Deconstructing Social Reality: A Primer on Critical Discourse Studies

Bernhard Seidl*

1. Introduction[1)]

In the 1970s German TV adaptation of Astrid Lindgren's famous Pippi Longstocking, the eponymous character sings 'Two times three is four, deedledumdee; plus three makes nine: I make my world the way I want it'. Even though we can be reasonably sure this was not the song writer's intention, this actually encapsulates poststructuralist thought on reality and jumps right to the key issue at the heart of studying discourse: How can we make sense of such a multitude of individual, overlapping 'worlds'?

As social creatures, we are constantly confronted with opinions and knowledge about the world we live in, whether in our interactions with others or our engagement with society at large. Even in solitude, we cannot escape the dialectic process of making sense of the many interpretations of knowledge we have accumulated, and which decides how we view the world. As Stanlaw notes regarding the foundations of structuralist thought: 'Thinking (i.e. conceiving the world in signs) constitutes, produces and reifies social reality, and social reality produces thinking' (Stanlaw 2020). The way an individual shapes their subjective reality through mental activity is therefore arguably not fundamentally different from the way a social group constructs its shared reality through what one might call intersubjective social cognition. And just as engaging with the inner processes of an individual helps making sense of the way that individual sees their place in the world and their interaction with other individuals, discourse analysis seeks to understand how intersubjective reality is formed; it presents a structured way of trying to uncover layers of knowledge, biases, aims and opinions in order to examine them thoroughly and critically, since '[...] in human matters, interconnections and chains of cause and effect may be distorted out of vision. Hence 'critique' is essentially making visible the interconnected-

*   Senior Lecturer, University of Vienna, Department of East Asian Studies
1) Notice regarding the use of AI tools: LLM-based tools were used for proofreading tasks and to assist with the translation of some verbatim quotes to English. No generative AI tools were used for primary text production or the suggestion of sources.

ness of things.' (Fairclough 1985:747).

In recent decades, numerous approaches to discourse analysis have emerged, each reflecting the priorities and perspectives of specific academic disciplines. While these approaches undoubtedly have their merits and have contributed valuable insights, the proliferation of terminologies, overlapping theoretical frameworks and acronyms (CDA, FDA, PDS, CDS, CL…)[2] tend to make the field appear rather fragmented and not easily accessible. In this paper, I will therefore try to sketch out a 'field-agnostic' basic framework of analysis drawing on various 'flavours' of discourse analysis, in order to provide a starting point for researchers and graduate students who feel a little overwhelmed by the large (and quite interdisciplinary) body of work that has been published on the topic of studying discourse over the years.

2. What is discourse?

As historian and social scientist Franz X. Eder observes, although many researchers write about discourse, only few make an effort to explain what they actually mean by it, which does not help to make discourse analysis more accessible. As Eder further remarks, it even seems to have become fashionable '[...] to have something to do with 'discourse' or 'discourse analysis' [...]' in the title of a publication (Eder 2006:11). This merely echoes the fact that outside of academic contexts, the term discourse is used interchangeably with a number of other words all pertaining to the exchange of opinions or communication in general, such as debate, discussion, talk, dialogue or exchange of opinions (cf. Eder 2006:9, Haslinger 2006:28).

Etymologically, this makes sense: The literal meaning of the Latin verb *discurrēre* is 'to go seperate ways', used also in the sense of 'dispersing information'; the nominal derivative *discursus* describes the act of 'moving to and fro', of people as well as of words (Kytzler and Redemund 2014:136). In the strictest sense, discourse can therefore be understood as the exchange of speech acts – in essence, a conversation. This allows us to draw conclusions regarding the basic constituents of discourse: Information to be exchanged, a medium of exchange (such as speech or written text), and an interlocutor.

It is not that easy, however: Based on an extensive literature survey, Andreas Gardt (2012) concludes that discourse analysis (and therefore the ob-

---

2) Critical discourse analysis, Foucauldian discourse analysis, Political discourse studies, Critical discourse studies, Critical linguistics

ject of such analysis) encompasses several areas of meaning. It can be understood as a method(ology), a theory, an intellectual attitude or mentality, and a philosophy. Even though discourse analysis is seldom explicitly labelled as a 'theory', the fact that it employs a variety of methodology indicates that there is an overarching theoretical framework these methods are ancillary to, making discourse analysis in Gardt's view similar to psychotherapy, which can refer to a theory as much as its practical application (Gardt 2012: 23,32). Siegfried Jäger (2015:21-23) reaches a similar conclusion comparing various discourse concepts: He argues that the two main concepts concern a) discourse as an intermediary between the individual and the social group (critical linguistics; Ruth Wodak, Teun A. van Dijk, Norman Fairclough, Theo Van Leeuwen to name a few) on the one hand, and b) discourse as the primarily linguistic part of a wider net of 'discoursive practice' that produces knowledge on the other. The latter is typically based on or influenced by Michel Foucault's work (e.g. the German school(s) of discourse studies; Siegfried Jäger, Reiner Keller, Jürgen Link, Andrea Bührmann and others).

Language in the Saussurean sense describes a social phenomenon of organised signs mediating arbitrary meaning that can only be understood in terms of their interrelatedness. While this understanding of language remains at the heart of any form of discourse theory, critical discourse studies are not primarily concerned with language itself. This makes them different from pureley linguistic discourse analysis, which refers to the analysis of the result of linguistic turn-taking (conversation) in a transparent and structured manner, typically employing various annotation systems to indicate speakers, modes of speaking, linguistics and paralinguistic idiosyncrasies. However, arguably even those flavours of critical discourse study that view themselves as applied linguistics ultimately treat language or rather 'texts' in the sense of organised bodies of semiotically coded knowledge as a means to and end; the end here being not to gain knowledge about language, but about the role of language in shaping social realities and identities. As a working definition of 'least common denominators', I would like to refer to Andreas Gardt's synthesis of multiple discourse approaches. According to Gardt, 'discourse' refers to the way a particular topic is negotiated within a social context. This process is driven by social groups and reflected in language. It shapes the knowledge and attitudes of these groups and, in doing so, can potentially influence how social reality regarding the topic in question is shaped (Gardt 2012: 26).

While I will write about methodology in sections 4 and 5 of this paper, I will briefly outline the philosophical key concepts of discourse analysis that, as Gardt notes, tend to coalesce into a certain way of viewing the world, or 'attitude', in the following section.

3. Theoretical foundations of discourse theory

Discourse theory as a multidisciplinary field of study owes much to the contributions of French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault (1926–1984). In works such as *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) and *Discipline and Punish* (1975), he expounded many of the theoretical foundations of discourse analysis, emphasising the role of social power in the formation of shared knowledge.

While discourse analysis based on Foucauldian discourse theory certainly represents an epistemological approach that places great value on the role of language as an arbiter of social reality, in this context, linguistic analysis serves as a means of understanding how knowledge is created, formed, shared, and perpetuated in specific social contexts. Foucault's concept of discourses as 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault 2004 [1989]:54) was not conceived in an epistemological vacuum. Examining the fundamental principles of the theorists and schools of thought that influenced Foucault (and that he in turn has influenced) is helpful for understanding the underlying assumptions of discourse theory. Among these schools of thought, poststructuralism stands out as particularly significant, providing a broader intellectual framework within which discourse theory can be situated. Foucault's notion of discourse creating knowledge therefore needs to be understood in the context of (post)structuralism: Objects of discourse, i.e. meaning and knowledge, are not so much created as they are constituted through differentiation from one another (Martin 2022:78). This echoes the structuralist maxims of interdependence, totality and transformation (Seidl 2020: 180) and suggests that knowledge of the broader social context and cultural practices, as well as a historical perspective, is necessary in order to make sense of social discourse.

The idea of 'radical contingency', ascribed to social institutions encapsulates one of the most fundamental principles of poststructuralist thought (Howard, 2013: 188) and has also informed discourse theories emphasising the dynamic nature of social reality: Social formations, practices and subjective and intersubjective identities are in a constant state of flux; meanings are never fixed, but follow rules and constraints that facilitate social reality as much as they produce it. Consequently, discourse cannot be approached as a discrete object of study. Instead, it must be understood as an ongoing, evolving process that reflects the continuous production and negotiation of meaning within society.

3.1. Discourse and power

Discourse as a process is based on knowledge and is mediated by another central concept in Foucault's work: Power. Although Foucault's understanding of power and its role in the formation of knowledge evolved over the course of his work, he ultimately concluded that power does not just mean the capacity for repression. Rather, it permeates and facilitates the formation and maintenance of knowledge in society (Howard 2013: 189), existing as 'a relationship of force' that is negotiated and realised through constant struggle' (Jäger 2015: 158), much like a game of tug-of-war between the subjects: 'Discourse can be understood as the result of many people trying to assert themselves in society. The result is never what any single one of them has intended, but which everyone has contributed to in various ways and in different areas of life (and with varying degrees of influence)' (Jäger 2015:37).

In this context, power is at a first glance as elusive a concept as discourse, but it may be best understood as the act of claiming or attributing authority. To give an everyday conversational example: When I ask someone for directions, I am attributing to the other person the knowledge that I lack, thereby casting them as an 'expert' (Belsey 2002: 97). Their utterances (at least regarding directions) will likely be treated as an authoritative 'text'. Similarly, in discourse analysis, the questions of who lays claim to authority, who is ceded authority, and how authority is governed are important. Discourse analysis aims to answer these questions through social critique, '[...] illustrating how utterances and interpretations thereof are authorised, hierarchised, or marginalised in the course of the communicative process, thereby generating, stabilising, or destabilising power relations' (Haslinger 2006:27).

Thus, poststructuralist discourse analysis is focused on the question of how knowledge and power manifest and interact in the process of creating knowledge in a social group. This iterative process is easier to grasp if we call its intermittent result '(social) reality'. Discourse is not merely a passive mirror of what people in a social group think about a specific topic. Rather, the discursive process shapes shared social reality by describing and dictating cultural norms, social rules and frames of understanding; it 'actively forms the knowledge and attitudes of social groups [...], and in doing so also guides future action pertaining to the construction of social reality relating to that topic' (Gardt 2012:26).

3.2 Discourse and social reality

As poststructuralism asserts, there is no objective reality; positivism regarding social phenomena is wishful thinking; fact and reality is merely what is being agreed upon by all concerned individuals in a process of the construction of multiple, overlapping realities. This implies that the critique in discourse analysis is not aimed at determining the 'truth' or the facts concerning a discourse topic. Poststructuralism also contends that facts have no inherent meaning. For instance, the controversial statements or actions of a high-ranking politician are not inherently controversial. It is only through a society's arbitrary decisions concerning ethics and morals that such utterances or acts become ethically questionable or amoral. Thus, social acts are *made* acceptable or controversial through the mechanism of the discourse, just as they may be *re-made* eventually. This harkens back to the above mentioned Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), whose theory of semiotics is arguably the basis of structuralist and ultimately poststructuralist thought (Stanlaw 2020, Belsey 2002:10). While de Saussure's linguistics essentialism has largely been abandoned in discourse studies, his central claim that meaning (the relationship between the sign and the signified) is an arbitrary construct created by social norms and rules, and that meaning is derived from (again, arbitrary) contrast and thus context, has had a lasting influence on the concept of social reality in discourse studies.

In summary, the purpose of critically examining discourse is not to establish the factuality or reality of a matter. That is not to say that striving to determine the factual circumstances objectively is not helpful; it on the contrary often needed to form a comprehensive picture. However, in the context of public opinion and shared social reality, 'truth' and even 'fact' does not necessarily point to the facts themselves, but rather to what these facts mean, and to the question of how that meaning is determined, challenged and changed.

With this working understanding of discourse, I will conclude this section by briefly addressing the question of terminology in Japanese. As I noted earlier, the term 'discourse' suffers from overuse in English and German. However, it seems there is a slightly different problem in Japanese, since there are several terms with more or less overlapping denotations but diverging connotations (see Nakanishi 2008, for a detailed discussion of discourse terminology in Japanese). While the Foucauldian notion of discourse as a theoretical and philosophical construct is typically transliterated from French to Japanese (*discours* → *diskūru* [ディスクール]), this term does not quite fit modern empirical discourse study, as it is usually mainly used in Japanese texts dealing with Foucault, Derrida and other

poststructuralist theorists. Furthermore, the transliteration of English 'discourse' (*disukōsu* [ディスコース]) that is used primarily in the context of discourse analysis in the sense of 'critical linguistics', is used interchangeably with the much older and less specific term *gensetsu* (言説), denoting the exchange of opinions and explanation of concepts. Finally, discourse analysis as discussed in this paper can be mistranslated into Japanese as *danwa bunseki* (談話分析), which denotes linguistic discourse (i.e. conversation) analysis. For the kind of analytical framework I will outline in the following sections, I propose to use *disukōsu* (ディスコース) as a term specifically adopted for this kind of context, which is not used in everyday language and carries no other meanings in Japanese.

4. Approaching critical discourse analysis

Foucault's work has been, and continues to be, influential in the fields of postmodern theory and discourse studies. However, few would argue that his oeuvre is a suitable blueprint for practical research. Although he asserts that '[...] discourse is a complex, differentiated practice, governed by analysable rules and transformations [...]' (Foucault 2004 [1989]: 232), specific methodological instructions are virtually absent from his body of work. Fortunately, several decades of Foucault exegesis have produced some eminently practical approaches based on poststructuralist thought, and applied linguistics/critical linguistics have contributed their own extensive approaches to examining social reality. As I have noted, this paper follows a pragmatical approach to methodology, and although the approach outlined here is based on Siegfried Jäger's system of critical discourse analysis (*Kritische Diskursanalyse*), I have incorporated many elements from other approaches that don't necessarily regard themselves as drawing on Foucault's work, or even poststructuralist thought. However, I am convinced it is for the most part neither easy nor necessary to draw a line between the various approaches; ultimately, they all agree that social reality is constructed phenomenon and aim to make sense of it as best as they can.

Coming from this point of view, no topic is inherently unsuitable for conducting a discourse analysis. However, for an analysis to be academically and/or socially *relevant*, the topic should incorporate elements of discord, clashing attitudes or challenges to norms. In other words, the discourse needs to be 'alive'. Most discourse analyses therefore draw on topics relating to ontological spheres such as identity and subject (e.g. gender roles, sexuality, body, mind), systems of belief (politics, religion, ideology etc.) or cultural practices (e.g. family structures, traditions).

Although discourse can be approached inductively, i.e. by generating

specific problems and hypotheses from a corpus formed on the basis of more general criteria, research more often focuses on questions of actors, power relations, positions and ideologies formulated beforehand. Nevertheless, it is advisable to remain open to unexpected avenues of investigation. Discourse can be examined either diachronically, that is, along a timeline, or synchronically, focusing on a specific point in time (Martin, 2022: 78). The latter should not be interpreted too narrowly. For example, focusing on a month of a larger discourse that spans decades is synchronic in that it reflects only a slice of the whole, but still examines a corpus of data accumulated following a specified timeline. This is incidentally echoed in Jäger's characterisation of discourse as 'the flow of knowledge, or rather reservoirs of social knowledge, through time' (Jäger 2015: 26), building on Foucault's metaphor of archaeology, which implies the uncovering of layers produced over time.   According to Jäger (2015), a thorough critical discourse analysis requires the following criteria to be met:

- it should be based on a representative data corpus
- it must aim to provide a detailed picture by analysing the corpus at macro and micro levels
- it should strive for a holistic approach by situating findings in the appropriate sociocultural context, including history, institutions, and media

However, this leads to a fundamental problem of discourse analysis: If discourse is essentially a process and a social phenomenon, how can it be collected, condensed or reified into a corpus?

The answer is that we don't actually analyse discourse; rather, we look at how it manifests itself, at the picture of discourse we see in the mirror. As I have established in the first section of this paper, discourse needs a medium. For conversations, that medium is language; for broader, intersubjective discourse, the question of the medium is twofold. Meaning is still transferred in and through text (in the sense of semiotic systems, including, but not limited to, spoken and written language), but now these texts need a meta-medium to be shared with other participant sin the discourse. In modern societies, this function of mediating text is realized by mass media.

4.1. Media: Places of discourse

As 'a site of power, of struggle' (Wodak 2001:6), mass media are of particular interest to all kinds of discourse study that are concerned with social critique, since the process of negotiating meaning is not limited to any particular medium. In fact, all media ultimately serve as an expression of knowledge and opinion, and thus, the various discourses they mediate.

Since discourse is not usually limited to a particular type of media, there is a potentially large variety of sources that can be drawn upon for analysis. Media shape the discourse they facilitate, and the choice of media determines the 'slice' or dimension of discourse that is examined. For example, social media may carry and amplify fringe voices in political discourse, whereas novels and movies process societal knowledge and participate in discourse on a more abstract, symbolic, or metaphorical level.

In modern media, especially digital media, it has become a 'deliberate media strategy to develop and promote properties [...] across different media channels' (MacQuail and Deuze 2020:412). This can make the decision to limit data acquisition to one medium challenging. Therefore, it is all the more important to carefully select the 'discourse mirror(s)' based on the research question, the researcher's interests, methodological inclinations and proficiencies, and of course the availability of data.

Media theory has developed several approaches to categorising media and their output according to technology, modes of interaction, intended audience, genre or format. I have found it especially helpful to consider places of discourse in terms of reactivity and interactivity (cf. Marshall McLuhan's concept of 'hot' and 'cold' media [Marchessault, 2005: 176]), and to consider reach, accessibility, and the degree of abstraction.

Reactivity here means media with a high degree of information throughput that react quickly to new information and developments. Examples include social media, news portals, or traditional newspapers. High reactivity also makes it likely that there is a large amount of data that needs to be selectively sampled.

'**Interactive**' describes media of a conversational nature that offer a high degree of participation, as opposed to passive media consumption. Examples include video games, social media and websites that invite user participation, such as forums, comments sections and polls.

'**Reach**' indicates whether a medium is potentially or practically used by large social groups or is limited to specific groups, providing an indication of the extent to which a wider social perspective can be expected. Newspapers or national television are prime examples for media with a wide reach, as well as various social media, web sites, movies or advertisements. At the same time, group-specific, limited discourse may provide valuable opportunities for in-depth qualitative analysis.

Accessibility in this context refers to whether a medium offers easy access to discourse participation (again, social media comes to mind), or if for example access to specific technology or tech literacy is required (also true of social media). The latter may prevent certain demographic groups from participating in discourse. For example, if the intention is to achieve a broad

social perspective (i.e. wide reach and high reactivity) for a super-aged society like Japan, then traditional newspapers might be a better choice of media than app-based digital media.

The above criteria are focused on media that belong to the sphere of discourse studies with a leaning towards social studies. However, it is worth noting that critical discourse analysis be applied to primarily narrative media as well.

'**Abstract media**' is used here to describe media that deal with social reality through the lens of fiction, i.e. novels, movies, or video games. After all, discourses are stories we tell each other based on a particular view of the world (Machin and Van Leeuwen 2007:58).

4.2. Corpus and data acquisition

The decision of which discourse media to analyse also determines what data the corpus will contain.

Generally, the corpus will consist of discourse fragments, i.e. the smallest self-contained units of discourse that can be justifiably counted as one contribution to the discourse in the examined media. The nature and size of such units depends on the media; while for movies or books, the whole work may constitute one unit (in the case of an anthology, one publication might ostensibly include multiple discourse fragments), for newspapers or magazines one article corresponds to a unit; for social media, one posting will typically count as one unit, and so forth. However, research focusing on cultural artefacts as products of 'abstract' media typically addresses the question of how discursive practices relating to a given topic are reflected and negotiated in fiction through the vicarious voices of characters and institutions featured in such works, and in the case of game studies, also through game mechanics and the ways in which players interact with the game world. Therefore, such analysis often focuses on a small number of works, or even a single work, and explores them in depth. For such media, as well as long documents such as white papers, it may be useful to divide the text into self-contained sub-fragments according to its structure (e.g. sections, chapters, levels, etc.).

Thinking in discourse fragments and sub-fragments as units of analysis help to maintain a structured approach and makes analysis on the macro level easier. Depending on the examined media and the 'hotness' of the discourse, it will sometimes be impossible to collect all discourse fragments. Even with discourses that are rather limited in scope, it might be difficult to be completely sure one has collected 'all there is'. Achim Landwehr calls this putative entirety of all fragments 'imaginary corpus' from

which a 'virtual corpus' that can be analysed needs to be sampled (Landwehr 2001:107). Sampling is the process of defining criteria to justify the selection of data. While I will not discuss sampling procedures in detail in this paper, the social sciences offer many approaches to data sampling that can be used to produce a corpus arguably representative of the imaginary entirety of fragments. However, for discourse analysis, I would like to point out that a corpus can be built around discursive key events for a more synchronic approach (e.g. sampling from before and after the event). Examples include geopolitical events, the passing of a law, or any other event that can be expected to have had a significant effect on the discourse. Possible ways of determining the validity of such a key event include the results of a preliminary macro analysis of discourse fragments, drawing parallels to historical events of a similar nature, and assessments in expert literature. For an initial appraisal, the researcher's own social intuition as a subject of the discourse may also be useful, as they may have experienced public discourse on a matter surging because of a certain event. In any case, identifying key events and determining time frames of data sampling must be based on clear criteria.

Building a corpus can be very straightforward if the media, subtype, topic or time frame is limited, but it is often an iterative process. This is especially true with media such a magazines, newspapers, or social media: Fragments are gathered based on key words and time constraints, and working with these fragments often yield new key words in a process akin to snowball sampling. This leads to a repetition of the sampling process, ideally until no more fragments and no more keywords are found.

The ultimate size of a corpus will vary considerably depending on the choice of topic, media, and methodological approach, but regardless of the nature of collected fragments and the size of the corpus, all collected discourse fragments should be archived in a structured way that facilitates subsequent analysis. Relevant metadata (collected when, where, based on what keywords, date of fragment creation etc.) needs to be attributed and the data needs to be stored in a durable and retrievable way (i.e. not just links to web content that might go offline at any time). Finally, the format of the collected data needs to be considered with respect to the intended method(s) of analysis (e.g. analogue or digitalised, and if digitalised, what kind of digital format?).

4.3. Analysis

As noted above, Jäger (and others) recommend conducting analyses at varying levels of granularity, working from large-scale structures (macro)

to more detailed ones (meso and micro), while iterating between these levels as required. This usually involves combining quantitative and qualitative approaches; as Früh (2007: 67–69) points out, both approaches are best used together to achieve a comprehensive perspective. At the macro level, the focus lies on broader structures, such as identifying dominant themes, actors, and trends. The meso level shifts the focus to fragments, end examines the organisation of text in narrative structures in its institutional context. Finally, the micro level explores the semiotic features of fragments on a (more or less) granular scale. The following sections will outline the characteristics of working at the macro, meso, and micro levels, and suggest specific steps and tools.

4.3.1. Macro analysis

The goal of macro analysis is to identify the general patterns of the discourse reflected in the corpus. This involves identifying connections and links between discourse fragments and strands, recognising key themes, and analysing the frequency of keywords and how they evolve over time (e.g. when specific keywords first appeared and how frequently they were used). As the often quantitative part of a multi-layered analysis, macro analysis lends itself to visualising discourse through tables, diagrams, word clouds, or various means of visualising collocations. However, macro analysis does not necessarily imply a corpus consisting of many fragments. Especially with a corpus consisting of few but voluminous texts (e.g. novels, movies, games), macro analysis can be synonymous with the surface reading and wide reading steps of literature studies influenced by cultural studies (Greguš and Kamerer 2021: 217-221).

Macro analysis reveals patterns to be further investigated. Although it may be based on theoretical considerations (deductive approach), it often leads to the inductive building of working assumptions and hypothesis regarding rules and structures governing the examined facet of discourse. Such hypotheses can then be tested deductively on macro, meso and/or micro levels. Noah Bubendorfer argues that 'social action leads to statistically salient patterns of language use. It should therefore be possible, to a certain degree, to draw conclusions regarding the social organisation of the world examining typical patterns of language use' (Bubendorfer 2009:3). Examining macro- and micro perspectives can also reveal how individual language use reflects larger patterns, and how in turn impacts larger observed patterns (cf. Krendel 2024:164). For large corpora of digital text and especially if the corpus is sorted along a timeline, text mining software is an invaluable tool that allows insights into such patterns through the computa-

tion of term frequency and collocations, that is, determining which words tend to be used together to from syntagmas. Commercial software, such as *KhCoder* (recommended for working with Japanese text corpora) as well as free and/or open-source tools such as *Voyant Tools* can be used to explore keywords and key phrases, as well as their contexts and collocations, according to transparent mathematical models. Visualising the results of such analyses through keyword-in-context (KWIC), keyword clustering and co-occurrence networks often offer a valuable first insight into large text-based corpora. While some applications also offer large language model-based tools as one-click solutions, as of now, these models are essentially 'black boxes', making it hard or outright impossible to understand how input is interpreted and conclusions are reached. In the context of scientific accountability, it is crucial to be able to understand and explain how results are produced and conclusions are arrived at in published research. Therefore, LLM-based or aided analysis need to be employed with great care.

Viewing the results of macro level analysis often hints at sub-discourses, i.e. thematic formations that can be traced as separate 'strands' interwoven with other such strands along a timeline. Identifying such sub-discourses is helpful in determining changes of focus, energy and tone of the larger discourse, and often hints at discursive effects. For instance, in my study of the wider discourse on language change and language decline in Japan between 1945 and 2020, gendered language emerged as a distinct sub-discourse. Following this thread, I was able to show the centrality of this sub-discourse in the 1960s to 1980s, and how the adoption of new gender ideals and imagery from the late 1980s onwards was mirrored in the reframing, and subsequent decline of this discourse strand (Seidl 2016, Seidl 2020).

Ultimately, all discourse is a sub-discourse of some larger, more abstract and more general discursive process. This can be likened to nesting Russian dolls or single hairs forming strands that together form a rope, which, together with other ropes, forms a net. While this awareness that no discourse happens in a sociocultural vacuum is important for interpreting and contextualising findings, a research project will, for pragmatic reasons, typically need to focus on one specific, dominant discourse strand that may or may not have several sub-strands. It is therefore the researcher's decision whether to investigate such sub-strands by actively creating a dedicated corpus with new or additional key words, or to limit the examination to already assembled corpus.

4.3.2 Meso- and micro analysis

Analysis on the meso- and microlevel seeks to reveal the language use

of discourse actors; returning to macro level analysis allows to situate such findings in the larger context of the discourse. This process is iterative rather than linear, and requires frequent shifts between perspectives due to the layered nature of discourse analysis. The exact nature of meso- and microlevel analysis depends on the characteristics of the media being examined and the resulting corpus. As established, discourse fragments can take various forms, which means there is no one-size-fits-all approach to analysis; the format of the media (text, still images, moving images or other modalities) and the desired depth of analysis decides the analytical approach. For example, is the research interest limited to text, even though the text is accompanied by images (newspaper articles, social media, web sites)? If images are to be part of the analysis, what level of detail is desired or necessary? If film clips are alluded to in textual fragments (i..e. comments to clips posted on social media), do these need to be analysed in detail, using content analysis, sequence protocols etc., or will a broader perspective suffice?

Researchers will therefore often find themselves working multidisciplinary and multimodally. This may involve borrowing methodologies from film studies (e.g. sequence protocol-based multimodal approaches, cf. Mikos 2008), literature studies (such as close-, surface- and wide reading approaches [cf. Greguš and Kamerer 2020] or hermeneutic text analysis), game studies (cf. Gee 2014), sociology (e.g. code-based content analysis, cf. Ueno 2008, Früh 2007), digital media studies (for example, multimodal web analysis, cf. Pauwels 2012), and of course linguistics (including sociolinguistics and computer/ corpus linguistics, cf. Seidl 2020). In general however, qualitative content analysis provides a solid basis for smaller text corpora, as well as for corpora consisting of different media (e.g. text, images and video). Software such as the free and open source *QualCode* or *Taguette* (and various more prominent commercial alternatives) can be used for tasks such as managing code trees and multimodal coding/annotation, which can speed up the analysis considerably.

For a text-based corpus, the meso level typically corresponds to the scale of a single fragment (or a set of closely related fragments) and is examined to reveal the overall structure, tone and positions of such texts, while working on the micro level means working on the scale of paragraphs, sentences, and words. To this end, qualitative methodologies such as hermeneutic text analysis, structured reading and content analysis help identify powerful linguistic and rhetorical devices, such as collective symbolism (which I will discuss in the following section), logical fallacies, humour, satire, and irony. Furthermore, they can be used to uncover narrative structures, such as discourse schemata ('activity sequences' of discourse) that can represent

the flow of imagined, idealised or critiqued social action (Machin and Van Leeuwen 2007:62-63). Returning to the macro view, such findings may coalesce into a worldview representative of certain actors or groups.

Larger text-based corpora often require computer-aided corpus linguistics methodology. Specialised software such as KhCoder is helpful not only for macro-level analysis, but also for encapsulating observed collocations and hypotheses in codes. This allows various units of analysis to be used, such as fragments, paragraphs and sentences, as well as types of tokens (nouns, verbs, adjectives, proper nouns, etc.), and Boolean operators (cf. Seidl 2010, 2020, 2025). In this way, patterns can be found, formalised and tested quite easily and iteratively.

To make sense of the findings on the various levels of analysis, corpora, and sub-corpora, discourse fragments need to be situated within their 'institutional frame' (Jäger 2015:98,99). On a general level, this means considering the characteristics of the media the corpus is drawn from (such as intended audience, modes of participation, political leaning, ideological background), but it also extends to factors such as specific causes of fragment creation (e.g. in reaction to a specific social or political event) and the personal, professional or ideological background of its creator(s), if deemed relevant.

4.3.3. Discourse actors and strategies

Discourse actors are individuals and institutions whose voices form the discourse at large. Representative actors also form an important category as individuals purporting to speak for a group, and therefore carrying the discursive weight of many voices. As this constitutes a form of discoursive power (authority based on the claim to speak for many), asking to what degree such representation is actually sanctioned by that group (or whether it is, in fact, disputed) might be prudent.

For narrative media such as novels or movies, the concept of discourse actors may be less useful at a first glance, since 'actor' would correspond to the individual(s) or institution(s) responsible for the creation of the cultural artefact as their discourse contribution. However, the various voices often present in a work of fiction may be viewed as a virtualised version of societal discourse. Therefore, analysing positions, ideologies and power relationships of represented characters and institutions nevertheless represents an important point of the analysis.

In the context of power relations, Jäger's concept of 'authorised actors' (or speakers) provides a good framework for categorising actors. Authorised actors are those who commonly claim or are awarded discursive au-

thority (i.e. power) due to their association with certain qualifications. Such qualifications might include expert knowledge (e.g. scientists, scholars, physicians, first-hand witnesses, victims and perpetrators of crimes), their social or symbolic function (emperors, presidents, judges, politicians, etc.), or institutionalised power (e.g. teachers, politicians, nobles in feudal societies, or oligarchs in societies where wealth is considered a form of crystallised power). Similarly to Link's notion of collective symbolisms discussed below, one interesting factor of authorised actors is that their authority need not be explained, since it is a function of structure; the knowledge of their social status makes their role as 'experts' largely self-explanatory and commonly acceptable. Having said that, the question of whether such authority is challenged or outright denied in the discourse represents another layer of analysing power relations in the discourse.

Actors may be examined as virtual groups that share common attributes pertinent to the research interest, even though the individuals in that group can be heterogeneous and disparate. To give an example, in an analysis of newspaper articles it may be worthwhile to compare if the virtual group of 'readers', 'experts' and 'journalists' show specific modes of talking or framing, or a focus on specific issues (cf. Seidl 2020). Analysing actors means trying to explain their aims and motives for participating in the discourse, and how they realise them. Therefore, it is crucial to examine how language or other means of conveying meaning, such as images, colours and sound is used to convey information, realise ideologies and manipulate the discourse.

On the meso level, this means determining the dominant tone of the fragment or sub-fragment; e.g. is it descriptive, explicative, questioning, predicative, or a mixture? To this end, the 'institutional frame' (Jäger, 2015: 98–99) needs to be considered, i.e. the characteristics of the media from which the corpus is drawn, such as the intended audience, modes of participation, political leaning and ideological background, as well as those of individual discourse fragments and their creators.

On the micro level, things to look out for include communicative acts that convey meaning as well as performing a social function; 'utterances that create the very state of affairs they represent' (Searle 1997:34). Such acts may include for example declarations (or war, innocence etc.), promise, forbidding (by creating a social reality in which the forbidden thing may not be done, thereby influencing social action), or naming. Similarly, different types of modality (expressions of possibility or necessity) can be important aspects of micro analysis. For example, framing something through bouletic modality (necessary because of one's desires) is different from expressing it as deontic (necessary, permissible, or possible given a normative

principle, such as laws or ethics) or teleological (necessary or acceptable in order to achieve a goal). As the slightly clichéd saying goes, it's more about how you say it than what you say.

Another important framing strategy is the use of metaphors, a 'key site of ideology in texts' (Hart 2024: 116). Hart argues that linguistic symbolism has long been recognised as an important focus of critical discourse linguistics, providing insights into the templates for thinking (frames) that discourse actors argue from or aim to invoke (Hart 2024: 117,118). John Searle defines linguistic symbolisms as semantic devices that symbolise concepts beyond or different from their lexical denotation according to convention achieved through wide social consensus (Searle 1997:66). However, symbolism in discourse is often not limited to language, which is why discourse studies scholar Jürgen Link introduced the useful concept of 'collective symbolism'. Link defines collective symbolisms as '[...] the whole "imagery" of a culture, the whole of its widely used allegories and emblems, metaphors, examples, illustrative devices, guiding themes, comparisons, and analogies' (Link 1996: 25), that can be expressed through any kind of medium, be it language, image, or sound. The power of such collective symbolisms lies in the fact that they do not need to be explained as they draw on established cultural knowledge. For example, it need not be explained why a 'flooding of our language with loanwords' or a 'flood of migrants pouring into our country' is an inherently bad thing that requires countermeasures: Floods are dangerous and bring destruction; they threaten established (and therefore implicitly 'good'; an example of *argumentum ad antiquitatem*) structures. Similarly, the slogan '[let's make] Austria into a fortress', used by the Austrian nationalist right-wing party FPÖ in the context of immigration policy, implies external enemies that need to be stopped from entering and signals the willingness to fight them. Likewise, 'lethal autonomous weapon systems' is not the same as 'killer robots' or 'the Terminator' (cf. Seidl 2025), likewise, framing a social conflict as 'war' conveys a multitude of familiar and accessible associations encapsulated in a single word (Hart 2024:118).

4.3.4. Synthesis and interpretation of findings

While working with the corpus at various analytical levels, intermediate interpretations and working hypotheses typically emerge. To achieve a comprehensive picture, these need to be synthesised and contextualised. In order to achieve this, it is helpful to reflect once more on the overall objective of a critical discourse analysis. Peter Haslinger summarises this goal as follows:

'Determining the influence of a discourse contribution, its degree of creativity, and the amount of attention it generates within its linguistic scope; methods of discourse control and monopolisation, hierarchisation, and restriction of expression. Integrating intermediate results into the larger picture of the examined discourse in order to describe the relationship between discourse, subject and social order — i.e. what can we infer about the examined social group from it, and how can we use the results to explain proscriptions, hierarchies and social action?' (Haslinger 2006:47)

To put the findings in perspective, it may be helpful to interpret them through the lense of a theory. While discourse theory itself offers intriguing albeit diverse and at times rather abstract (see sections 1 and 2) ways of making sense of discourse, depending on the nature of the research interest, anthropology, sociolinguistics, pragmatics, political studies, media studies etc. all provide valuable epistemological frames

Before concluding, I would like to emphasise the importance of negative analysis particularly during the synthesis and interpretation of findings. Negative analysis means focusing on what is absent from the examined corpus, even though it could reasonably be expected to be present: Which actors are missing? What themes could, might or should be present, but are not? What is left unsaid, which words are not used? Thinking about a phenomenon in terms of what it the social context says it is *not* either directly or implicitly arguably echoes the poststructuralist notion of meaning arising only from contrast to, and demarcation and absence of, other meanings. While it first needs to be established whether such discursive ellipses are the result of the chosen media or the method of data sampling, negative analysis can provide valuable insights into power relations, social and cultural norms - in short, the rules of discourse. For example, who is not permitted or invited to participate in the discourse? Is the subject of a discourse also an active participant? In a discourse about trans people's rights, for instance, to what extent are trans people's voices present? In a discourse centred on immigration policy, do immigrants participate? If not, what might explain their absence, and what does that say about the social reality regarding this issue?

5. Closing remarks

Public discourse is not merely a collection of words or images; as I have tried to outline in this paper, the ways in which something or someone is spoken about, represented, or framed in public discourse provide the foundation for how individuals and groups act and interact within society. In

this sense, discourse essentially represents the framework that influences and structures the possibilities for social action and interaction. This implies that discourses possess a transformative power that extends far beyond 'text'. Discourses do not merely reflect social practices; they actively transform them. As Machin and Van Leeuwen argue, they represent, reshape, legitimise and delegitimise the social practices they recontextualise; therefore, discourses are deeply intertwined with the purposes, reasons and justifications of social practices and influence how these practices are understood, enacted, and evaluated within specific social and cultural contexts (Machin and Van Leeuwen 2007:60-61).

It follows that the energy and tension generated by discourse, its 'frictional heat', as it were, also does not remain confined to the realm of text. The reciprocal interaction between discourse and social reality manifests in tangible social action. These actions can range from the individual level (such as acts of speech, consumer choices, personal expressions through clothing or body modifications, and other behaviours in everyday social interactions) to the collective level, including voting patterns, participation in rallies, or engagement in demonstrations. Such actions are not only reflective of the discourses that shape them; they potentially also serve as catalysts for societal changes on the micro or macro level. Machin and Van Leeuwen further emphasise that since discourse constitutes socially constructed knowledge, there exists an interplay between knowing and doing. Just as actions are informed by knowledge, the act of doing also contributes to the production and reinforcement of knowledge (Machin and Van Leewen 2007:61). However, this needs to be tempered with a dose of pragmatism; it will be difficult, if not impossible, to prove a tangible causal relationship between, for example, a flame war on a social media platform and the way a government tackles a global pandemic. Furthermore, due to the reciprocal nature of discourse and social reality, the question of causality quickly becomes one of chicken or egg, where discursive effects can only be inferred from the research findings. For instance, my research (Seidl 2016) indicated that decades of public discourse on language deterioration in Japan had resulted in a substantial, multifaceted market comprising guidebooks, training courses, certifications and even video games. This finding had to be inferred from the intricate interplay between discourse actors, emerging topics and evolving cultural values. No single event, fragment, actor or institution could be identified as the sole cause. To give another example, in my study of public discourse on lethal autonomous weapons (LAWS) in Japan (Seidl 2025), I found that LAWS, which have long been perceived as abstract or fictional, are becoming increasingly accepted as a reality that needs to be addressed, thus setting the stage for political and social action.

At the same time against a background of NPO campaigning for increasing awareness and newspapers starting to actively pursue the topic, one of the two ruling parties decided to introduce a dedicating LAWS working group, and related experts were invited to explain the issue to lawmakers - all examples for tangible social action, but again impossible to ascribe to any single event or discourse contribution. Thus, the extent to which social action can be extrapolated from the examined discourse often depends on the scope of the 'holistic approach' described in section 4 and on factors such as the recency of the topic.

Returning to the argument I made in the introductory section of this paper, the process of making sense of discourses is, in essence, an attempt to understand the mechanisms of intersubjective social cognition and the ways in which the production and circulation of knowledge drive the continuous evolution of the social world. Given this intricate relationship between discourse, knowledge, and action, it is perhaps unsurprising that discourse studies have been likened to a form of psychotherapy for societies or social groups. As Krendel (2024: 159) notes, discourse analysis serves not only a 'socio-diagnostic' function by 'demystifying the underlying attitudes and ideologies conveyed in language', but also offers a potential element of prognosis through critical engagement, using '[...] findings in an applied way to make a material difference in wider society', and in this way inviting reflection, critique, and, potentially, transformation.

In closing, I would like to emphasise that critically examining discourse holds a significant, albeit sometimes underappreciated, value: It enhances our ability to discern how public opinion is shaped, influenced, and, at times, manipulated. In an era increasingly defined by the dynamics of an economy of attention (cf. Goldhaber 1997; Franck 1998), we find ourselves inundated with information from social media, countless news outlets, and the rise of mass-generated AI content. In this buzz of voices all vying to assert their version of public 'truth,' terms like 'fake news' and 'alternative facts' have become part of our shared lexicon for describing the complexities of contemporary social reality. In such a context, critical discourse analysis provides a means to untangle and interrogate the ways in which these factors converge to construct the overlapping and often conflicting social realities we inhabit.

Sources

Belsey, Catherine. 2002. *Poststructuralism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Bubendorfer, Noah. 2009. *Sprachgebrauchsmuster: Korpuslinguistik Als Methode der Diskurs- und Kulturanalyse*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Eder, Franz X. 2006. 'Historische Diskurse Und Ihre Analyse - Eine Einleitung'. In: *Historische Diskursanalysen. Genealogie, Theorie, Anwendungen*, edited by Franz X. Eder. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Fairclough, Norman. 1985. 'Critical and descriptive goals in discourse analysis'. *Journal of Pragmatics* 9, 739-763.

Foucault, Michel. 2004 [1989]. *The Archeology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge.

Franck, Georg. 1998. *Ökonomie der Aufmerksamkeit: Ein Entwurf*. München: Carl Hanser.

Früh, Werner. 2007. *Inhaltsanalyse*. Konstanz: UVK.

Gardt, Andreas. 2012. 'Diskursanalyse – Aktueller theoretischer Ort und methodische Möglichkeiten'. In *Diskurslinguistik nach Foucault, Theorie und Gegenstände*, edited by Ingo H. Warnke. Berlind and Boston: De Gruyter.

Gee, James Paul. 2014. *Unified Discourse Analysis*. London and New York: Routledge.

Goldhaber, Michael. 1997. 'The Attention Economy and the Net'. *First Monday* 2 (4).

Greguš, Adam and Tamara Kamerer. 2020. 'Japan wie es im Buche steht: Literaturwissenschaftliche Methoden in der Japanologie'. In *Wiener Selektion Japanologischer Methoden : Jahrgang 2020*, edited by Florian Purkarthofer, Christina Gmeinbauer, and Sebastian Polak-Rottmann. Beiträge Zur Japanologie 48. Vienna: Abteilung für Japanologie, Institut für Ostasienwissenschaften, Universität Wien, 217-221.

Hart, Christopher. 2024. *Ten Lectures in Cognitive Linguistics*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.

Haslinger, Peter. 2006. 'Diskurs, Sprache, Zeit, Identität: Plädoyer Für Eine Erweiterte Diskursgeschichte'. In *Historische Diskursanalysen. Genealogie, Theorie, Anwendungen*, edited by Franz X. Eder. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Jäger, Siegfried. 2015. *Kritische Diskursanalyse. Eine Einführung*. Duisburg: Unrast (Edition DISS).

Krendel, Alexandra. 2024. 'The Reddit Manosphere as a Text and Place: A Three-Part Analysis'. In *Discourse in the Digital Age*. New York: Routledge.

Kytzler, Bernhard, and Lutz Redemund. 2014. *Unser tägliches Latein. Lexikon des lateinischen Spracherebes*. Koblenz: Edition Kramer.

Landwehr, Achim. 2001. *Geschichte des Sagbaren. Einführung in die Historische Diskursanalyse*. Tübingen: Edition diskord.

Link, Jürgen. 2012. 'Kollektivsymbolik und die deutsche Krise seit dem Jahr 2000'. In *Erzählungen im Öffentlichen*, edited by Markus Arnold, Gert Dressel, and Willy Viehöver. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 135-146.

- 1996. *Versuch über den Normalismus. Wie Normalität produziert wird*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.

Machin, David, and Theo van Leeuwen. 2007. *Global Media Discourse: A Critical Introduction*. London and New York: Routledge.

Marchessault, Janine. 2005. *Marshall MacLuhan: Cosmic Media*. London: Sage.

Martin, Craig. 2022. *Discourse & Ideology: A Critique of the Study of Culture*. London: Bloomsbury.

McQuail, Denis, and Mark Deuze. 2020. *McQuail's Media & Mass Communication Theory*. London: Sage.

Mikos, Lothar. 2008. *Film- und Fernsehanalyse*. Konstanz: UVK.

Pauwels, Luc. 2012. 'A Multimodal Framework for Analyzing Websites as Cultural Expressions'. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 17: 247–65.

Seidl, Bernhard. 2025. 'Legitimizing and Contesting Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems in Japan: A Multi-Layered Analysis of Public Discourse'. In *The Realities of Autonomous Weapons*, edited by Thomas Christian Bächle and Jascha Bareis. Bristol: Bristol University Press.

- 2020. 'Corpus Linguistics as a Tool for Metapragmatics in Japan'. In *European Approaches to Japanese Language and Linguistics*, edited by Guiseppe Pappalardo and Patrick Heinrich. Venice: Ca' Foscari Japanese Studies.

- 2016. *Verfall oder Wandel? Sprachkritik Als Thema des öffentlichen Diskurses in Japan*. PhD Thesis, University of Vienna.

Stanlaw, James. 2020. 'Structuralism'. In *The International Encyclopedia of Linguistic Anthropology*. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. [digital edition from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/]

中西 満貴典. 2008. 'ディスコース概念の再考 —Van Dijk 及び Fairclough の言説概念

の検討―'. 岐阜市立女子短期大学研究紀要 57: 29–39.

上野 栄一. 2008. '内容分析とは何か ―内容分析の歴史と方法について―'. 福井大学医学部研究雑誌　9 (1): 1–18.