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## Discourse Analysis

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## DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

*Titus Hjelm*

### ABSTRACT

### KEYWORDS

### CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Discourse analysis is the study of how to do things with words.
- Discourse analysis examines how identities, relationships, beliefs and knowledge systems are constructed in language use.
- Discourse analysis combines textual interpretation informed by social theory with linguistic analysis.
- Critical discourse analysis focuses on ideology in discourse, i.e. the reproduction and transformation of relations of domination.
- Discourse analysis is suitable for both micro- and macro-level analysis.
- In addition to the study of texts, comprehensive discursive analysis can examine the production and reception of texts, e.g., by combining discourse analysis with ethnography.
- Every discourse analytical study needs to be designed individually; variation of emphasis and the choice of analytical 'tools' is almost unlimited.
- While discourse is gaining ground as an organizing concept in the study of religion, discourse analysis as an empirical method remain underutilized.

Discourse analysis is the study of how to do things with words (cf. Austin 1962). What consequences are there, for example, when a newspaper writes about ‘Muslim terrorists’? Why don’t we ever see ‘Christian terrorists’ in the news? Discourse analysis examines how actions are given meaning and how identities are produced in language use. Theoretically speaking, discourse analysts investigate processes of **social construction** (Phillips, Hardy 2002).

My aim in this chapter is to outline the basic premises and varieties of discourse analysis and to examine how these ideas can be put into practice in analyzing religion. Although a basic overview of theorizations of discourse is required, I am here mainly concerned with the application of discourse analysis as a practical method. Further, I am here interested particularly in what Fairclough refers to as ‘textually oriented discourse analysis’ against (although drawing in some aspects from) Michel Foucault’s more abstract and broadly historical approach (for a comprehensive discussion see Fairclough 1992: 37–61). In the next sections, I will explore the varieties of discourse analysis and discuss practical concerns for choosing a discourse analytical approach. At the end of the chapter, I will discuss the prospects and limitations of discourse analysis as a method in the study of religion.

### **What is Discourse?**

‘**Discourse**’ has been defined in various ways throughout its ‘career’ in the social sciences and humanities (see e.g. Mills 2004; Goddard and Carey 2017). For the purposes of this chapter, I will concentrate on the social scientific uses of the concept, which generally agree that discourse is a way of speaking that does not simply reflect or represent things ‘out there’, but ‘constructs’ or ‘constitutes’ them

(Fairclough 1992:3). Although discourse analysts talk about representation, they do so in a very specific sense. All descriptions of the world are by definition partial, and the variability of discourse itself is an indicator of the constructed nature of social life.

The ‘cult controversies’ are a good example of this: how can it be that the same religious beliefs and practices are to some the way to salvation and to others deviant, harmful, and evil? The answer is in the different discourses that the adherents, on the one hand, and the ‘anti-cult movement’, on the other, employ. It is not that either side is consciously telling lies (although sometimes that happens as well), but rather that ‘while people may tell the truth, and nothing but the truth, it is impossible for anyone to tell the *whole* truth. Everyone (more or less consciously) selects what is to be included or excluded from their picture of reality according to a number of criteria—one criterion being what is relevant to their interests’ (Barker 2011: 200, emphasis in original).

As the above example shows, discourse is *constitutive*—that is, it constructs social reality and relationships (see Box 1). However, discourse has a second characteristic closely connected to Barker’s observation about the interests of social actors. In addition to being constitutive, discourse also has a *function* (Hjelm 2014a: 5–6). Discourse itself is seen as a form of social *practice*, contributing both to the reproduction of society and to social change (Fairclough 1992; Potter 1996: 105). Edwards and Potter (1992) talk about the ‘action orientation’, and Butler (1990) of the ‘performativity’ of discourse, that is, how things are *done* with discourse. For example, the sentence ‘it is going to drive me mad doing all those statistics by hand tonight’ can be read as a simple announcement. However, if uttered in the presence of a friend in possession of a calculator, its potential meaning changes into a veiled question (Potter, Wetherell 1987: 33). The discourse of the anti-cult movement, for

example, is thick with not only constructions of cults, but also descriptions of the ways cult members can be ‘cured’ and how the influence of cults can be prevented. This ‘cult discourse’ both constructs cults as a social problem and offers solutions to dealing with the problem (see Hjelm 2011a).

#### BOX 1 BEGINS

Box 1. The Constructive Effects of Discourse (Fairclough 1992)

What is constructed in discourse?

1. Social identities or ‘subject positions’
2. Social relationships
3. Systems of knowledge and belief

#### BOX 1 ENDS

Although there are considerable regional, national, and disciplinary differences in how academia has responded to discourse theory, the story of discourse analysis is one of increasing impact. From the late 1960s onwards both linguists and social scientists started thinking about ways of putting insights from the philosophy of language—especially the later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein—into practice. Although used in widely different senses and drawing from varying disciplinary backgrounds (see below), discourse analysis emerged as a field of interdisciplinary research in the 1970s and, boosted by the emergence of postmodernist theory, gained prominence in the 1980s. Thus, we can speak of a ‘discursive turn.’ Crucial to this development was the work of Michel Foucault (especially 1978; 1995), who conceptualized discourse

as the defining aspect of social relations and who, consequently, saw the study of discourse as central to the study of how society is constituted. While Foucault's theory was influential, the development of detailed methods for analyzing discourse was left to others.

### **Discourse and Cognition**

Writing in the late 1980s, Teun van Dijk, one of the leading names in the development of the field, called discourse analysis a 'new, interdisciplinary field of study' (van Dijk 1988: 17). Since then discourse analysis has spread even further in academia—losing some of its initial attachment to linguistics on the way—and is now used across the social sciences and humanities. Thus the typology of three approaches (cognition, interaction, critical) that I use here is just one of many possibilities, although perhaps the most fundamental. In a way van Dijk's own work is an example of this diversification and of the fact that the different approaches overlap in many ways. The early cognitive model discussed here is less prominent in his later writings, but deserves mention here as a particular way of looking at discourse.

It should be made clear from the outset that van Dijk's model encompasses a huge variety of perspectives, from the analysis of syntax to the study of rhetoric and cognitive schemata, and a comprehensive treatment of it would require much more space than available here. Therefore, I am concentrating on the concept of *thematic macrostructures* and their application in practical analysis. This will be unavoidably a simplified account and those interested in the full scope of the theory and method should consult van Dijk's original work (e.g. 1980; 1988).

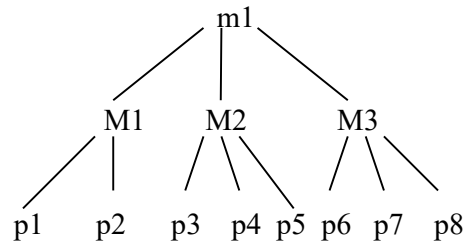
At the heart of van Dijk's model is the idea of social cognition: our knowledge of the world is organized into schematic structures and the aim of discourse analysis is to trace the cognitive processing of texts. Through *macroanalysis*, in van Dijk's terminology, the theme or topic of the discourse is processed and condensed from the words and sentences of the particular text. The resulting 'gist' is what van Dijk calls a *macrostructure*. Macrostructures are derived from *propositions* (p) that in the case of newspaper text, for example, are sentences or paragraphs. A single sentence can be considered a proposition, but complex sentences can include multiple propositions. *Macrorules* are tools of analysis that organize propositions into hierarchical macrostructures. Despite the formality of van Dijk's terminology, the process of analysis is fundamentally interpretive. Because macrorules operate with natural language, they are not grammatical rules, but interpretive tools that require contextual knowledge.

The three macrorules that van Dijk employs in his analysis of news discourse are *deletion*, *generalization*, and *construction* (1988: 32). The deletion rule 'deletes all those propositions of the text base which are not relevant for the interpretation of other propositions of the discourse' (van Dijk 1980: 46–7). The generalization rule abstracts more general propositions from sentences. It works similarly to the deletion rule, in that it leaves out information in the resulting macroproposition, but through abstraction and combination rather than complete deletion. Thus, Catholicism, Lutheranism, Methodism, Baptism, etc. could all be subsumed under 'Christianity'. Finally, in the construction rule, 'propositions are, so to speak, "taken together" by substituting them, as a joint sequence, by a proposition that denotes a global fact' (van Dijk 1980: 48). Prayer, liturgy, confession, Eucharist, etc., for example, constitute the

‘global fact’ of ‘ritual’. The difference between ‘generalization’ and ‘construction’ is a fine one, as can be seen from the above.

As a result of applying these macrorules we end up with a hierarchical macrostructure like the one in Figure 1. Propositions are denoted by *p*, while first level macropropositions are denoted by *M*, and second level macropropositions by *m*.

FIGURE 1: Macrostructure (see van Dijk 1988: 32–33).



Basically there is no limit to how many levels of macropropositions there can be, as long as the function of each level of analysis is to get further into the ‘heart’ of the topic.

As an example of the practical application of van Dijk’s model, I will use a translation<sup>1</sup> of a news story from a Finnish Christian weekly *Kotimaa*. It is an early example of the Finnish Satanism Scare discourse (see Hjelm 2002).

‘Satanists in Järvenpää’ (*Kotimaa* 29/03/1993)

<sup>1</sup> It has been acknowledged that writing discourse analysis in English—the *lingua franca* of academia—is problematic if the source text is in another language (Nikander 2008: 424). Fairclough (1995b: 190–191) goes so far as to suggest that the analysis should be done only in the original language. While I think this is ultimately dependent on the level of detail of the analysis, I agree that, minimally, the original version should be provided as an appendix or in footnotes. However, in the interests of space, I have not done that here.

1. A youth group worshipping Satan has been exposed in Järvenpää.
2. The group consists of young girls and it is lead by an older man.
3. The issue was uncovered when the girls' cutting of school classes was being investigated.
4. This is a case of a criminal drug gang, that was held in a tight leash by means of satanic rituals.
5. According to Harri Heino, the director of the Church Research Institute, groups like these have been uncovered in other parts of Southern Finland as well.
6. 'The pattern is quite similar to the Järvenpää case in these communities'.
7. 'The group is lead by one or two older men who have a criminal record and the rest of the group consists of young people', says Harri Heino.
8. The first church of Satan in the United States was established in 1966 by Anton LaVey.
9. The movement became famous when celebrities like Sammy Davis Jr. and Jayne Mansfield took part in its activities.

The process of analysis could then look like this, going through the text line by line:

1. M1 Construction
2. M1 Construction
3. Delete
4. M2 Construction
5. M1 Construction

6. M1 Construction
7. M2 Construction
8. Delete
9. Delete

The first level macropropositions of this short article would be:

M1 There are Satanist youth groups in Southern Finland

M2 These are criminal drug gangs

The issue of girls cutting classes is of course further evidence of the harmful nature of Satanism, but not central to the local context of 'discovery'. Further, while important in the broader Satanism discourse, the international nature of Satanism that the last two sentences imply is not central to this discourse.

By combining M1 and M2, we would end up with a discourse that could be named 'Satanism is criminal'. Whatever else it might be, this is the aspect that comes through most forcefully in an analysis of macrostructures. Obviously, the choice (whether conscious or unconscious) to present Satanism and the youth allegedly involved in it in this particular light has important consequences when cultural artifacts like symbols and music styles are associated with Satanism. As happened in the Finnish case, many youth wearing black and listening to Black Metal music were labeled as either potential victims or perpetrators of crime.

While in many ways impressive in its complexity, there are many reasons why van Dijk's model is problematic from a social scientific point of view. I will discuss these below. Neither has the cognitive model caught on as a popular way of utilizing

discourse analysis. I think, however, that a simplified excursus into the cognitive model of discourse analysis is important as an example of an approach that is potentially reconcilable with the cognitive paradigm in the study of religion—a perspective that is often pitted against discursive and ‘constructionist’ methodologies.

### **Discourse and Interaction**

Although van Dijk has been very influential in establishing discourse studies as a discipline, most other approaches to discourse analysis are in many ways antithetical to his cognitive model—my own take on discourse analysis included. Perhaps the most vocal critics of the kind of cognitivism that van Dijk’s model espouses have been scholars coming from a (social) psychology background. For them the concept of discourse and discourse analysis has been not just a methodological innovation, but a way to reconfigure the whole field of psychology. Hence, this approach is sometimes referred to a ‘discursive psychology’ (Edwards, Potter 1992; Wiggins 2017).

Van Dijk’s point is that we can analyse discourse by examining thematic macrostructures because texts are representations of cognitive processes. In contrast, discursive psychologists and other critics of cognitive psychology argue that there is no unproblematic path to cognition. Hence, discourse should not be seen as a representation of mental states, but rather as the object of analysis itself (Gergen 1994: 27; Edwards, Potter 1992: 15–16). Jonathan Potter, in a discussion on the discursive take on central psychological concepts such as ‘memory’ and ‘attitude’, puts it succinctly:

Discursive psychologists ask: What does a ‘memory’ *do* in some interaction? How is a version of the past constructed to sustain some *action*? Or: what is an ‘attitude’ used to *do*? How is an evaluation built to assign blame to a minority group, say, or how is an evaluation used to persuade a reluctant adolescent to eat tuna pasta? (Potter 2000: 35; emphasis in original)

One of the main points of this type of discourse analysis, which focuses on language use in interaction, is to look at *variability* in discourse. In traditional psychological attitude research, utterances are treated, according to Potter and Wetherell (1987), as indicators of underlying attitudes. Their research shows, however, that people are generally inconsistent, and their discourse varies dependent on what they are trying to achieve—that is, the action orientation of discourse. Their studies on the discourse of racism (Potter and Wetherell 1987; Wetherell and Potter 1992), although more than thirty years old, remain relevant for the study of religious diversification and its effects. For example, Potter and Wetherell analyse a short excerpt from a research interview:

I’m not anti them at all you know, I, if they’re willing to get on and be like us; but if they’re just going to come here, just to be able to use our social welfares and stuff like that, then why don’t they stay home? (Potter and Wetherell 1987: 47)

Methodologically speaking, the first statement ‘I’m not anti them at all you know’ could be read as a positive statement on ‘them’ (Polynesian immigrants in New Zealand) and on a questionnaire scale could be located at the ‘sympathetic’ end of the

scale. The following sequence, however, paints a much less sympathetic picture. First, Potter and Wetherell point out how the expressed sympathy of the opening is qualified by organising the discourse into ‘conditionals and contrasts’ (1987: 47): *If* (they’re willing to get on and be like us), *then* (I’m not anti them), but *if* (they’re just going... to use our social welfares), *then* (why don’t they stay home). Second, the criticism of immigration/immigrants is justified rhetorically by using what the authors call an *extreme case* formulation (1987: 47–48). Qualifying the initial non-anti statement, the speaker says: ‘if they’re *just* going to come here, *just* to be able to use our social welfares’. This ‘paints a picture of people whose sole purpose in coming to New Zealand is the collection of social security, a selfish motive’ (1987: 48). Finally, the initial non-anti statement does much more than tell us about the speaker’s attitude. In this case, it in fact functions as a disclaimer for warding off accusations of racism, which the later they should ‘stay home’ implication might engender. It is a very common discursive device used in many potentially controversial topics, such as sexism, and, in the case of religion, especially to avoid accusations of anti-Semitism or Islamophobia.

Analysing discourse from the above perspective becomes a study of how things are accomplished discursively, how identities and social reality are constructed in interaction. Some ‘interactionists’ go as far as to say that, in fact, interaction is the *only* thing that we can and should study (Shotter 1993; Gergen 1994). This radical epistemology dispenses with analyses of the context of language use and focuses solely on the interaction event. It is strictly the discourse, and discourse alone, which we can analyse and make conclusions about. The critical approaches outlined below have been most suspicious of this kind of approach and there are more moderate views among discursive psychologists as well.

Many studies in this vein analyse interaction also on the sequential level, that is for example, how dialogue or group discussion is organised around taking turns in speaking and how that creates identities. In this sense the interaction perspective often comes close to conversation analysis (see Lehtinen, 'Conversation analysis', this volume; Wooffitt 2005) in its focus on microlevel processes rather than broader social contextualization. Although discursive psychology remains marginal in the field of psychology, its applications have spread across disciplines and it has become a genuinely interdisciplinary field in the process.

### **Discourse and Power**

**Critical discourse analysis** (CDA) differs from the above approaches in the sense that it (a) focuses on power and ideology in discourse, and (b) insists that research needs to take the material and social reality *outside* of discourse into account in order to make meaningful claims about society and culture. I will discuss both of these aspects in turn.

In everyday talk '**ideology**' is often understood as something akin to a worldview and has sometimes been explicitly contrasted with religion (see Lease 2000). John B. Thompson neatly summarizes this view that he calls the 'grand narrative of cultural transformation' (starting with Marx and Weber): 'the decline of religion and magic prepared the ground for the emergence of secular belief systems or 'ideologies,' which serve to mobilize political action without reference to other-worldly values or beings' (Thompson 1990: 77).

While the above way of using 'ideology' is rooted in the history of the concept, Thompson—one of the foremost scholars of ideology—and critical discourse

analysts use it in a different sense. Therefore, for my purposes it is important to differentiate between the everyday use of the concept and the *critical conception of ideology*. For the critical tradition in social science, ideology is intimately tied with the question of power. Concisely defined, the critical tradition sees ideology as ‘meaning in the service of power’ (Thompson 1990: 8). Speaking in the plural, Fairclough defines ideologies as ‘constructions of reality (the physical world, social relations, social identities), which are built into various dimensions of the forms/meanings of discursive practices, and which contribute to the production, reproduction or transformation of relations of domination’ (Fairclough 1992: 87).

Following Foucault, the contemporary discursive conception of ideology sees power as increasingly exercised using persuasive language. When ‘proper’ ways of thinking about and doing things are constructed from a particular perspective—yielding a one-sided account that ignores the variety of practices—discourse is said to function *ideologically* (Chouliaraki, Fairclough 1999: 26). For example, when the characteristics of a group of people are represented as derivable from their ethnic or religious background (e.g. ‘Muslim terrorists’), the discourse ‘irons out’ the variety of beliefs, practices and ways of thinking in the group. **Hegemony** (‘hegemonic discourse’) is the peak of ideology, the point when all alternative constructions are suppressed in favor of one dominating view.

In addition to what is said in discourse, it is equally important for critical discourse analysis to study what is *not* said, that is, what we take for granted. According to Fairclough, any reference to ‘common sense’ is ‘substantially, though not entirely, *ideological*’ (Fairclough 1989: 84, emphasis in original). Because common sense naturalizes our conceptions of everyday life, it is the most effective way of sustaining hegemony, that is, an exclusive interpretation of reality. This means

that one of the tasks of the discursive critique of ideology is what could be called ‘unmasking.’ Unmasking focuses on how ‘the effect of ideologies in “ironing out” (i.e. suppressing) aspects of practices [...] links ideologies to “mystification” and “misrecognition”’ (Chouliaraki, Fairclough 1999: 26). Therefore, unmasking and ideological analysis always means studying not only what is said, but also what is not said. Silences in discourse are very effective in buffering ideology by simplifying representations of social reality.

Because CDA is more interested in the social and political context of interaction than are either of the above approaches, the sample analysis below will, in the interests of space, be limited in many ways. As an illustration of ideology and the construction of hegemonic discourse, I offer a snapshot of Mariya Omelicheva’s analysis of official discourses on Islam in Central Asian states. Omelicheva (2016: 146) focuses on what she calls the ‘instrumentalisation’ of religion:

The instrumentalisation of Islam is a deliberately discursive process of packaging the references to Islam with certain themes for varying its connotations and emotional appeals, and highlighting some selected aspects of religion while muting or disparaging others. It inevitably entails reducing the complexity and diversity within the faith to an allegedly authentic and universal, if simplified, account of religion.

Although Omelicheva does not use the term herself, this is exactly the kind of ideology critique that CDA advocates. In the official speeches of the Presidents of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Islam becomes two Islams: The homemade, ‘good’ Islam, and the ‘bad’ Islam of Islamists that threaten from the outside. Kazakhstan’s

President Nazarbayev emphasizes the secularity of the post-Soviet state yet assigns a role for Islam for its capacity to teach people ‘to help each other in difficult situations, *to unite around a state, to love one’s Motherland*’ (Omelicheva 2016: 150; emphasis in the original). Islam—the good kind—is a national, ‘cultural’ Islam that does not upset the status quo. In contrast, ‘foreign terrorist groups’ and ‘Wahhabis’ represent the other Islam, geographically and theologically cordoned off from Kazakh Islam. In Uzbekistan this differentiation has been even starker. The point is: Words associated with Islam matter (see Richardson 2007: 47). The good Islam of the Motherland is clearly different from the foreign Islam with its bad connotations. What the analysis shows is how power works here in two senses: (a) the discourse works ideologically by suppressing alternative visions of Islam (as the international *ummah*, for example) and (b) is intimately tied with extra-discursive power, that is, the context in which it is politically expedient to construct Islam in these particular ways. In the context of an international coalition against Isis, it is politically smart to claim that Isis is a “‘gang” with no relation to Islam’, as a representative of Kazakhstan’s Ministry of Culture reportedly said (Omelicheva 2016: 151)—especially if one wants to remain in good terms with key political players such as Russia, China and the United States.

Two points merit further comment on Omelicheva’s analysis as an example of CDA. First, it feels understandable that politicians would ‘instrumentalise’ religion and present it from a particular perspective. That is, after all, what they do with the economy, culture, and other spheres of society. It sounds like a reasonable suggestion to say that better religious literacy might prevent getting stuck in partisan positions about religion (Omelicheva 2016: 160). However, one could argue that no amount of economic literacy or statistics has increased rapprochement between free-market advocates and strong welfare state supporters. Politics is a field of struggle by

definition. Things get more interesting when one analyses supposedly objective or neutral fields, such as the media or education. They too, despite appearances, advance ideologically narrow perspectives, consciously and unconsciously.

Second, Omelicheva—and to be fair, most people using (critical) discourse analysis—focuses on the level of meaning of texts, whereas ideally this would be combined with attention on the linguistic aspects of texts as well. I have singled out the use of words as a way to contextualize Islam in the Central Asian case, but there are many other tools to examine how hegemonic discourse is produced with the aid of linguistic devices (Hjelm 2014b: 861–863). For example, looking at transitivity, or the ways in which agency is constructed in texts, enables the analysis of possible bias. Saying that ‘demonstrators were shot’ is very different from ‘police shot demonstrators’. In the former, the demonstrators are the active participants, implying that something they did led to the shooting, whereas in the latter the police are identified as actively engaging in the shooting. It is a small difference, but significant when a newspaper story, for example, creates the framework for interpreting an event. ‘Objective’ reporting rarely assigns blame directly, but who has agency—and especially, whose agency has been deleted from the picture—guides the audiences’ reception (Richardson 2007: 55–56).

Unlike discursive psychology’s focus on variability, critical discourse analysis is interested in how discourse produces hegemonic ‘truths’. Critical discourse analysis provides a powerful method for analyzing what is taken as ‘common knowledge’ or ‘appropriate’ in society and how these discursive constructions perpetuate particular ways of thinking and practice by suppressing alternative discourses. In the field of religion, anti-Semitic and Islamophobic discourse (e.g. Weaver 2013), the legitimization struggles of minority religions (e.g. Hjelm 2007) and religion and state

issues (e.g. Hjelm 2020a) are among some of the potentially fruitful objects of critical discourse analysis.

### **How to Choose a Discourse Analytical Approach**

It should be clear from the above that there are many approaches within the broad field of discourse analysis. Here I will ‘diversify’ the field even more. Although the three above varieties provide the most basic blueprint for navigating the field, *every discourse analytical study needs to be designed individually*. The research question/problem, data and method need to be aligned in a way that enables a rich, yet practically feasible analysis. Some scholars tend to think of discourse analysis as data-driven, but that is a simplification, because the particular constructionist framework of discourse analysis affects the formulation of research questions and so on. At the same time, methodological fetishism should be avoided. Discourse analytical techniques cannot make research interesting by themselves. Few discourse analysts concentrate on the same things in their research; rather they modify and change their analytical ‘toolkit’ to suit the requirements of different questions and data.

That said, the above examples are meant as very basic pointers in the right direction. Discourse analysts would typically work with much more substantial texts or collections of texts, and the analysis would be more detailed and robust. As a result, the examples differ from a typical case of discourse analysis in several ways. First, they all analyze an excerpt that is part of a longer discussion, where a proper discourse analysis would, of course, analyze the full text. As my interest here is mainly to demonstrate how discourse analysis works in practice, I have chosen excerpts that are useful in illuminating the analytical frameworks outlined above. In a

proper discourse analysis, all passages analyzed must be explicitly considered in their fullest practicable context, unless the focus is on turn-taking and speaker positions, as in conversation analysis. Second, discourse analysts would generally spend more time describing the turns of talk in their own words, in a form of narrative paraphrase, thus contextualizing the chosen text excerpts more fully.

These points highlight a fundamental difference from the ways in which scholars of religion often work with texts. The analysis is of full and complete texts or collections of texts (e.g., complete interview transcripts) and it proceeds with a closer relation between method and theory than is often the case. That is, a typology of features of discourse—e.g., those discussed in the previous sections—emerges from theoretical concerns and is used as a schema to analyze all portions of the chosen text(s). This differs from a less formal search for portions of text that illustrate predetermined themes. The previous examples are intended to illustrate the former, where the latter is characteristic of much scholarly work with texts in the study of religion.

In addition to the above, there are few hard rules about how to choose a particular approach. Needless to say, practical issues such as disciplinary background, departmental preferences and other factors not directly related to the method as such play a big part. One major issue is the difference between approaches that pay minute attention to linguistic form and those that focus on the level of meaning in text and talk. Not surprisingly, social scientists have usually been more interested in the level of meaning than in minute details of grammar, whereas a full linguistic discourse analysis can spend pages after pages discussing the nuances of a single sentence. However, as Fairclough (1992: 74) reminds us, the two approaches are interconnected: analysis on the level of meaning can gain powerful insights from

more formal analysis of language, and linguistic analysis that ignores the social level has little to contribute to social and cultural research. As I argued above, the final ‘research design,’ that is, which aspects of discourse the analyst will focus on, depends on the requirements and goals of each research project.

As Hardy and Phillips (2002: 20) suggest, another distinction could be made between approaches that focus on variation within and between discourses on the one hand and more critical approaches that focus on how some discourses become hegemonic on the other. As mentioned above, this distinction is often blurred in practice, because as Gee (2005: 1–2) reminds us, discourse (conceptualised as language-in-use) is always political in the sense that we always choose to describe reality in some terms but not others. That choice of perspective—even if not always conscious—is a political choice from a discourse-analytical point of view. Whether and how that is foregrounded in the analysis is a choice the analyst has to make in each study.

### **Challenges**

All methods pose challenges to the analyst. These range from the accuracy of measuring instruments in quantitative research to the validity of qualitative data. However, the constructionist approach (Hjelm 2014a: 107–109), that is the framework of discourse analysis, creates very particular problems that every analyst needs to consider. Below, I will discuss some of the main challenges, including the following: a) the suspension of ‘common sense’; b) the problem of causal explanation; c) relativization; and d) the time requirements of discourse analytical research.

Anyone—whether in the humanities or social sciences—familiar with the concept of *interpretation* is told that ‘the world’ is never ‘out there’ for the researcher to find, but is always interpreted, both by our interview respondents and through the (implicit and explicit) theoretical lenses we use in our research. Despite this, the suppression of ‘common sense’ that a constructionist and discourse analytical approach requires can be a challenge. What does it mean that I am discursively constructed as a man? I just *am* a man! The suppression of common sense is different from the challenge of relativization discussed below, because this is a personal, not a theoretical, challenge. I am guessing that this is especially relevant for students embarking on their first research project, but luckily they are not alone, as all academics that do broadly ‘interpretative’ research have had to face the same challenge. The ways in which we are treated as women and men, daughters and sons, young and old, students, scholars, religious and non-religious people are (to an extent) discursively constructed, and realizing this can also be an empowering experience.

Second, for many the main problem with a discourse analytical (and more broadly, constructionist) approach is the lack of strictly causal explanatory power (e.g. Sanderson 2001: 24–40; Little 1991: 34, 68–87; Edwards and Potter 1992: 100). Although quite a few textbooks fail to mention this, it is safe to argue that discourse analytical research is better equipped to answer *how* questions than *why* questions (Silverman and Gubrium 1994). To claim otherwise would be to succumb to the ‘fallacy of internalism’ (Thompson 1990: 24–25), that is, to claim that texts in themselves dictate the way they are interpreted. Even hegemonic discourse cannot tell us the practical consequences for action, because even when the variety of alternative interpretations is being suppressed within discourse, the discourse itself cannot fully tell us how it is discussed, reinterpreted and resisted in practice. Religious schism is

an example of a situation where a form of hegemonic discourse is resisted to the point that abandoning the original discourse and creating an alternative discourse becomes a desirable option.

However, because good discourse analysis always analyzes discourse with reference to its social context, we can look at the history and background of events and actors and argue about the potential ways in which discourse translates into action. Looking at discourse alone, we cannot conclusively say why someone did what they did, but at least we can say that the line of action was one among a choice of actions that the discursive framework enabled—or alternatively, how the choice of action was constrained by the social and cultural framework. In Max Weber's terms this would be something akin to a 'causally adequate' explanation (Buss 1999; Ringer 2002). However, to make more conclusive causal claims, other types of research, such as surveys or ethnography, would be needed. In other words, it is important to think of the study of text and the study of its reception as analytically distinct categories. The study of religion and media, for example, was for a long time interested solely in discourses on religion in the media, but recent developments in research have tipped the balance towards the study of how audiences not only receive explicitly religious discourse, but also how religious discourses and identities are constructed through the use of seemingly non-religious media products (e.g. Clark 2003).

Third, discourse analysis can be extremely relativizing. If *everything* is just discourse, how is the researcher's discourse any different; and how can we say anything about 'reality' in the first place if it is in constant flux? These are common criticisms of discourse analytical (and, again, more broadly constructionist) research that have been voiced by both 'outsiders' and discourse analysts themselves (see Parker 1998). Although there are solid arguments on both sides, I have here adopted a

‘weak constructionist’ approach, which emphasizes the importance of the social context in the analysis of discourse. Thus, as the above discussion on causality shows, analyzing discourse should involve examining the discourses in their social context and discussing the ways in which discourse and social action and structure are related. While this might make discourse analysis seem less all-powerful as a method (a healthy attitude towards *any* method!), it—along with the considerations of causality—helps narrow down the scope of research by focusing the formulation of research questions.

Finally, on a very practical level, discourse analysis is by definition time-consuming. The bulk of time in discourse analytical research is spent in the actual reading and analysis of texts. That is why some studies use a seemingly limited number of sources, preferring to analyze the texts in depth. Again, there is no hard-and-fast rule about this, because, as noted, a ‘lighter’ discourse analysis enables broader data use. Although in principle any type of data that ‘carries meaning’—regardless of medium—can be subjected to discourse analysis, most studies approach discourse as text and often convert recordings to transcripts. In terms of data types, there is a wealth of ‘naturally-occurring’ (Silverman 2007) texts around us that can be used. Religious books (including sacred texts), internet sites, radio and television speeches, recordings of sermons, etc., are all potential sources of discourse-analytical research (see also Davie and Wyatt, ‘Document analysis’, this volume). In addition, the researcher can analyze discourse that is ‘manufactured’ (Silverman 2007) in the research process, such as interviews or ethnographic field notes—all of the above within the framework of ethical research, of course (e.g. Silverman 2006: 315–335; Rapley 2007: 23–33).

Having collected the data, the discourse analyst's research process has really just begun. Unfortunately—in terms of saving time—developments in qualitative analysis software haven't made much difference for the discourse analyst. Although some of the programs (e.g. NVivo, ATLAS.ti; see Lewins and Silver 2007) can be helpful in organizing large amounts of data, the final analysis is very much hands-on work. This has two practical implications: a) the analyst either restricts the amount of data she analyzes, or b) she restricts the number of 'tools' she uses in the analysis. The choice of whether to do either or both depends on the research question and on the practical time limitations of research. An additional solution is to analyze the data with a colleague, but this is less a time-saving technique than a way of making the research more 'reliable'. Doing discourse analysis in pairs or groups is sometimes recommended for a more rounded analysis, but the process involves double (or triple, etc.) reading of the same material rather than dividing the data into smaller pieces. Thus, although struggling with time is most obviously relevant for students working on theses and dissertations, awareness of the 'bulkiness' of discourse analytical research can also save more mature scholars from sinking into a potential analytical mire.

### **Discourse Analysis in the Study of Religion**

Writing for the first edition of this handbook ten years ago, I noted that the study of religion 'has not adopted discourse analysis as a *method* in any systematic way' (Hjelm 2011b; emphasis in original). Things are looking better now, but for the most part, the statement still stands. Let me explain why.

I think it is important to differentiate between constructionism, discourse theory, and discourse analysis. The latter builds on both of the former two, but unlike them, explicitly and systematically operationalizes the epistemological and theoretical ideas into a method, as described above. Much of the discourse on discourse (!) in the study of religion, however, falls into the first two categories.

First, constructionism has become a staple concept in the human and social sciences ever since Berger and Luckmann's classic *The Social Construction of Reality* (Berger and Luckmann 1967). Both authors later applied the sociology of knowledge approach presented in the book to religion (Berger 1967; Luckmann 1967). However, the idea that religion is a phenomenon constructed in human interaction never quite caught on as an approach to research, partly because of the authors' (especially Berger's) own shortcomings in foregrounding the role of language in the construction process (Hjelm 2018). Luckmann later focused on the sociology of language and communication, even applying it to religion, but the impact of this approach has been limited largely to German-speaking Europe (see Tyrell, Krech and Knoblauch 1998). In the United States, the constructionist approach gained traction in the study of new religions movements (or 'cults') from the 1980s onwards (see above). This field, often examining how minority religions were labelled as 'bad' religion, was however inspired by American sociology of social problems rather than Berger and Luckmann (Hjelm 2011a). None of this research, with perhaps the exception of James Beckford's early analyses of the conversion accounts of Jehova's Witnesses (1978), properly operationalized the idea of social construction. Some studies used common-sense conceptualizations of rhetoric, perhaps, but nothing like a systematic tool-kit for the study of how exactly the process of construction happens and what is doing the constructing. 'Discourse' does not feature in this tradition of research.

Second, while I do not have systematic data to back up my claim (there is a research project here for someone!), my sense is that the use of ‘discourse’ has increased dramatically in the study of religion in the last twenty years (cf. Murphy 2000; Engler 2005). This is partly thanks to the emergence of a self-identifying discursive study of religion, best known in the English-language world through the work of Kocku von Stuckrad (2003; 2010; Stuckrad and Wijsen 2016; Taira 2013). Until recently, much of this research has been metatheoretical in nature. Inspired by the work of J.Z. Smith (1982), Bruce Lincoln (1989), and Talal Asad (1993), much ink has been spilled on ‘classification’ in the study of religion (e.g. McCutcheon 1997; Fitzgerald 2000). That is, the focus has been on the discipline of religious studies and its ways of classifying what passes for ‘religion’. Meanwhile, empirical research on what passes for religion in broader society has been lagging behind somewhat, but steadily emerging as a field in its own (Moberg 2013; Hjelm 2020b). The point here, though, is that while inspired by discourse theory—especially Michel Foucault and other poststructuralist thinkers—the operationalization of ‘discourse’ in the discursive study of religion has been underdeveloped. Foucault’s genealogical approach is often cited, but Foucault himself offers few blueprints towards a systematic method. Somewhat curiously, von Stuckrad (2014: 18) omits discourse analysis altogether in his discussion on methods in the discursive study of religion.

In Moberg’s (2013) useful typology of discursive approaches in the study of religion, ‘*actual* discourse analysis’ (emphasis mine) is a minority endeavor. As said above, it is a sentiment that I share. In this context, I take ‘actual’ to mean empirical (as opposed to metatheoretical) research, and research that systematically takes as its focus language use both on the level of meaning and form—that is, the kinds of approaches described above. Within this remit, there is practically no limit on

research topics. Adding to the few existing book-length studies (Heather 2000; Wooffitt 2006) employing discourse analysis in the study of religion, Moberg (2017) has analyzed the discursive strategies used to mark religious institutions, and Lehmann (2016) the construction of ‘the religious’ and ‘the secular’ within religious non-governmental organizations. ‘Naturally-occurring’ political discourse—parliamentary debates, political speeches, etc.—has offered interesting material for discourse analyses, especially of the critical kind (e.g. Hjelm 2014b; 2014c; Vellenga 2015; Bedford and Souleimanov 2016). Similarly, the analysis of mediated religion is increasingly embracing discursive approaches (e.g. Kolodziejska 2018). Analyses of spoken discourse have so far been fewer. Despite the title, Robert Wuthnow’s promising-sounding article (2011) does not engage with discourse analysis per se but with broader ethnomethodology-inspired qualitative methodology. Considering how central discourse analysis has been to the huge field of identity studies (e.g. De Fina et al. 2006), I expect religious identities to be increasingly considered from a discourse analytical perspective. Perhaps it is a sign of an approach in its infant stage that methodological manifestos seem to outnumber practical applications, but looking at recent dissertations and theses, this will soon change, should these young scholars continue their discourse analytical work.

### **Conclusion**

Discourse analysis offers a rich and easily adaptable method for the study of religion. As mentioned above, a substantive amount of research employing ‘discourse’ as an organizing concept already exists. Much of this, however, lacks the systematic analytical framework that discourse analysis provides. Elsewhere (Hjelm 2020b), I

have created a model, which enables the mapping of disparate discursive approaches to the study of religion on three axes: ontology (whether the world outside discourse is relevant to our analyses), abstraction (whether the focus of analysis is on religion as a social phenomenon or religion in scholarship), and power (whether the focus is on the variability of discourses on religion, or the hegemonic ways of talking about religion). Different approaches to the discursive study of religion (understood here more broadly than von Stuckrad's self-identified approach) can be mapped on to the three-dimensional model. Discourse analytical approaches, at least the way I see it, stand out on this map with their focus on empirical analysis (what passes for religion in society) and their systematic focus on language use. Wide availability of textbooks and 'how to' guides (see Further Reading below) make discourse analysis relatively easy to approach, but the actual application can only be learned through 'getting your hands dirty.' Fortunately, nowadays—unlike when I was writing the first edition of this chapter—it is possible to attend a conference session on the discursive study of religion in many religious studies and sociology of religion conferences. A global network of scholars applying discourse theory and discourse analysis to the study of religion is emerging. I welcome you to it.

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### **Further Reading**

Fairclough, N., 1992. *Discourse and Social Change*. Polity Press, Oxford.

*This is a classic text of critical discourse analysis (CDA). The focus is on the theoretical framework of CDA, rather than practical analysis, but as a source for discussions on ideology and hegemony in discursive research, the book is indispensable.*

Gee, J.P., Handford, M., 2011. *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis*.  
Routledge, London, New York.

*Although the emphasis is on the linguistic aspects of discourse analysis, this handbook includes comprehensive discussion on many of the issues raised in this chapter.*

Mills, S., 2004. *Discourse*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Routledge, London, New York.

*This is a useful, short introduction to the concept of discourse and its use in cultural studies.*

Phillips, N., Hardy, C., 2002. *Discourse Analysis: investigating processes of social construction*. SAGE. London, Thousand Oaks, CA.

*Although the empirical examples are mainly from organization studies, this is a nice concise introduction to the principles of discourse analysis.*

Richardson, J.E., 2007. *Analysing Newspapers: An Approach from Critical Discourse Analysis*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

*Although the focus in this book is newspapers, it is also the best introduction to Fairclough's ideas, much more accessible than most other guides to critical discourse analysis.*

Potter, J., 1996. *Representing Reality: discourse, rhetoric, and social construction*. SAGE, London.

*This book is written from a social psychology perspective, but it has a useful interdisciplinary 'history' of discursive approaches to social analysis. There is also a substantive section on rhetorical analysis.*

Wiggins, S. 2017. *Discursive Psychology: theory, method and applications*. London: Sage.

*A useful introduction with an emphasis on how to turn the theoretical principles of discursive psychology into practical research.*

### **Key concepts**

**Critical Discourse Analysis:** Critical discourse analysis (or CDA) is a form of discourse analysis that focuses on the use of power in discourse. From a discursive perspective, power is not only an attribute of organizations and institutions that explicitly exercise it, but permeates all social relationships. It is also not primarily coercive, but rather persuasive, in nature. Thus, the most important 'vehicle' for power is discourse, that is, the way we speak and *do not* speak about things. See *Ideology and Hegemony*.

**Discourse:** Discourse is a way of speech (or an image) that does not simply reflect or represent social entities and relations, but constructs or 'constitutes' them. When language is conceived in terms of discourse it is seen as having a function, that is, 'things are done with words'.

**Hegemony:** When a single practice or a way of thinking becomes the *only* legitimate one, supplanting other interpretations, it has become hegemonic. Hegemony is a term

coined by the influential Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci. In opposition to coercive power, hegemonic consensus is achieved by persuasion. As Fairclough (1992: 92) puts it: ‘Hegemony is about constructing alliances, and integrating rather than simply dominating subordinate classes, through concessions [...] to win their consent.’

**Ideology:** The critical tradition in the social sciences sees ideology as ‘meaning in the service of power’ (Thompson 1990: 8). The discourse we use in interaction reproduces or transforms relations of power in society. When ‘proper’ ways of thinking about and doing things are constructed from a particular perspective, giving a one-sided account that ignores a variety of practices, discourse is said to function ideologically. When ideological discourse supplants (or attempts to supplant) *all* other versions of reality, it becomes hegemonic. See *hegemony*.

**Social Construction (Constructionism):** Constructionism is an epistemological and theoretical perspective that sees reality as a product of human interaction. This production process is dialectical, that is, in their discourse people draw from the world, but also contribute to the reproduction and transformation of that world through discourse (Hjelm 2014a).