

# Discourse analysis and Foucault's “Archaeology of knowledge”

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**ABSTRACT:** Discourse analysis is a method with up to now was less recognized in nursing science, although more recently nursing scientists are discovering it for their purposes. However, several authors have criticized that discourse analysis is often misinterpreted because of a lack of understanding of its theoretical backgrounds. In this article, I reconstruct Foucault's writings in his “Archaeology of Knowledge” to provide a theoretical base for future archaeological discourse analysis, which can be categorized as a socio-linguistic discourse analysis.

**KEY WORDS:** Discourse analysis, Foucault, critical research, philosophy of science, multidisciplinary research, nursing

## DISCOURSE ANALYSIS IN NURSING SCIENCE

Only recently have authors increasingly begun to emphasize the possible meaning of discourse analysis for nursing (Yuginovich 2000, Allen & Hardin 2001, Stevenson 2004, Campbell & Arnold 2004, Crowe 2005). Especially Crowe (2005) refers to some nursing literature that “suggests that discourse analysis is gaining a place as a relevant method in nursing research” (Crowe 2005:56).

Stevenson (2004) sees a possible reason for the low level of concern with discourse analysis in that nursing is much concerned with the physical body and, therefore, under-utilises discourse analytical approaches in nursing research. Several authors emphasize the frequent misapplication of discourse analysis within nursing research because of a lack of understanding of theoretical approaches within discourse analysis among some nursing scientists (Traynor 2006, Buus 2005, Campbell & Arnold 2004). This might be caused by the description of discourse analysis as “an orientation towards research rather than a recipe for doing it” (Campbell & Arnold

2004:31) or as “a process rather than a step-by-step research method” (Crowe 2005:57).

Discourse in the nursing literature is described as the “use of language as a form of social practice” (Crowe 2005), or “a way of mapping a set of signifying practices” (Allen & Hardin 2001), and “discourses assist in the creation of various practices and yet simultaneously are essential to the continuation and reinforcement of patterns and practices” (Yuginovich 2000).

There exists a general agreement that nurses need different kinds of knowledge for the provision of high quality nursing care and that we have to look beyond our own discipline for a better understanding of health and health-related issues. Even nursing itself needs to be understood as a “political, cultural and social practice ... to improve the quality of care provided ... (and the) critical skills needed for discourse analysis require a commitment to reading a wide variety of texts to develop an understanding of the context within which health care and nursing practice occur” (Crowe 2005:62).

## DIFFERENT KINDS OF DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

There is a shared view that the current use of the term “discourse” can be attributed to Foucault, however this is not the case (Sawyer 2002). The term is very widespread. Discourse is defined in different ways depending on the subject area or the theoretical orientation of the



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researcher (Sawyer 2002, Phillips & Hardy 2002, Keller 2005).

“Post-colonial theory: discourse is a system of domination (...) Anthropology: discourse is a culture or ideology (...) Sociolinguistics: discourse is a speech style or register (...) Psychology: discourse is a physical or bodily practice (...) Feminist theory: discourse is a type of subject” (Sawyer 2002:434).

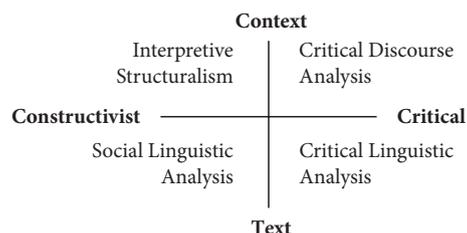
It is used in different disciplines, in different ways, with different contents or meanings of the concept and correspondingly with different forms of analysis (Phillips & Hardy 2002, Sawyer 2002, Wetherell, Taylor & Yates 2001).

Discourse analyses are always concerned with the interplay of text, context, and the practices of talking and writing, but they vary in the degree in which they combine text and context. Another distinction is to be made between discourse analytical research and qualitative approaches, although discourse analysis is often attributed to qualitative research. Both share the concern in the meaningfulness of social life but, while traditional qualitative approaches “work to understand or interpret social reality as it exists, discourse analysis endeavours to uncover the way in which it is produced” (Phillips & Hardy 2002:6).

While discourse analytical research is always three-dimensional, thus text and context should be included, it is also emphasized that researchers have to make choices about the data they select, because “no researcher can study everything” (Phillips & Hardy 2002:19). This is caused by the fact that empirical research is restricted to manpower, time, and money, which makes dealing with all aspects of discourse theory in the same depth impossible. Another important issue is that, even if there were enough resources, discourses are very complex and all their aspects can never be studied. Subsets of texts have to be selected simply for the purpose of manageability of the data. Nonetheless, these individual texts have to be seen within a larger body of texts.

There are various categorizations of discourse analytical research. Phillips and Hardy (2002) describe four main styles of discourse analytical research (Figure 1). The styles are categorized along two axes: (1) between text and context, and (2) between constructivist and critical approaches. The first axis is about the degree to which research focuses on individual texts or on the surrounding texts. Phillips and Hardy distinguish between a proximal and a distal context. The proximal context is the local context, e.g. a discipline or science. The distal context is a broader social context, e.g. ecological, regional, or cultural settings.

The second axis describes the degree to which the research focuses on ideology and power, as opposed to



**Figure 1.** Different approaches to discourse analysis, SOURCE: Phillips N, Hardy C (2002): *Discourse Analysis-Investigating Processes of Social Construction*, SAGE Publications, page 20

processes of social construction. The axes are seen as continua not as dichotomies, thus combinations of elements of both axes are possible and usual.

The four perspectives of discourse analysis are described as:

- *Social Linguistic Analysis.* A social linguistic analysis is constructivist and focuses on individual texts. It gives insight into the organization and construction of these texts and how they work to construct and organize other phenomena. Such studies examine specific examples of text or talk, which they usually only marginally relate to a broader or distal context. The focus is not on the exploration of the power dynamics in which the texts are implicated.
- *Interpretive Structuralism.* Similar to social linguistic analysis, these discourse analyses are interested in the way in which broader discursive contexts come into being. They are not directly concerned with power. Individual texts are more important as background material, as “insiders’ interpretations of the context” (Phillips & Hardy 2002:24).
- *Critical Linguistic Analysis.* Critical linguistic analysis shares with social linguistic analysis its focus on individual texts, but its main concern is with the dynamics of power that surround the text. The examination of individual texts is for understanding how the structures of domination of the proximal context are implicated in the text.
- *Critical Discourse Analysis.* The main interest of critical discourse analysis is in the discursive activity to construct and maintain unequal power relations. The distal context is of interest, that is, the ecological, cultural, or regional settings that surround the individual texts.

## FOUCAULT AND DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

In the following paragraphs I will focus on the early Foucault and his book “The Archaeology of Knowledge” to explain one possible theoretical background of dis-

course analysis. Archaeological discourse analysis following Foucault can be described as a social linguistic discourse analysis because it is based on a strong constructivist thinking, focuses more on proximal contexts, and is not so much interested in power relations.

Authors often refer to Foucault without reference to the work and pages consulted and sometimes even without any reference to a certain article or book (Sawyer 2002). Sawyer emphasizes that Foucault is often read in English speaking countries and is valued. He is cited because he is "in" and he stands for a certain intellectual attitude. Quoting Foucault is a way of saying "this is a stance that I am taking" – establishing a political ground by a shortcut, albeit superficial and misguided. Foucault is one of the most cited people related to discourse analysis, even where Foucault himself would not place himself (Sawyer 2002).

Foucault uses the term "discourse" according to the standard usage of the term in the 1930s in which "discourse refers to a unit of language larger than a sentence, and discourse analysis is the study of these sequences of sentences" (Sawyer 2002:434).

Foucault's definition of discourse is a technical one and therefore limits the meaning of the term. It is about text and the analysis of text. In his chapter about the statement (a central concept of his definition of discourse) he emphasizes his ambivalent usage of the term discourse in the first chapters of his book "The Archaeology of Knowledge" and defines the meaning of his usage of the term as follows: "discourse is constituted by a group of sequences of signs, in so far as they are statements, that is, in so far as they can be assigned particular modalities of existence" (Foucault 1972:107).

Hence, discourse is an activity, a practice that can be initiated by a single author or person. Foucault gives the following definition of discourse: "We shall call discourse a group of statements in so far as they belong to the same discursive formation" (Foucault 1972:117).

On discursive formation he writes that "Whenever one can describe, between a number of statements, such a system of dispersion, whenever, between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations), we will say, for the sake of convenience, that we are dealing with a discursive formation" (Foucault 1972:38).

Discursive formation, in the sense of Foucault, has four indispensable characteristics; these are that statements refer to the same object, are enunciated in the same way, share a common system of conceptualisations and have similar subjects or theories. A central concept in Foucault's outline is the statement which he defines as "an enunciative function that involved various units

(these may sometimes be sentences, sometimes propositions; but they are sometimes made up of fragments of sentences, series or tables of signs, a set of propositions or equivalent formulations); and, instead of giving a meaning to these units, this function relates them to a field of objects, instead of providing them with a subject, it opens up for them a number of possible subjective positions; instead of fixing their limits it places them in a domain of coordination and coexistence; instead of determining their identity, it places them in a space in which they are used and repeated" (Foucault 1072:106).

Thus, on the one hand, the illustration of the discursive formation demonstrates the specificity of a statement; on the other hand, the description of statements and organisation of their enunciation lead to the individualization of the discursive formation. To describe a statement means to define the conditions of its specific existence. It is the description of what is said, namely as it has been said "exactly". It is a precise description and therewith, in the view of Foucault, it is no interpretation or the search for what "really" has been said or what lies behind what was said. Rather it is the description of the meaning of the formation of the occurrence of statements in a particular time at a particular place (Foucault 1972). It is the description of how meaning is produced in texts. This study thus, is no interpretation of the philosophical discussion as it took place around 1930, but the reconstruction of this discussion and how meaning has been constructed through this discussion.

Statements are always in deficit, because they are always dependent on the vocabulary that is available at a particular time and place. In other words, an archaeological discourse analysis is a historical snapshot. For this reason, the description or study of statements is to define a limited system of the present and the discursive formation as a dissemination of gaps, voids, limitations, or disagreements.

Positivity plays a part in what Foucault calls the "historical a priori" (Foucault 1972). That is an a priori which, beside the fact that discourse has not only meaning and truth, also includes the history of the discourse that can be attributed to the rules of the discursive practice. Because these discursive practices can change, even this a priori of the positivity can change. Discursive practices include systems with which statements are reasoned as events or things. Foucault calls these systems "archives". Archives determine what can be said and how (Foucault 1972).

Archives cannot be described in their totality, their presence is unavoidable and they appear in fragments, different areas and levels. Their description makes difference visible and gives a reason for this difference. The discovering of the archive, the description of discursive formations, the analysis of positivities, the mapping of the enunciative field, Foucault calls "archaeology" (Foucault 1972).

### Archaeology or an analysis of discourses

Foucault (1972) distinguishes clearly between the history of knowledge, the history of ideas, and his archaeology, and describes four differences: the attribution of innovations, the analysis of contradictions, comparative descriptions, and the mapping of transformations.

“Archaeology tries to define not the thoughts, representations, images, themes, preoccupations that are concealed or revealed in discourse, but those discourses themselves, those discourses as practices obeying certain rules. It does not treat discourse as a document, as a sign of something else, (...) it is concerned with discourse in its own volume, as a monument. It is not an interpretative discipline: it does not seek another, better-hidden discourse. (...) it is not a “doxology”; but a differential analysis of the modalities of discourse. (...) It defines types of rules for discursive practices that run through individual oeuvres, sometimes govern them entirely, and dominates them to such an extent that nothing eludes them; (...) it does not try to repeat what has been said by reaching it in its very identity. (...) It is nothing more than a rewriting: that is, in the preserved form of exteriority, a regulated transformation of what has already been written. It is not a return to the innermost secret of the origin; it is the systematic description of a discourse-object” (Foucault 1972:140f).

Every group of statements or theory follows rules and laws that are not given in their formulation, rather they cross formulations and, therewith, open the space for co-existences. Groups of statements or theories and these rules operate on the most general form first; they are starting points from which other objects, other concepts, other enunciative modalities or other strategic decisions are formed that follow more specific rules and which have a more specific area of application. Contradictions and oppositions are neither appearances to overcome nor are they secret principles to reveal, rather they are objects that are described (Foucault 1972).

Foucault (1972) distinguishes between extrinsic and intrinsic contradictions. Extrinsic contradictions are those which reflect an opposition between different discursive formations or sciences, while intrinsic contradictions are those within a discursive formation or science itself and which reveal sub-systems. The oppositions of intrinsic contradictions are not final states rather are they different ways of forming statements. Relevant for archaeological analysis are these intrinsic oppositions (Foucault 1972).

Contradictions differ in their function: the function can be the additional development of the enunciative field (making possible the determination of new concepts etc.), reorganisation of the discursive field (ques-

tions about possible translations of theories or groups of statements into other theories), or critical reflection of the acceptability of discursive practices.

Archaeological analysis individualizes and describes discursive formations; therefore, these must be compared with each other. They are opposed in the simultaneity of their presence and are distinguished from those which do not belong to the same time-scale. They are related to the non-discursive practices in which they are embedded. The comparison is always limited and regional.

The horizon of archaeological description is not exhausted by one science, one mentality, one culture, etc.; archaeological description has a diversifying instead of a unifying effect. The aims of this kind of description are to uncover the interplay of analogies and differences as they appear on the level of the rules of formations, and to analyse the relations between the discursive formations and the non-discursive areas (for example, institutions, political events, economic practices and resources).

The archaeological description of discourses is “deployed in the dimension of a general history” (Foucault 1972:165). It describes change, transformation, and difference. Rules do not change at any moment or permanently, rather they have a certain “periodic” persistence which is the result of the analysis of particular discourses (Foucault 1972). The change or transformation of rules is not a homogeneous and chronologically ordered process which goes the same everywhere at the same time in the same way. Rather it is a back and forth, an interplay between different formative systems. The change from one positivity to the next is not an “event”, not a sudden occurrence of a single statement and then everything changes. It is a process that contains several types of transformations and transitions from one condition into another. The object of archaeological analysis is the way of the transformation of different elements of the formation-system, of characteristic relations of these systems, relations between different rules of formation, and of relations between the different positivities.

### CONCLUSION

Discourse analysis is not new –its origins are in the 1960s– but it is still “new” in nursing science. It is a method with less recognition in nursing science up to now, although more recently nursing scientists are discovering it for their purposes. However, it is criticized by several authors that discourse analysis is often misinterpreted because of a lack of understanding of its theoretical backgrounds. With this article I tried to give in depth information about archaeological discourse analysis based on the writings of Foucault.

Whether archaeological discourse analysis or another form of discourse analysis, it is always about how texts are made meaningful through the processes of their production and how they contribute to the constitution of social reality by making meaning (Phillips & Hardy 2002:4). Several forms of discourse analysis exist with different foci, scopes, and interests. Some focus more on single texts, others more on bodies of texts, on the context or even on the power relations. However, every discourse analysis includes parts of all of these aspects.

Thus, discourse analysis is a method with a high amount of flexibility. It is highly political by nature, because the analysis of texts always includes an analysis of their broader (societal) context and power relationships. It always goes beyond one's own disciplinary borders and shows the interconnectedness of different disciplines and fields and their (sometimes) differing interests. Hence, it has the potential to contribute to theoretical debates in other "streams of literature" (Phillips & Hardy 2002:55). Additionally, it has the potential to show how activities are influenced through the production of meaning in texts.

In a discourse analytical study, aspects are even included that are not specific for the discipline. This multi-disciplinary perspective of a discourse analysis requires getting used to, analysing, and understanding the different perspectives of the different disciplines. It opens up other possibilities of multi-disciplinary and multi-cultural research cooperation. It is a way out of the "tunnel vision" of the one's own discipline, without losing one's own unique perspective; on the contrary, other perspectives or knowledge can be integrated into one's own visions or perspectives. In addition, nursing or a nursing perspective will be and has to be included or taken into account in other disciplines. It can show nursing's understanding and perspective in direct comparison and relation to other disciplines' perspectives and understandings. And this will enrich all disciplines involved.

A positive contribution of discourse analysis to nursing is that it is a way to introduce a new culture of debate in nursing, as well as between nursing and other disciplines. It is a way to show and understand difference, particularly when it is combined with a critical background. Discourse analysis is a way to treat other beliefs with respect and take them seriously and to be able to prove and question one's own beliefs as well. It allows a synthesis of different things – it is an open dialogue on different beliefs and opinions.

In our era, we increasingly live in service and information societies in which language and texts are becoming increasingly influential. Texts are disseminated by varying media, such as the world wide web, radio, TV, DVDs, journals, books, policies or even advertisements which influence and produce social reality. There is also a grow-

ing body of texts related to health, health care and health care issues, which influence the production of the meaning of health and health care. Thus, discourse analytical research is an original venture for nursing to study how meaning related to health and health care is socially constructed; this can serve as a basis for a better understanding of health, health care and health behaviour.

With all the positive aspects mentioned, it should be noted that discourse analytical research is very challenging and demanding. A huge amount of data must be managed which definitely takes time, although the researcher focuses and makes choices – even to make a selection, the researcher has to read a lot of texts. Discourse analytical research also requires flexibility, self-reflection, self-discipline, and open-mindedness of the researcher. It is a multi-disciplinary approach and requires the researcher to leave his/her own field, at least for some time, in order to become familiarized with, analyse, and understand perspectives of different fields. Hence, it is hardly an approach for people who focus exclusively on nursing.

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