

## **What difference does Foucault's discourse analysis make? Why discourse analysis needs to be based on the concepts of historical epistemology**

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# Zeitschrift für Diskursforschung

## Journal for Discourse Studies

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Rainer Diaz-Bone

## What difference does Foucault's discourse analysis make? Why discourse analysis needs to be based on the concepts of historical epistemology

**Abstract:** Michel Foucault's neostructural discourse analysis was developed in the context of the so-called »historical epistemology« (or »French epistemology«). The argument of this contribution is that discourse analysis needs to be based on the core concepts of historical epistemology. These can be conceived of as methodological concepts for Foucault's discourse analysis. The main concepts as epistemological break, epistemological obstacle and phenomenotechnology are introduced and related to discourse analysis. One consequence is the need of a specific form of hermeneutics, which has to be different from subjectivist and phenomenological forms of interpretation is emphasized. Also, the critique against historical epistemology in France articulated by Bruno Latour as well as the defense of historical epistemology as formulated by Mary Tiles and Pierre Bourdieu is presented. The need for self-objectivation and self-reflection of discourse analysis as method and practice is introduced. The article concludes that, so far, outside of France the main methodological positions of Foucault's discourse analysis have not been successfully established.

**Keywords:** Bachelard, Foucault, Bourdieu, epistemological break, discourse analysis, phenomenotechnology

**Zusammenfassung:** Die neostrukturalistische Diskursanalyse von Michel Foucault wurde im Kontext der so genannten »historischen Epistemologie« (oder »französischen Epistemologie«) entwickelt. Der Beitrag argumentiert, dass die Diskursanalyse auf den Kernkonzepten der historischen Epistemologie basieren muss. Diese können als methodologische Konzepte für Foucaults Diskursanalyse aufgefasst werden. Die wichtigsten Konzepte wie epistemologischer Bruch, epistemologisches Hindernis und Phänomenotechnik werden vorgestellt und auf die Diskursanalyse bezogen. Eine Konsequenz ist das Erfordernis einer spezifischen Form der Hermeneutik, die sich von subjektivistischen und phänomenologischen Interpretationsformen unterscheiden muss. Außerdem wird die von Bruno Latour in Frankreich formulierte Kritik an der historischen Epistemologie sowie die Verteidigung der historischen Epistemologie diskutiert, wie sie von Mary Tiles und Pierre Bourdieu vertreten wird. Die Notwendigkeit der Selbstobjektivierung und Selbstreflexion der Diskursanalyse als Methode und Praxis wird vorgestellt. Der Artikel kommt zu dem Schluss, dass sich die wichtigsten methodologischen Positionen der Foucaultschen Diskursanalyse außerhalb Frankreichs bisher nicht durchsetzen konnten.

**Schlagwörter:** Bachelard, Foucault, Bourdieu, epistemologischer Bruch, Diskursanalyse, Phänomenotechnik

»[...] I did not cease to look to Bachelard and the French tradition of epistemology, in my effort to found an epistemology of the social sciences on a constructivist philosophy of science [...], as much as in my analysis of the scientific field. The break, which seemed to me a necessary one, with the ›native‹ view of science, more or less relayed by the scientific (Mertonian) vision, did not lead either to a questioning or to a legitimation of science (in particular social science) [...].« (Bourdieu 2004, p. 107)

## 1 Introduction

The theoretical, methodological and empirical studies of Michel Foucault have paved the way for a specific strand of discourse analysis, which is different to the mainstream of qualitative social research practices and traditions. Foucault's neostructural approach was developed in the context of the so-called »historical epistemology« (or »French epistemology«). Founded by Gaston Bachelard, this historical epistemology is at the same time an advanced philosophy of science which has contradicted neopositivism as well as phenomenology and which has become the methodological basis for structuralism and neostructuralism in France (Tiles 1984; Rheinberger 2010).<sup>1</sup> The works of Michel Foucault, but also of Pierre Bourdieu in sociology, Jacques Derrida in Philosophy share methodological core positions which were first introduced by Bachelard and continued by Georges Canguilhem (Bourdieu et al. 1991; Dosse 1997a, 1997b; Williams 1999; Bourdieu 2004; Elden 2019). Foucault's methodological position of discourse analysis emerged from the tradition which was founded by Bachelard and Canguilhem (Foucault 1989, p. 209). And it is mainly the applied transdisciplinary work of Foucault, which has become the main reference for different developments in the field of discourse analysis in the social sciences.<sup>2</sup>

In this contribution, it is argued that the epistemological and methodological positions are opposing the positions of the mainstream of qualitative social research, which rely on subjectivist and phenomenological assumptions about meaning and meaning structure. Foucault's discourse analysis is a methodological project, based on a neostructural theory of discourse, but not based on a theoretical position only. Unfortunately, many forms of discourse analysis which refer to Foucault's work do not apply Foucault's neostructural methodology but refer to theoretical concepts only or argue against (the possibility of) an explicit methodological foundation for their analysis. This way, outside of France the Bachelardian elements of discourse analysis have never fully arrived in the field of discourse analysis.<sup>3</sup>

- 1 Here the notion of neostructuralism is applied instead of the one of »post-structuralism«. This is in line with Manfred Frank's argument, that the (even later) work of Foucault and Derrida is a critical but fruitful extension of early structuralism and has contributed to its development and not to its overcoming.
- 2 See for the link of Foucault's biography and work the contributions of Eribon (1991) and Elden (2016, 2017, 2021, 2023). Foucault's theory of discourse is a point of reference for many publications in the field as Williams (1999), MacDonell (1986), Howarth (2000), Diaz-Bone (2010), Keller (2011), Jäger (2012).
- 3 There are important exceptions in France as the work of Michel Pêcheux (see the contributions in Hak and Helsloot eds. 1995 and Diaz-Bone 2010).

## 2 Historical epistemology

Gaston Bachelard has introduced a kind of prototype for Foucault's specific form of discourse analysis. Since the 1930ies, Bachelard discovered in his highly influential analyses of the dynamics of scientific theory »The new scientific spirit« (Bachelard 1984) and »The formation of the scientific mind« (Bachelard 2002) that scientific progress is characterized by breaks between different scientific discourses. Round about three decades before Thomas Kuhn (1962) presented his theory of scientific revolutions Bachelard recognized scientific dynamics as fundamental reorganization of deeper structures of discourses in emerging science fields as chemistry and physics (Tiles 1984; Rheinberger 2010).<sup>4</sup> Georges Canguilhem (1991) extended this perspective to medicine and Foucault to psychology, culture and society in general. Foucault can be regarded as a representative of the French tradition of historical epistemology and he became renown with his structural analysis of the shared deeper structures of linguistics, biology and economics, where scientific theories were regarded as research objects (Foucault 1970). Although Foucault developed his methodology of discourse analysis in the strand of French historical epistemology, he presented studies, which embedded scientific discourses in their institutional contexts. In difference to the internal analysis of science proceeded by Bachelard and Canguilhem, Foucault focused since the 1960ies in »The birth of the clinic« (Foucault 1973) and in »Madness and civilization« (Foucault 1965) on the link between discursive practices and their institutional settings.

## 3 Methodological positions

To recognize this methodological enlargement is important, because afterwards Foucault's discourse analysis cannot be restricted to any kind of linguistics. Also, the separation of his work into phases as an »archaeology« of knowledge and different from this a »genealogy« of power/knowledge relations loses its evidence.<sup>5</sup> Archaeology and genealogy are linked from the beginning in Foucault's historical studies since the early 1960ies. Although Foucault did not work out a discourse analytical method as a set of practical rules to apply in discourse analysis, he presented in »The archaeology of knowledge« (Foucault 1989) a theory of discourse, discourse structure and discursive practice. He continued to apply the specific methodological standpoint of Bachelard, which is to implement an (1) epistemological break (or »epistemological rupture«) with the object under study and to (2) bring in a scientific problematization. Science does not describe its object or mirror its substantial properties. Instead, it (3) employs theories, instruments and methods to empirically construct its object, which Bachelard has called »phenomenotechnique« (Tiles 1984; Rheinberger 2005).

4 In France, »The new scientific spirit« was first published in 1934 (Bachelard 1934), »Le nouvel esprit scientifique« was first published in 1938 (Bachelard 1938).

5 See for such an inappropriate interpretation Dreyfus and Rabinow (1983).

»The traditional division that separated a theory from its application was unaware of this need to incorporate the conditions of application into the very essence of the theory. [...] It is then that we understand that science realises its objects without ever just finding them ready-made. Phenomenotechnique extends phenomenology. A concept becomes scientific in so far as it becomes a technique, in so far as it is accompanied by a technique that realises.« (Bachelard 2002, p. 69 f.)

These methodological positions are the structuralist as well as neostructuralist strategies for a construction of a scientific object (Bourdieu et al. 1991). The consequences are important to grasp the character of structuralists' »hermeneutics«, which aims to identify the rules of discourse as residing in the discourse practice itself, not being the result of subjects' agency but imposing on actors in institutional settings. »Meaning« is not based in social worlds as Edmund Husserl's »life-world« or in subjects' minds or intentions as in Husserl's phenomenology (Husserl 1970) and Alfred Schütz' interpretative sociology (Schütz 1934).<sup>6</sup> Also, for Bachelard, the idea in science to rely on immediate experience (as everyday experience) – a shared basis of phenomenology as well as of positivism – is an »epistemological obstacle« and an »anti-concept« to the concept of epistemological break.<sup>7</sup>

»Primary experience or to be more precise, primary observation is always a first obstacle for scientific culture. Indeed, this primary observation brings with it a profusion of images: it is vivid, concrete, natural, and easy. You need only describe it and marvel. And then you think you understand it. We shall begin this study by describing this obstacle and by showing there to be not continuity but rather a break between observation and experimentation.« (Bachelard 2002, p. 29 f.)

Meaning is at once, first a super-individualist institutional reality, second a structural effect as a result out of discursive practices and in the realm of the collective unconsciousness – to engage a classical concept of Levi-Strauss (1969). It is not caused by intentions or determined by substantial references, but generated by relational effects, by differences and oppositions (Derrida 2001; Deleuze 2004). A discourse analysis is a methodological reconstruction, which is different from the content of actors' consciousnesses and it is not the summary or the description of subjective meaning. The epistemological break has to be implemented on the level of meaning, too.<sup>8</sup>

6 For an extended presentation of Bachelard's critique of Husserl's phenomenology see Diaz-Bone (2008).

7 Bachelard has characterized the notion of anti-concept with reference to the scientific concept of fermentation: »Every scientific concept must, in any case, have its anti-concept linked to it. If all things ferment, then fermentation is very close to being a phenomenon lacking in any interest.« (Bachelard 2002, p. 78)

8 For Bachelard, scientific communities (and scientific experience) have to split from life-world experience »The world in which we think is not the world in which we live.« (Bachelard 1968, p. 95)

»Is it not possible to make a structural analysis of discourses that would evade the fate of commentary by supposing no remainder, nothing in excess of what has been said, but only the fact of its historical appearance? The facts of discourse would then have to be treated not as autonomous nuclei of multiple significations, but as events and functional segments gradually coming together to form a system. The meaning of a statement would be defined not by the treasure of intentions that it might contain, revealing and concealing it at the same time, but by the difference that articulates it upon the other real or possible statements, which are contemporary to it or to which it is opposed in the linear series of time.« (Foucault 1973, p. xvii)

Structuralist hermeneutics, therefore, can be regarded as a second order-hermeneutics, a discourse about discourse(s), inferring not on subjective states of minds but identifying a set of discursive rules and its internal organization. Foucault has emphasized that discourses form the collective experience of reality and discourse analysis should be conceived of as a specific task.

»A task that consists of not – of no longer – treating discourses as groups of signs (signifying elements referring to contents or representations) 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. It is this more that renders them irreducible to the language (langue) and to speech. It is this ›more‹ that we must reveal and describe.« (Foucault 1989, p. 54)

This kind of a »methodological anti-humanism« is one of the differences, which makes Foucault's discourse analysis an outstanding methodology in the field of social research in general and in discourse analysis in particular. One can conclude that it is the three aspects of epistemological break, which is the important heritage of historical epistemology.

(1) One of Bachelard's ways to think in terms of ›break‹ is the view on dynamics of science as a disruptive reorganization of discourses and not as a continuous gathering of knowledge building upon scientific precursors.

(2) Immediate experience is an epistemological obstacle. Therefore, realizing an epistemological break is the need for another form of interpretation and for different »hermeneutics« which *breaks with subjective meaning* as starting point and does not aim for its reconstruction as outcome.

(3) The epistemological break is realized as the request to systematically construct discourses as scientific objects. This is what has been introduced as »*phenomenotechnique*«.

## 4 Defending historical epistemology

The importance of the seminal work of Bachelard (and Canguilhem) as the philosophy of science for structuralism and neostructuralism as well as the critical discussion of historical epistemology have been misrecognized outside of France. In France, the main

counter-position to historical epistemology is represented by the work of Bruno Latour. He regards historical epistemology as part of the »modernist settlement«. This settlement is characterized by two forms of practices: translation and purification – as Latour argues: interlinked but disconnected in the awareness of modern science.

»The hypothesis [...] is that the word ›modern‹ designates two sets of entirely different practices which must remain distinct if they are to remain effective, but have recently begun to be confused. The first set of practices, by ›translation‹, creates mixtures between entirely new types of beings, hybrids of nature and culture. The second, by ›purification‹, creates two entirely distinct ontological zones: that of human beings on the one hand; that of nonhumans on the other. Without the first set, the practices of purification would be fruitless or pointless. Without the second, the work of translation would be slowed down, limited, or even ruled out. The first set corresponds to what I have called networks; the second to what I shall call the modern critical stance. [...] What link is there between the work of translation [...] and that of purification? This is the question on which I should like to shed light. My hypothesis – which remains too crude – is that the second has made the first possible: the more we forbid ourselves to conceive of hybrids, the more possible their interbreeding becomes – such is the paradox of the moderns, which the exceptional situation in which we find ourselves today allows us finally to grasp.« (Latour 1993, p. 10 ff.)

For Latour, modern science has to recognize these activities as being separate, where »purification« (for Latour) is made possible by bringing in a distinguished position for science, which is conceived to be distant from its object and from its societal embeddedness. And Latour's argument is that this scientific self-concept resides on masking the practices of translation, by »forbidding« to recognize the resulting hybrids. Finally, it is the notion of epistemological break, which represents for Latour this modernist stance of purification and it is therefore refused (Latour 1993, p. 58 f.).

Interestingly, Latour does not refer to Bachelard's concept of phenomenotechnique, which interlinks science and its ›object‹ in a reflexive way and therefore could be regarded as a »modernist« alternative to Latour's notion of hybrids. The epistemological break is the precondition for this, but Bachelard does not implement the epistemological break to withdraw from the interlinkages between theory and its objects. It is the opposite: phenomenotechnical practices can open the way to detect epistemological obstacles and can result in correcting and rejecting theoretical positions and also in adjusting the link between theory and its object. Bachelard's philosophy of science rejects the idea of a given ›pure‹ scientific mind and its separation from its objects. Therefore, empirical research has consequences for scientific thinking itself.

»Empirical thought is clear in retrospect, when the apparatus of reason has been developed. Whenever we look back and see the errors of our past, we discover truth through a real intellectual repentance. Indeed, we know against previous knowledge,

when we destroy knowledge that was badly made and surmount all those obstacles to spiritualisation that lie in the mind itself.« (Bachelard 2002, p. 24)

All in all, historical epistemology demonstrates to be fallibilistic, reflexive and an active reconciliation of realism and rationalism (Tiles 1984).

But what about Latour's own epistemological position? Here, the shortcomings of his position become visible.

Mary Tiles (2011) has presented a helpful argument on positioning Bachelard's epistemology vis-à-vis Latour's critique. With reference to Bourdieu, she argues that Latour's position, which does not regard a separation of nature and society as acceptable, has the problem of not being able to bring in one's own scientific position as a reflexive realization of a scientific practice.<sup>9</sup> And therefore, Latour's scientific practice is not able to reflect and thus justify its construction of a scientific object. Bourdieu, on the other hand, in the tradition of Bachelard, employs the realization of the object as the central scientific act to be realized by two steps (Bourdieu 1992).

(1) The concept of the break with everyday knowledge (epistemological break) is of central importance. This has to be done intentionally and reflexively, by bringing in scientific instruments that ›mirror‹ the (ontological) assumptions of theory in itself and thus contribute to the reflexive scientific construction of the object.<sup>10</sup> And – as Bourdieu has argued – the epistemological break is not implemented by replacing common sense with a »political standpoint« or another kind of social engagement.

»Social scientists tend too easily to assume that the socio-political importance of an object is in itself sufficient warrant for the importance of the discourse that addresses it. This is perhaps what explains why those sociologists who are most prone to equate their standing with that of their object (as do some of those who, today, concern themselves with the state or with power) often pay the least attention to method. What counts, in reality, is the rigor of the construction of the object.« (Bourdieu 1992, p. 220 f.)

And Bourdieu has made aware that sociology has to reconstruct the genealogy of social problems, evidences and instruments of thought to become self-reflexive.

»For a sociologist more than any other thinker, to leave one's thought in a state of unthought (impensé) is to condemn oneself to be nothing more than the instrument of that which one claims to think. How are we to effect this rupture? How can the

9 And Tiles refers to Bourdieu, who criticized Latour for committing the fallacy of the scholastic illusion. »Some of the separations Latour counts as part of the Modernist Settlement, Bourdieu locates in what he calls the scholastic illusion – the intellectual's vision of scientific knowledge, a vision that is unaware of the conditions of its own production. Latour's unwillingness to recognize the epistemological break required to enter the world of science, and to insist on continuity between science and common sense is a product of this illusion [...].« (Tiles 2011, p. 536)

10 More recently, in neopragmatism, Clarke, Friese and Washburn (2018) have argued for a similar position, which the authors named »theory/methods packages«.

sociologist escape the underhanded persuasion which is exercised on her every time she reads the newspapers or watches television or even when she reads the work of her colleagues? The mere fact of being on the alert is important but hardly suffices. One of the most powerful instruments of rupture lies in the social history of problems, objects, and instruments of thought, that is, with the history of the work of social construction of reality [...].« (ibid., p. 238)

(2) This is accompanied by the self-positioning and self-reflection of one's own scientific position and one's own scientific unconscious. Already Bachelard has emphasized the need to make the metaphors and the collective unconsciousness in scientific theories to an object of study itself (Bachelard 2002). Also, the work of Bourdieu on scientists' strategies not only for objectivation of social structures but also for the self-objectivation of scientists' own position in society are of relevance (Bourdieu 2004, 2008, 2013).

Only these two steps enable science to relate reflexively to its (self-constructed) object. In this way, it also escapes Latour's accusation that modernity and its science emerge through unconscious acts of purification, that is, the separation of scientific objects (things and nature) from human practices (along with their normative politics) that refashion the latter. In fact, this purification must occur, and Tiles (2011) argues that the purification and the institutional as well as infrastructural conditions for it must then become the object of a discipline's historical knowledge, rather than entering its unconscious. What is at stake for Tiles is not a location of scientific knowledge that is distinguished as superior or (epistemologically) privileged, but rather the possibility of reflexive control of the self-induced relationship between scientific object and scientific subject. Here the link between the two steps comes to the fore.

»The question of the privileged viewpoint needs to be replaced by the question of scientific control of the relation to the object of science, which in my view is one of the fundamental conditions in the construction of a genuine object of science. [...] one needs to be able to objectify one's relation to the object so that discourse on the object is not a simple projection of an unconscious relation to the object.« (Bourdieu 1993, p. 53)

## 5 Conclusion

The argument of this contribution is that discourse analysis needs to be based on the core concepts of historical epistemology. These can be conceived of as methodological concepts for Foucault's discourse analysis. It has been a main obstacle for discourse analysis, to disregard this need outside of France. Another main obstacle has been the misleading critique of Latour against Bachelard's epistemology. The consequence is that an establishment of methodological core positions of discourse analysis in the tradition of Foucault's works has almost failed – so far.

Foucault extended the range of application of French historical epistemology by analyzing discourses in their institutional settings and he applied epistemological ways of

thinking without strongly theorizing their concepts. Discourse analysis has to focus on these concepts as epistemological break, epistemological obstacle or phenomenotechnol-ogy to fully unfold its proper methodological position and to develop its specific form of interpretation (or »hermeneutics«), its own practices of problematization and construc-tion of its scientific object as well as its specific explanatory power and – last but not least – to develop its capacity for self-objectivation and self-reflexivity.

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