholars reflects a widespread consensus: the broad usage originated with Foucault. However, all of these attributions are problematic, because Foucault's technical definition of the term 'discourse' does not include any of these senses. This paper has three related goals. First, I demonstrate that the broad usage of 'discourse' did not originate with Foucault, and in many ways contradicts his more limited technical usage. Following a brief discussion of Foucault's theory of discursive formations, I elaborate two intellectual developments in Foucault's thought that are frequently unacknowledged and often lead to misreadings. I argue that these misreadings result in part from a tendency to attribute to Foucault a contemporary concept of discourse that did not originate with him. Second, I present an intellectual history that explains where the broad usage originated — ironically, from contemporary schools of French thought towards which Foucault was often hostile — and I describe how this French concept influenced British theory of the 1970s. The British scholars who first borrowed this French concept in the 1970s — including Marxists, screen theorists and cultural studies theorists — did not draw on Foucault. By extending this intellectual history though the 1990s, I document how a second wave of Anglo-American scholars retrospectively began to attribute the broad usage to Foucault. In conclusion, I suggest several intellectual needs that the broad usage satisfies, and I explore what the term's success tells us about the state of contemporary cultural studies theory.

Foucault's discourse on discourse: The Archeology of Knowledge

Associations of Foucault with the contemporary concept of discourse typically invoke the most theoretical and programmatic of Foucault's works, The Archeology
of Knowledge (AK) (Foucault, 1969/72). Before AK, Foucault did not use the term 'discourse' as an analytic concept; and after AK, Foucault's avoidance of the term is remarkable (as I demonstrate below). If Foucault is indeed responsible for the current broad usage, then, the most likely source is the 1972 English translation of AK. However, in the following I show that Foucault's usage of the term 'discourse' in AK is consistent with the term's established usage within French structuralism. For example, in the 1950s, Benveniste had defined discourse as 'language put into action'; in French scholarship, the term had connotations of use, function and practice that were not associated with the standard usage of Anglo-American discourse analysts (Benveniste, 1958/71: 223). For Foucault as for Benveniste, 'discourses' are specific events of language use — letters, speeches, conversations, legal documents, books. I show how Foucault relates the concept of 'discourse' to several other key analytic concepts — including positivities, discursive formations, concepts, strategies and the archive — to help identify the conceptual scope to which Foucault limited 'discourse'.

The core chapters of AK are grouped into Parts II, III, and IV. In Part II, Foucault defines and describes his central analytic concept, the discursive formation. In Part III, Foucault steps back a bit, to more carefully define a term that was used frequently in Part II, the 'statement', and then uses that definition to define discourse and the archive. In Part IV, Foucault describes the project of archeology and how it differs from the traditional history of ideas.

The discursive formation

Foucault introduces Part II by stating his focus: the history of ideas, thought, science and/or knowledge (1969/72: 21). However, his approach contrasts with the history of ideas — a discipline then enjoying a period of intellectual fashion — in its level of analysis. His focus is on 'the totality of all effective statements (whether spoken or written), in their dispersion as events (1969/72: 26–7), in contrast to the history of ideas, which emphasizes the creativity, influence and oeuvre of individuals (1969/72: 27).

Foucault replaces the 'scientific discipline' with a new concept, the discursive formation. A 'discursive formation' is a grouping of statements that can be delimited and individualized, and that must satisfy four criteria. The statements refer to the same object, are made in the same enunciative modality, share a system of conceptual organization and share similar themes and theories, which Foucault calls strategies. Foucault considers each of these criteria in its own chapter, and determines that all four of them are necessary to define the unity that is a discursive formation. Foucault closes Part II with a summation of discursive formations, and prepares the stage for Part III, in which he defines statement and discourse (discussed in the following section).

In Part IV, Foucault uses the central concept of the discursive formation, together with two additional concepts, the positivity and the archive, to describe the task of the archology of knowledge. There are several potential stages in the historical emergence of a discursive formation. First, a set of discursive practices achieves individuality and autonomy; at this point, the discursive practices cross the threshold of positivity: 'The positivity of a discourse . . . characterizes its unity throughout time' (1969/72: 126). A positivity is the loosest and least regulated form of discursive formation. By using Hegel's term of 'positivity', Foucault invokes a frequently-unnoticed set of connotations: for Hegel, a positivity was historically contingent, and represented an externality, a form of constraint or authority that was imposed on thought.

Having defined the discursive formation, Foucault is in a position to define the archive. The archive is 'the general system of the formation and transformation of statements' (1969/72: 130, original emphasis). The archive constrains our thought; we cannot describe our own archive 'since it is from within these rules that we speak'. As Lois McNay points out, the archive is Foucault's term of choice to replace the term épistémé, which Foucault was never to use again after The Order of Things. In an attempt to respond to critiques that the épistémé was an overly idealist, structuralist notion, Foucault emphasized the historical transformations and possibilities of the archive (McNay, 1994: 66).

Foucault uses these three concepts — discursive formation, positivity and archive — to describe the archology of knowledge, and to detail how it differs from the history of ideas: 'Archological analysis individualizes and describes discursive formations' (1969/72: 157) and 'reveals relations between discursive formations and non-discursive domains (institutions, political events, economic practices and processes)' (1969/72: 162).

Foucault's definition of 'discourse

This summation of Foucault's archeological theory does not require use of the term 'discourse', but it prepares us to understand Foucault's technical usage of this term, as presented in Part III. It is not incidental that Foucault only provides a formal definition of 'discourse' after his extended description of the discursive formation. Foucault begins his definition of 'discourse' by acknowledging that his uses of the term have been confusing, referring to his 'rather fluctuating meaning of the word “discourse” . . . have I not allowed this same word “discourse” . . . to vary as I shifted my analysis or its point of application?' (1969/72: 80). Foucault is referring to several passing non-technical uses of the term — both as a mass noun and a count noun — and it is these passages from Part II that result in confusion. In these early sections, Foucault is following usage that had been common among French structuralists since at least the 1950s, when Benveniste and Lacan began using the term.

Following the prefatory apology for his confusing usage of 'discourse', Foucault spends the majority of Part III developing a technical definition of the term. He begins by defining the statement, a term used frequently in Part II but without being clearly defined. Statements are the 'elementary unit' of discourse,
but not in a structuralist sense (1969/72: 80); statements are not propositions or sentences. Rather, Foucault takes a functionalist position that statements are units of language use: 'The statement is not therefore a structure... it is a function' (1969/72: 86). Foucault claims that statements are not speech acts (1969/72: 82 passim), but this claim was based on a misunderstanding of speech act theory. In fact, after Searle clarified Foucault's original misunderstanding of the speech act, Foucault changed his position and agreed that statements are speech acts.  

After defining the statement, Foucault is in a position to define ‘discourse’. He again acknowledges his prior confusing usage: ‘We can now understand the reason for the equivocal meaning of the term “discourse”, which I have used and abused in many different senses’ (1969/72: 107); he precedes his definition by listing three senses in which he has used the term. Although he is to choose the third sense, note that all three senses are descriptions of specific instances of language in use. The first sense: ‘In the most general, and vaguest way, it denoted a group of verbal performances’ (This is Foucault’s first usage of the term ‘performance’, which it later becomes clear is meant to invoke Chomsky’s performance/competence opposition.) The second sense: ‘A group of acts of formulation, a series of sentences or propositions’. (Since we have learned that statements are not sentences, we now know this sense is incorrect.) The third sense: ‘A group of sequences of signs, in so far as they are statements’. Foucault then presents a definition based on this third sense: ‘We shall call discourse a group of statements in so far as they belong to the same discursive formation ’ (1969/72: 117).

Foucault repeats this definition in two now-famous lectures given shortly after he completed AK. In the lecture ‘What is an Author?’ (Foucault, 1969/77), the terms ‘discourse’ and ‘text’ are used interchangeably, and Foucault makes it clear that both terms refer only to verbal signs: ‘My analysis is restricted to the domain of discourse. . . . I have discussed the author only in the limited sense of a person to whom the production of a text, a book, or a work can be legitimately attributed’ (131). Foucault then suggests that individuals that create entire disciplines of knowledge, like Marx and Freud, be called ‘initiators of discursive practices in addition to authors of discourses’ (131–2). In the lecture ‘The Discourse on Language’ (Foucault, 1970/72), Foucault clarified the term in the same way: ‘Discourse is really only an activity, of writing in the first case, or reading in the second and exchange in the third . . . [These activities] never involve anything but signs’ (228).

Foucault and structuralism

By Foucauldian standards, these definitions are relatively consistent and unambiguous. Yet Foucault’s presentation is obviously confusing enough to mislead a generation of secondary scholarship. As Paul Veyne notes, ‘The word discourse has created a great deal of confusion (and Foucault’s readers are not to blame)’ (Veyne, 1971/97: 146). However, the above discussion shows that Foucault is not completely at fault. Attributions of the contemporary concept of discourse to AK persist due to two broad errors, which this and the following section will address in turn. First, such attributions are supported by two common misreadings of Foucault: a failure of English-speaking readers to understand the extent of structuralism’s influence on 1960s French theory, and a failure to understand a fundamental shift in Foucault’s thought which occurred after 1968. Second, the original sources of the broad usage are no longer widely known among Anglo-American academics. In the subsequent section, I identify the original sources of the broad usage.

The influence of structuralism

One cannot understand Foucault’s technical definition of ‘discourse’ apart from what Paul Veyne referred to as the ‘height of the structuralist and linguistic frenzy’ (1971/97: 146) that characterized the French intellectual climate of the late 1960s.  

As he wrote AK, Foucault shared with the structuralists an interest in identifying the autonomous rules that could be identified to describe his chosen domain: the history of knowledge. In a 1968 interview, Foucault explicitly described his archeology as a transformational grammar of knowledge:

What one is essentially looking for are the forms, the system, that is to say that one tries to bring out the logical correlations that can exist among a great number of elements belonging to a language, to an ideology (as in the analyses of Althusser), to a society (as in Levi-Strauss), or to different fields of knowledge, which is what I myself have studied. One could describe structuralism roughly as the search for logical structures everywhere that they could occur.

Translation in Davidson, 1997: 7

This background is essential to properly understand Foucault’s complex taxonomy in AK. Table 1 shows the structuralist analogies which Foucault never quite made explicit.

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<td>Foucault’s archeology</td>
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<td>statements (speech act)</td>
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Statements (speech acts) are the basic element of Foucault's system. Since statements are speech acts, groups of statements must also be events of language use. Thus, 'a discourse' is a specific instance of language use: a letter, a speech, a book, an argument, a conversation. Each discourse is generated — by analogy to generative grammar — according to the rules of the discursive formation and the archive; Foucault's own definition invites the comparison to transformational grammar: the archive is 'the general system of the formation and transformation of statements' (1969/72: 130, original emphasis).

Foucault, of course, vehemently argued that he was not a structuralist, and no doubt would be horrified by the rather bald Anglo-American style of table 1. Foucault is not a structuralist in the Chomskian or Levi-Straussian sense; both of these theorists searched for relationships between deep and surface structures, between 'competence' and 'performance', and focused their analyses on the competence associated with the underlying systemic level. In contrast, Foucault focuses his analysis on practice, 'verbal performance', and defines discourses in functional terms, as combinations of speech acts. Foucault explicitly noted this contrast: 'By seizing, out of the mass of things said, upon the statement defined as a function of realization of the verbal performance, it distinguishes itself from a search whose privileged field is linguistic competence' (1969/72: 207). Foucault's archeology is something of a paradox, a structuralism of practice, not a Saus surean study of the relations between significé and signifié, but 'the principle according to which only the 'signifying' groups that were enunciated could appear' (1969/72: 118). These contrasts justify Foucault's claim that 'I have used none of the methods, concepts, or key terms that characterize structural analysis' (1966/70: xiv). Nonetheless, his approach to the analysis of discursive practice has undeniably structuralist elements, as the above reading of AK demonstrates, and as Foucault himself was to later acknowledge. It is exactly this unavoidably structuralist element of AK that is the crux of the many critiques of Foucault's early epistemological project.

**Foucault's shift away from discourse**

In the previous section, I explored one factor that has contributed to the attribution of the contemporary concept of discourse to AK: a failure to understand the structuralist elements of its theoretical architecture. This misunderstanding combines synergistically with a second common misreading: a failure to understand the significance of Foucault's shift, after AK, to a focus on what he always referred to as non-discursive practices.

In AK, Foucault focuses exclusively on discursive practices, but in several passages he itemizes some of the non-discursive practices that relate to discourse. Non-discursive practices include 'the rules and processes of appropriation of discourse'; examples provided include pedagogic practice, the political decisions of governments (1969/72: 68), 'an institutional field, a set of events, practices, and political decisions, a sequence of economic processes' (1969/72: 157). These non-discursive practices are explicitly excluded from consideration in AK; this led to substantive criticisms from many French intellectuals, particularly Althusserian Marxists.

In response to criticism of both The Order of Things and AK, and to the political events of May 1968 (which occurred after the completion of AK), Foucault's interests began to shift away from discourse, and towards these non-discursive practices. Six years after the publication of AK — the longest pause between books of his career — Foucault published Discipline and Punish (1975/77). In this and in later works, Foucault's avoidance of the terms 'discourse' and 'archeology' is remarkable; Foucault never again described his projects using the terms 'archeology', 'archive' or 'discursive formation'. In these later works, on those few occasions when Foucault uses the term 'discourse', he is careful to state that a discourse is always embedded within non-discursive practices. For example, in Discipline and Punish, Foucault does not describe power and knowledge relations as 'discourses' nor as 'discursive formations'. Likewise in The History of Sexuality, Volume I (1976/78), Foucault's usage of 'discourse' is remarkably unambiguous. 'Discourse' is used only to describe specific instances of talking or writing about sexuality, particularly in the widely-cited chapter titled 'The incitement to discourse'; sexuality itself — as a concept, or as a set of socially constructed practices — is never described as 'a discourse'.

A misunderstanding of this shift leads many to assume that the contemporary concept of 'discourse' originated with these later works; non-discursive concepts from Foucault's later work are often conflated with the more structuralist and linguistic notions found in The Order of Things and in AK. In attributes that contradict Foucault's rather careful usage, discursive concepts from his earlier works — épistéme, discursive formation, archive — have been conflated with non-discursive concepts from the later works: power-knowledge relations, technologies of power, semi-techniques, apparatuses and the 'politics of the body'. In the perhaps earliest example of this conflation, the 1978 book Orientalism, Edward Said referenced The Archeology of Knowledge and Discipline and Punish in the same sentence, as accounting for 'Foucault's theory of discourse' (Said, 1978: 3), although in Discipline and Punish Foucault does not present, discuss or elaborate a 'theory of discourse'.

Why do so many readers conflate Foucault's later non-discursive concepts with his earlier focus on autonomous discourse, thus confusing his earlier forays into structuralism with his later rejections of it? There is a subtle, if unconscious, motivation for these misreadings: They both move Foucault in the direction of the broad usage. To understand this motivation, we have to first understand the original source of the Anglo-American concept of discourse.
The source of discourse, and how it was forgotten

If not Foucault, then who? Theories of discourse and language, derived from French structuralism and post-structuralism, began to filter into British social theory in the 1970s. Such concepts began to appear in writings by British Marxists (Hindess and Hirst, 1977), screen theorists (Coward and Ellis, 1977) and the Language Group at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) (Hall, 1980a). But these theories of discourse were not based on Foucault's writings.

Discourse -- defined in one cultural studies text as 'socially produced groups of ideas or ways of thinking that can be tracked in individual texts or groups of texts, but that also demand to be located within wider historical and social structures or relations' (Turner, 1996: 32-3) -- only gradually became central to British cultural studies theorists. In the 1970s, both Screen and CCCS were exploring tools to help them analyse the products of popular culture. They began with Marxist concepts, including Gramscian notions of hegemony and resistance, and Althusser's theory of ideology. They then turned to the works of Barthes and other French semiotists, and to Lacan's theory that the unconscious was formed by language. Only after these explorations did Foucault enter the picture; this sequence of events is crucial to understand how Foucault became associated with the contemporary concept of discourse.11

French Marxist conceptions of discourse: Althusser and Pêcheux

French discourse analysis was active between 1969 and 1981, in the journals Langages, Langue française, and Bulletin du Centre d'Analyse du Discours. Most French discourse analysts were Marxist in orientation, and often critical of Foucault; Foucault's approach was well-known to be opposed to that of the Althusserian Marxists.

The broad usage of 'discourse' originated with this opposing school; it is based on Althusser's concept of ideology, and was developed into a 'theory of discourse' by a group of French discourse analysts including Paul Henry and Michel Pêcheux. Althusser's work, particularly in the influential 1970 essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' (1970/71), was an attempt to elaborate on Gramsci's original intuition that the State exercises power not only through coercive means, but also through more subtle systems of cultural reproduction. 'There is a plurality of ideological State Apparatuses' (1970/71: 144), including religion, education, the family, the legal system and the media. These mechanisms of the State function not by repression or violence, but by ideology. Althusser's structuralist insight was to analyse ideology as a representational system; it represents 'the imaginary relation of . . . individuals to the real relations in which they live' (1970/71: 165). Ideologies are always material, because they exist in 'an apparatus and its practice' (1970/71: 166). Following Marx, Althusser claimed that 'ideology has the function (which defines it) of"constituting" concrete individuals as subjects' (1970/71: 171, original emphasis). Althusser referred to this function of ideology as interpellation (1970/71: 173-5).

Althusser made a further distinction between theoretical ideology and practical ideology. For Althusser, theoretical ideologies are always based in, and derived from, practical ideologies, which reflect a society's material conditions. Compare Althusser's 1967 definition of practical ideology, widely quoted by French scholars of the time, to the examples of the broad usage of 'discourse' that I quoted at the beginning of this essay:

Practical ideologies are complex formations which shape notions-representations-images into behaviors-conducts-attitudes-gestures. The ensemble functions as practical norms that govern the attitude and the concrete positions men adopt towards the real objects and real problems of their social and individual existence, and towards their history.

(Althusser, 1974/90: 83)

In this quotation, we see the essence of the broad usage of 'discourse', although Althusser himself did not focus on language or discourse. Althusser's concept of ideology was taken in a discursive direction primarily by Pêcheux in France, who was also heavily influenced by Lacan (discussed below). Pêcheux (1975/82) coined the phrase theory of discourse to describe his project, which explored the relations that discourses (in the broad usage) have with ideologies; discourses, like ideologies, develop out of clashes with one another, and there is always a political dimension to writing and speech. Pêcheux's analytic terms were discursive process and discursive formation: 'Every discursive process is inscribed in an ideological class relationship' (1975/82: 59).12 Pêcheux explored the relationship between discursive formations and ideological formations; for Pêcheux, the discursive formation was the key concept that linked Lacan and Althusser: 'Individuals are "interpellated" as speaking-subjects (as subjects of their discourse) by the discursive formations which represent in language the ideological formations that correspond to them' (1975/82: 112).

This Althusserian sense of discourse seems to have filtered into British Marxism sometime between 1975 and 1977, the publication dates of two critiques of Althusser by the British Marxists Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst. In the 1975 book, the term 'discourse' does not appear at all; in the 1977 book -- which speaks to the same issues, and is subtitled 'An Auto-Critique' of the 1975 book -- the term 'discourse' is central to the first chapter, 'Discourse and Objects of Discourse'. Also in Britain that year, Laclau's 1977 essay on Latin-American populism contains many instances of the broad usage of 'discourse' within an Althusserian framework (Laclau, 1977).13
**Lacan and the discursive construction of the self**

In Britain in the 1970s, the combination of semiotics and Lacanian psychoanalytic structuralism resulted in a radical recentering of virtually the whole terrain of Cultural Studies around the terms “discourse” and “the subject” (Hall, 1980a: 34). In the early and mid-1970s, articles in *Screen* began to explore the connections between language and subjectivity by drawing on Freud, Lacan, Benveniste and the *Tel Quel* semioticians Barthes and Kristeva. Gramsci and Althusser had explored how power was exerted in subtle ways, causing individuals to internalize the ideologies of the State. For a more robust theory of these processes, screen theorists and CCCS turned to Lacan’s combination of Freud and semiology. Lacan’s theory that the subject was constituted through language was perceived to address gaps in structuralism and Marxism; it seemed to provide a mechanism for Althusser’s ‘interpellation of the subject’.

Perhaps the fundamental assumption of semiology is that all sign systems can be analysed using semiological techniques, and that techniques developed for language analysis can be applied to other forms of interhuman communication. By the 1950s, this assumption had led to the widespread application of language metaphors to non-linguistic phenomena by French anthropologists and semiologists. In a 1953 lecture (Lacan, 1956/68), Lacan drew on this semiological assumption and frequently applied the term *discours* outside the realm of language. By the mid-1960s, with the acclaim that followed the 1966 collection *Écrits* (which included the 1953 lecture), *lakanisme* was intellectually fashionable; an entire generation of French intellectuals attended his seminars, including Barthes, Foucault, Derrida and Althusser (Lacan, 1956/68: xiv–xvii).

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to construct a ‘Lacanian theory of discourse’, I reproduce two representative quotations from the 1953 essay to demonstrate the range of connotations that the term must have had for French intellectuals of the 1960s:

> The omnipresence of the human discourse will perhaps one day be embraced under the open sky of an omnicomunication of its text. This is not to say that the discourse will be any more in harmony with it than now (1956/68: 27).

> The unconscious is that part of the concrete discourse in so far as it is trans-individual, which is not at the disposition of the subject to re-establish: the continuity of his conscious discourse (1956/68: 20).

In the seminar of 1969–1970 – probably prepared before reading *AK* – Lacan further elaborated a theory of discourse, writing that *discourse* ‘subsists in all fundamental relations’, including psychological relations, social relations and relations with the physical world (Lacan, 1991; see also Bracher, 1994). Differently structured discourses produce different psychological results: different knowledge, beliefs, values and ideals.

Lacan was perhaps the originator of the now-commonplace notion that selves are constructed through discourse; this concept is found throughout structuralist and poststructuralist thought: ‘The unconscious is the discourse of the Other’, Lacan famously wrote, with ‘the Other’ referring to the ‘absolute and universal subject’ (Pêcheux, 1975/82: 92). Together, Benveniste and Lacan were powerful influences on French thought in the late 1960s. For example, Julia Kristeva – who had a major influence on 1970s British cultural studies – combined Benveniste’s and Lacan’s concepts within a feminist and Marxist framework. Such work influenced 1970s screen theory (Coward and Ellis, 1977) and CCCS writings (Weedon *et al.*, 1980).

**Foucault to the rescue**

By the late 1970s, CCCS had combined these French theorists to develop a notion of discourse and language in relation to ideology, as a mechanism of social control over the construction of the self. Following Pêcheux, discourse was perceived to be the mechanism for Althusser’s interpellation of ideology. Combined with the semiological insight that all sign systems can be analysed using techniques originally developed for linguistic signs, the cultural studies group had a powerful theoretical arsenal for analysing the products of popular culture. Note that Foucault has not yet entered the story. However, these three strands of French theory led the Language Group of the CCCS to a problem, and Foucault was perceived to be the solution. The problem was that all of these theories had a universalist status, rather than a historically specific one. The group became increasingly concerned to enhance their evolving theory with a sophisticated notion of history. The members of the Language Group turned to Foucault, a historian who had studied the historical development of power and knowledge relations (Weedon *et al.*, 1980: 208).

In most cases, this ‘first wave’ of British scholars read Foucault quite closely, and were aware that his terminology did not match their already-developed concept of ‘discourse’. One does not find ‘discourse’ attributed to Foucault in British texts from the 1970s or early 1980s; they all attribute Pêcheux, Althusser or Lacan as the source of the broad usage (e.g. Cousins and Hussain, 1984; Hall, 1980a; Henriques *et al.*, 1984; Macdonell, 1986; Struver, 1985; Weedon *et al.*, 1980). Nonetheless, the cultural studies theorists that further developed the concept of discourse read Foucault with very specific theoretical needs, and they interpreted Foucault’s works – of both the 1960s and 1970s – within their already-established concept of discourse. In fact, the CCCS drew more heavily on Foucault’s later, non-discursive works than they did on *AK*, including primarily *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*. Within their already-formed theory of discourse, these works were used to develop ‘an analysis of the conditions for the emergence and constitution of specific forms of discursive subjectivity’, and were read as studies of ‘the innovatory ways in which the body is constituted within discourses’ (Weedon *et al.*, 1980: 212).
The second wave

Thus, the CCCS blended Foucault's later theory of non-discursive practices with a theory of discourse that had originated from other French sources. Throughout the 1980s, a second wave of English-language theorists gradually began to attribute this hybrid concept of 'discourse' to Foucault. It is not possible to identify one single person who first attributed this concept to Foucault. I believe that those second-wave scholars who first encountered the broad usage through the CCCS in the late 1980s, when Foucault's star was rising among Anglo-American scholars, could easily have gotten the impression that the entire theoretical edifice derived from Foucault, particularly if they read only these works and not the original French sources.

By 1989 – five years after Foucault's death in 1984 – US and British writers had begun to attribute the concept of discourse to Foucault. Note that Foucault was never attributed in this way by the first wave of British scholars prior to 1984. Increasingly after 1989, this attribution became so widespread that many writers were referencing Foucault as the source of the broad usage, without including references to specific works. The attribution became so enmeshed that many scholars attempted to justify the attribution retrospectively – selectively reading The Archeology of Knowledge (as I demonstrated in the prior section), and sometimes even misquoting passages out of context.

For example, several writers quote ambiguous uses of the term 'discourse' from the first 80 pages of _AK_ – passages in which Foucault follows common French usage of the term, before presenting his own definition. Other quotations involve rather bald misreadings, where the secondary text defines the term 'discourse' by quoting a passage in which Foucault is clearly defining some other term – apparatus, épistéme, discursive formation or discursive practice. When one examines the original text, one finds nothing to justify the misreadings. Instead, they result from the concept of 'discourse' being imposed on the text. A few examples:

Apparatus. In a footnote justifying their Foucault misattribution, Abu-Lughod and Lutz (1990: 20) claim that Foucault 'substituted the term "apparatus" for discourse in some of his later work'. But in the referenced work, Foucault defines 'apparatus' to be 'a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements...' (1980: 194). Abu-Lughod and Lutz's footnote gives the impression that Foucault was extending the term 'discourse' to include this full list, when in fact 'discourse' is only one of many elements of an apparatus.

Épistéme. Frank begins his analysis of The Order of Things by writing 'Of course, Foucault to a very great extent refrains from using the expression "discourse", preferring the term "épistéme of the classical age"' (Frank, 1989/92: 104–5). Nonetheless, Frank then re-interprets Foucault's discussion as being about discourse. The concepts that Frank interprets as 'discourse' include not only épistéme, but also 'order' and 'codes of a culture'. Frank does not provide evidence to argue that this is consistent with Foucault's own usage of the term, although this is the clear implication of his essay, which is titled 'On Foucault's concept of discourse'.

Discursive practice. Many writers confuse discourse and discursive practice. Several writers, for example, misquote passages in which Foucault defines discursive practice, by removing the introductory part of the definition and quoting the passage as being a definition of 'discourse'. Mills writes, 'For Foucault, . . . discourse is characterized by a "delimitation of a field of objects, the definition of a legitimate perspective for the age of knowledge, and the fixing of norms for the elaboration of concepts and theories"' (Mills, 1997: 51). But in the original text, this is Foucault's definition of discursive practices, not of a 'discourse' (Foucault, 1977: 199). Furthermore, whereas Foucault was always careful to distinguish discursive and non-discursive practices (particularly after _AK_), in Mills' (and others') interpretation of such passages, 'discourse' is equated with all practices.

Discursive formation. When contemporary theorists use the term 'discourse', they often mean the concepts, enunciative modalities, objects or strategies that are part of the discursive formation, rather than the 'group of statements' that constitute a specific language event. For example, once a particular way of talking about gender (a discursive practice) becomes established – individualized and with discursive regularities – it can be analysed as a discursive formation, because it has crossed the threshold of positivism. Despite his many confusing usages of the term, Foucault never says that 'a discourse' is a type of discursive formation, or is synonymous with it.

The irony

For Anglo-American intellectuals today, the broad usage of 'discourse' originated in what Pêcheux called the 'Triple Alliance' of 1960s French thought: Althusser, Lacan and Saussure (Pêcheux, 1982: 211). The irony, of course, is that Foucault was the least likely French intellectual to be associated with such a blend; Foucault took great pains to distance himself from all three schools. Foucault and the French Marxists were often opposed through the 1960s and 1970s; Foucault was critical of Althusser's concept of ideology, and famously criticized Marx as relevant only to the 19th century, and worse, derivative of Ricardo. French Marxists including Lecourt and Pêcheux spoke approvingly of Althusser and were quite critical of Foucault's theories. Foucault was equally dismissive of psychoanalysis and Freudianism, as was to become clear with the 1976
publication of *The History of Sexuality*. And although Foucault's early works contained undeniably structuralist elements, Foucault always insisted that his work was not structuralist.

**Conclusion**

This essay has been directed at several goals: to demonstrate that the broad usage of 'discourse' did not originate with Foucault; to identify the origin of the broad usage; and to determine how Foucault began to be associated with the term. I will conclude by addressing the issues raised at the beginning of the article: what intellectual needs does the broad usage satisfy, and how does this archaeology help to clarify the contemporary concept of discourse? The broad usage satisfies several theoretical needs; I contextualize those needs by contrasting 'discourse' with three related terms: 'culture', 'ideology' and 'language'.

At the time that the concept of 'discourse' was emerging, cultural studies had perceived a need for a new term to replace 'culture'. First, Marxism – an important influence on most of the British 1970s work – was difficult to reconcile with the concept of culture. 'Culture' generally refers to a realm of ideas, concepts and symbols; the term implies that this realm can be distinguished from material realities and concrete social practices (Abu-Lughod and Lutz, 1990: 9; Hall, 1980a: 22). Some of the foundational figures in cultural studies, for example Raymond Williams, developed the concept of culture in opposition to Marxism, particularly the economic determinism of vulgar materialism (Hall, 1980a: 23–5). In contrast, 'discourse' can be used to refer to social and material practices in ways that retain some connotations of culturalist notions of symbolic structures as autonomous from material conditions. Second, most anthropologists now acknowledge that the traditional concept of culture – particularly that of structural and symbolic anthropology of the 1960s and 1970s – was overly synchronic and ahistorical; for cultural studies theorists in the 1970s, 'culture' took on the connotations of a totalizing ideology. Drawing on Foucault's later work, 'discourse' began to be conceived as historically constructed and contingent. Third, culture implied an emphasis on consciousness, in its focus on meanings and values experienced and expressed by individuals; this led to Lacanian critiques by screen theorists that emphasized the discursive construction of the unconscious (Coward, 1977). For these and other reasons, the term 'culture' was gradually abandoned within cultural studies; 'discourse' took on many of the connotations formerly associated with that term. Contemporary uses of the term 'discourse' rarely retain the distinctions between discourse and culture that were central to the debate in Britain in the 1970s.

British readings of Althusser led to a concern with ideology, defined not as the contents of ideas and beliefs, but rather as the unconscious categories through which material conditions are represented and interpreted. Following the structuralist paradigm, these categories were considered to be collective and impersonal, and could not be reduced to individual beliefs. However, later theorists became concerned that this conception of ideology had undesirable connotations. First, Althusser opposed ideology to science, and many of today's theorists are concerned to demonstrate that science is equally ideological. Foucault strongly influenced the contemporary notion of science as a discursive practice, and AK helped to theorize this analysis. Second, the concept of ideology seemed unavoidably attached to a Marxist concept of base-superstructure, implying a radical separation between a realm of ideas and material and social reality. In contrast, the broad usage of 'discourse' includes both material and bodily practices. Third, Althusser's 'ideology' was perceived to be an overly functionalist notion, ahistoric and synchronic, whereas for Foucault, technologies and discursive practices are historically situated and emergent (Hall, 1980a: 27; Henriques *et al*., 1984: 47–8). Fourth, ideology seemed embedded in a Marxist model of class conflict, whereas discourse seemed to also reflect race and gender conflict – primary concerns of cultural studies, feminist theory and post-colonial theory. For these reasons, 'discourse' gradually took on many of the connotations formerly associated with the term 'ideology'; contemporary theorists often fail to make the careful distinction between discourse and ideology that was so important in Britain in the 1970s.

Concepts of culture and ideology both began to seem inappropriate as theorists shifted their concern to subjectivity and the social construction of the self. Lacan and others influenced the shift to a concern with subjectivity, and 'subjectivity . . . is always discursive' (Weedon *et al*., 1980: 211). British theorists began to focus on language, and to argue that existing theories of culture and ideology were not sufficient to this endeavor: 'Any attempt to analyze ideological processes leads inevitably to the problem of language' (Coward and Ellis, 1977: 78). In 1970s British theory, language became the way to theorize how subjects were constituted, and this initial structuralist foundation led to the first theoretical formulations of the 'centred subject'. The linguistic turn in literary theory was also an indirect influence.

But the term 'language' had several weaknesses that led to a preference for 'discourse'. First, in the context of 1970s post-structuralism, 'language' suffered from its unavoidable association with structuralism. 'Discourse' emphasized the spoken, active practice of language, whereas 'language' did not. 'Language' seemed limited to semiotic systems – implying synchronous and mentally represented structures – whereas 'discourse' could also be used to theorize unconscious social practices. Second, the term 'language', unlike the term 'discourse', did not include the connotations of power, hegemony, ideology and conflicting interests desired by feminist, postcolonial and race theory scholars.

'Discourse' uniquely satisfies these multiple requirements. 'Discourse' has captured the totalizing and semiotic connotations of 'culture', combined it with the Gramscian and Althusserian notions of 'hegemony' and 'ideology', blended
it with Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts, tapped into the linguistic turn in literary theory, and then introduced Foucault’s historical perspective on power/knowledge relations. ‘Discourse’ thus retains many connotations of 1970s Marxist and Lacanian theory, but in a way that allows the incorporation of history, culture and both structuralist and post-structuralist insights. It is not surprising that such an all-encompassing term is now associated with a wide range of conflicting and confusing meanings, such as those quoted at the beginning of this article; perhaps this is simply too much weight for a theory to place on one word.

As I have argued here, such a concept can only problematically be associated with Foucault, a man who rejected all three legs of the 1960s French intellectual ‘Triple Alliance’. Nonetheless, the Foucault attribution is deeply rooted in the collective psyche of Anglo-American theory; I have found only two texts that point out that Foucault is not the source of the contemporary concept of discourse, and neither attempts an archeology of this broad usage.17

In Foucault, we have a writer who began to use the term ‘discourse’ years after its usage was already fashionable among French intellectuals; used the term in a more restricted, technical sense than many of them; and discontinued his focus on discourse after May 1968. So why is Foucault almost canonically attributed? Why don’t scholars reference Pêcheux or Lacan? In this essay, I have noted several contributing causes; I will close by suggesting one additional factor. Foucault’s work is relatively famous and widely read in English-speaking countries, while other French discourse theorists are relatively unknown. Referencing Foucault has become an academic emblem of affiliation, indexing a certain intellectual stance; attributing a less-known figure like Pêcheux does not accomplish this political goal. At the same time that Foucault’s star has been rising – at least in English-speaking countries – Lacan’s Freudianism is out of fashion, Marxism has been out of fashion since the political events of 1989, and structuralism had already been rejected by the late 1970s. References to these schools do not index desirable affiliations for the author.

In conclusion, if one is to attribute the broad usage of the term ‘discourse’, it should either be attributed to British cultural studies collectives, to Lacan, or to the French Marxist discourse analysts working in the 1960s and 1970s, depending on the specific theoretical usage and the connotations intended. If one prefers to reference Foucault in this context, more accurate terms would be discursive formation, positivity, épistémé, or archive (if referring specifically to linguistic practices), apparatus, power/knowledge relations, semio-techniques or politics of the body (if referring to non-linguistic practices). Defining and limiting one’s usage of ‘discourse’ in these more careful ways could provide much-needed clarity to the many vague contemporary uses of the term; a general attribution to Foucault tends to perpetuate this confusion.

As Foucault himself would be the first to acknowledge, his concept of discourse is localized (to France) and historicized (to the 1960s). In this article, I have applied something like Foucault’s proposed archeological method to study the ‘formation of a concept’:

One tries in this way to discover how the recurrent elements of statements can reappear, dissociate, recompose, gain in extension or determination, be taken up into new logical structures, acquire, on the other hand, new semantic contents, and constitute partial organizations among themselves. These schemata make it possible to describe . . . [a concept’s] anonymous dispersion through texts, books, and oeuvres.

(1969/72: 60)

Notes

Few Foucauldian analysts seem aware of the Hegelian roots of the term ‘positivity’, which Foucault also used in the final chapter of The Order of Things (1966/70). The Hegelian connotations of the term are essential to an understanding of Foucault’s usage. For example, Foucault’s teacher Jean Hyppolite stated that a positivity ‘makes man a slave and cultivates in him the feeling of slavery’ (Hyppolite, 1948/96: 22). The last two chapters of Part III of AK are both implicitly addressed to Hegel. For example, for Hegel, Foucault’s focus on historical positivities – while denying the dialectic opposite, the reason and intuition of human nature – implies that he is a ‘dogmatic empiricist’; concluding his discussion of Hegelian issues, Foucault acknowledges this, writing ‘[if by doing this] one is a positivist, then I am quite happy to be one’ (1969/92: 125).

In his 1970 review of AK, Lecourt comments on this ‘very remarkable absence’ of the concept of épistémé, which was ‘the prop of all the “structuralist” interpretations of Foucault’ (1970/75: 188).

Foucault’s letter to Searle, 15 May 1979, discussed in Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982: 46). Of all of Foucault’s commentators, only Dreyfus and Rabinow note Foucault’s interaction with Searle.

Of course, in the Chomskian framework these categories are not of interest, since they are considered to fall into the realm of ‘practice’ rather than ‘competence’. However, these concepts have been a focus of sociolinguistics since the early 1960s.

Some Foucauldian scholars have emphasized the connections between AK and structuralism, but my analysis differs from each of these (Davidson, 1997; Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982: xii; Frank, 1989/92; Hall, 1980a).

After the 1966 publication of The Order of Things, the book was interpreted as structuralist by most French scholars, perhaps the most prominent being Jean Piaget (1968/70: 128-35). In the Preface to its 1970 English translation, Foucault used uncharacteristically direct language: ‘Certain half-witted “commentators” persist in labeling me a “structuralist”. I have been unable to get it into their tiny minds [etc.].’ (Foucault, 1970, xiv).
Dreyfus and Rabinow, in Michel Foucault, also comment on this paradox: 'It seems that the regularities he describes... must be evidence of some underlying systematic regulation. However, since at this stage he is committed to the view that discursive practices are autonomous and determine their own context... the result is the strange notion of regularities which regulate themselves' (1982: 84).

8 Dreyfus and Rabinow report that Foucault admitted to them 'that perhaps he was not as resistant to the seductive advances of structuralist vocabulary as he might have been' (1982: xii), and continue, 'Of course, this was more than just a question of vocabulary. Foucault does not deny that during the mid-sixties his work... [displayed] an almost exclusive emphasis on linguistic practices... Against Foucault's better judgement [this approach led] to an objective account of the rulelike way discourse organizes not only itself but social practices and institutions'.


10 Said's book was a foundational text of colonial and post-colonial theory, a field in which one frequently encounters the broad usage of 'discourse'.

11 There was ongoing debate between screen theorists and CCCS concerning the proper use and balance of these theoretical perspectives; I have chosen not to belabour these nuances here, but examples of this debate can be found in Coward, 1977; Chambers et al., 1977–8; Hall, 1980b; Morley, 1980. Although discourses, language, subjectivity, practice and ideology are all central terms in this debate, Foucault is not mentioned nor are his works referenced.

12 Although Pecheux and Foucault both use the phrase 'discursive formation', Pecheux does not reference Foucault. The phrase was in widespread usage by 1971; in France at that time, the phrase unequivocally invoked the syntactically parallel Althusserian phrases social formation and ideological formation.

13 Particularly pages 157–98, for example, 'Classes cannot assert their hegemony without articulating the people in their discourse', p. 196.

14 With uncanny regularity, attributions of the broad usage of 'discourse' to Foucault reference a passage on p. 49 of AK: 'A task that consists of not - of no longer - treating discourses as groups of signs but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak. Of course, discourses are composed of signs; but what they do is more than use these signs to designate things'. All such attributions leave out the surrounding context of the passage (a discussion of the relations between words and things); they do not acknowledge that this passage follows common French usage of the time; and they do not reference the explicit definitions of 'discourse' that Foucault provides later in the book (1969/72: 80–117), and Foucault's apologies for his prior confusing and conflicting usages. Examples of attributions to p. 49 include Abu-Lughod and Lutz, (1990: 9), Mills (1997: 17), Parker (1990: 196), and Sarup (1989: 70).

15 Both dispositif and appareil have been translated to the English 'apparatus', although in French they have very different connotations. Appareil has a more mechanical, 'device' connotation, and also carries unavoidable Marxist connotations (for example, it was Althusser's term). In contrast, dispositif (Foucault's term) is not used to refer to mechanical devices, but for more abstract systems or organizations of implementation, and is used in phrases including 'disposition of troops', in a military operation, and 'disposition of a statute', in law.

For example, Lecourt considered Foucault's 'archive' to be a failed paradox: a version of Althusser's concept of theoretical ideology, but autonomous from practical ideologies, and thus without any grounding in material conditions (Lecourt, 1970/75).

Cousins and Hussain write: 'It is important to distinguish Foucault's use of the category, a discourse, from contemporary uses of the term "discourse"' (1980: 77). And in an essay by Paul Veyne (1971/97) - that Foucault described as 'the single most penetrating essay on his work' (quoted by Davidson, 1997: 15) - Veyne writes 'The word discourse has created a great deal of confusion... Foucault uses the word discourse in his work in a special technical sense' (1971/97: 146); and later, 'Foucault is not revealing a mysterious discourse different from the one we all understand; he is simply inviting us to observe exactly what is said' (1971/97: 156).

References


