

# The Discourse Studies Reader

Main currents in theory and analysis

EDITED BY

Johannes Angermüller,  
Dominique Maingueneau  
and Ruth Wodak

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# **The Discourse Studies Reader**

Main currents in theory and analysis

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# The Discourse Studies Reader

## An introduction

Johannes Angermuller, Dominique Maingueneau, Ruth Wodak

Since the 1960s a new field of research has emerged around the concept of *discourse*, known as Discourse Analysis or – more recently – Discourse Studies. It is not possible to trace the field of Discourse Studies back to one founder, school or field. Discourse studies (abbreviated as DS) is, we believe, the result of the convergence of a number of theoretical and methodological currents originating in various countries (above all in Europe and North America) and in different disciplines of the social sciences and the humanities (linguistics, sociology, philosophy, literary criticism, anthropology, history...). Philosophy, history and the social sciences is said to have seen a ‘linguistic turn’ since the second half of the 20th century. Likewise, one could speak of a ‘discursive turn’ which goes hand in hand with cultural, visual and argumentative turns in the social sciences and humanities.

Discourse Studies is an extremely heterogeneous field involving scholars from a range of disciplines. Many contest the idea that it derives from linguistics, even in the larger sense of the term. To this extent, Discourse Studies could be considered as not only a trans-disciplinary or even post-disciplinary project but rather one which runs counter to the division of knowledge into specialized disciplines and sub-disciplines.

In spite of recent developments in electronic modes of communication and the mobility of researchers in our globalized world, the field remains quite heterogeneous for several reasons:

- *The variety of scientific and intellectual traditions*, which are less and less linked to strictly geographical divisions. In the same country, if not in the same university, one can find researchers working with theoretical and methodological approaches originating from quite different traditions, such as poststructuralist, praxeological, hermeneutic, semiotic approaches and many more.

- *The diversity of disciplinary fields:* Discourse Studies has assumed different forms depending on the field(s) of research to which it pays attention. In the United States, for instance, anthropology, sociolinguistics and sociology, with their focus on oral discursive practices and processes, have played a salient role. In France, by contrast, formal linguistics with a background in Marxism and psychoanalysis has been influential.
- *The diversity of 'schools'* generally associated with the figure of one or several charismatic founders, such as Michel Foucault or Michel Pêcheux, Harvey Sacks or Erving Goffman, Ernesto Laclau or Judith Butler, Norman Fairclough or Teun van Dijk. Some (such as Jürgen Habermas) are public intellectuals known internationally, while others such as Deborah Tannen (1990) and George Lakoff (2004) and Robin Lakoff (1975) have produced best-selling books on discourse-related issues; and some are known for their analytical tools (such as Zellig Harris's distributionalist method) or for a particular large-scale research project.
- *The various types of data, corpora and/or genres* utilised by researchers. Discourse analysts can work with extensive corpora in order to reveal the meaning structures and communication patterns of large discursive communities. Or they may have recourse to small excerpts which they analyse in great detail in order to illustrate some theoretical claims. 'Texts' do not always designate written data; they can comprise written, oral or non-verbal data.
- *Theoretical versus applied research.* While 'discourse' serves as the symbol of a renewed interest in social and cultural theory, poststructuralism in particular lends itself to being a productive source of discourse-theoretical inspiration. At the same time, a great deal of the success of empirically-oriented discourse analytical research deals with the increasing demand for applied research (which is, of course, also theoretically founded).

## Discourse Studies as a field

Whether one speaks of 'discourse analysis', 'discourse research' or 'Discourse Studies', the first hurdle one usually encounters is that the discourse that one is supposed to study has no single definition recognized by all researchers. 'Discourse' is used principally in two different ways: (a) in a pragmatic understanding, predominant among linguistic and micro-sociological discourse analysts, which considers discourse as a process or practice of contextualising texts, language in use, the situated production of speech acts or a turn-taking practice (e. g. Gumperz, 1982; Brown and Yule, 1998[1983]); (b) in a socio-historical understanding, preferred by more macrosociological discourse theorists interested in power, for whom 'discourse' refers to an ensemble of verbal and non-verbal practices of large social communities (e.g. Foucault, 1989[1969/1971]; Fairclough, 1992).

The common denominator of the many strands in Discourse Studies is that they consider meaning as a product of social practices. Meaning, in other words, is not to be understood as an inherent property of utterances or texts. Rather, it results from the use that is made of language in specific contexts. In order to have some meaning for somebody, texts need to be contextualized. For discourse analysts, therefore, meaning is a fragile and contested construction of the discourse participants. While discourse may take place between physically present participants of an interaction in an institutional setting, it can also be seen as a product of large communities. Embedded in larger socio-historical configurations and structures, discursive practices can operate with various types of media – oral, written or multimodal – allowing large or small numbers of participants to communicate in face-to-face situations or mediated through written texts (such as newspapers and television) over shorter or longer distances.

As opposed to content analysis or hermeneutic approaches, Discourse Studies does not consider meaning as a given which can be read off the textual surface and reconstructed in spontaneous acts of understanding. Unlike sociolinguists, who usually focus on the language, vernacular and codes used by speakers to signal membership of certain groups, discourse analysts study the way the social order is constructed in discursive practice. They are interested in the practices, rules or mechanisms that can explain how meaning is negotiated between the members of a discourse community.

Discourse Studies, with its many approaches, schools and developments, is now emerging as a new and fully-fledged field in which a number of currents meet – from structuralism to symbolic interactionism, from poststructuralism to problem-oriented strands like Critical Discourse Analysis. Even if Discourse Studies is a field with some autonomy, it nevertheless continues to be heavily indebted to some of the more disciplinary traditions, which provide many productive tools and concepts to assist in meeting both the theoretical and methodological challenges involved in Discourse Studies.

## ‘Discourse’ in linguistics

In studying real social and historical objects, Discourse Studies is not so much interested in linguistic phenomena *per se*, such as certain approaches to semantics, syntax, phonology or morphology. Drawing from the pragmatic idea that language is always used in context, linguistic discourse analysts have been critical of ‘pure’ linguistic theory in the Chomskyan tradition which, with its focus on syntax and grammar, does not analyse or explain phenomena transcending the sentence level. If linguists have turned to discourse to problematize more formalist, grammatical and philological approaches to meaning, ‘discourse’ is used against the background of various oppositions: *discourse* versus *sentence*, *discourse* versus *language*, *discourse* versus *text*.

- If one distinguishes between *discourse* and *sentence*, discourse is considered to be a linguistic unit constituted by a series of sentences. Here, ‘discourse’ can be synonymous with order on a transphrastic level, such as in Zellig S. Harris (1952), who first introduced the term ‘discourse analysis’.
- If one contrasts *discourse* with *language*, discourse typically refers to the uses that can be made of language in a specific context. In this understanding, discourse must not be confounded with language as a system or structure, which is why some linguists, notably those with a discourse pragmatic background, see Saussure (1974[1916]) as antithetical to Discourse Studies.
- One can also oppose *discourse* and *text*, which implies two different understandings of *discourse*: (a) *One discourse corresponds to each text*. From this viewpoint, a text is the product of a discourse, which is perceived as a social activity within a particular context (Adam, 1999; Widdowson, 2007). (b) *Or a group of texts from various genres is associated with one discourse*. Discourse can thus cover a multitude of phenomena: a discipline (psychiatry, astronomy... of whatever epoch); a position in a discursive field (‘Communist discourse’, ‘surrealist discourse’); a type of discourse (‘journalistic discourse’, ‘administrative discourse’); verbal production specific to a category of speakers (‘the discourse of nurses’, ‘the discourse of mothers in a family’); etc.

Most often, then, ‘discourse’ refers to:

(...) a cluster of context-dependent practices that are: situated within specific fields of social action; socially constituted and socially constitutive; related to a macro-topic; linked to the argumentation about validity claims such as truth and normative validity, involving several social actors who have different points of view.

(Reisigl and Wodak, 2009: 89)

## ‘Discourse’ and the social sciences

Even though linguists have played an important role in making discourse a central concept of the interdisciplinary debate, Discourse Studies is not a sub-discipline of linguistics. Nor is it restricted to linguists who defend the idea of linguistics as a social science. A truly interdisciplinary field at the crossroads of language and society, Discourse Studies also comprises other social scientists and humanists who subscribe to the constructivist view that social and political order is constructed in communication. Discourse Studies have not only been a source of methodological innovation but also crucially inspired the theoretical debate in the social sciences and humanities. A certain gap can sometimes be observed between the more epistemological and political interests of discourse theorists and the methodological focus of discourse analysts,

most notably in Europe: on the one hand, discourse theories in the wake of Michel Foucault, Ernesto Laclau or Judith Butler; and on the other, discourse analytical strands in the more empirical, object-oriented sense of large-scale quantitative corpus analysis or more qualitative, micro-sociological studies of situated practices. If the emphasis is sometimes placed more on theory and sometimes more on analysis, Discourse Studies actually only exists as a field where both discourse theory and discourse analysis are integrated in the practice of discourse research.

## Discourse studies = discourse theory + discourse analysis

It is an objective of the *Discourse Studies Reader* to close the gap between **discourse-theoretical and discourse-analytical strands** and to point to the numerous links between the various strands and traditions which have made 'discourse' an object of interdisciplinary interrogation. While **discourse theory is sometimes equated with poststructuralism** (Torfing, 1999; Howarth, 2000), **pragmatics is often considered as the background to more empiricist discourse analyses** (e.g. Brown and Yule, 1998[1983]; Gumperz, 1982). Poststructuralist discourse theory, in this sense, covers intellectual and epistemological debates led by Continental European theorists such as **Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser**, and their North-American commentators such as **Judith Butler, Gayatri Spivak (1988) and Edward Said (1978)**. Better known in Cultural Studies and in the (European) social sciences than in linguistics, discourse theory typically aims to account for the symbolic constitution of society through the circulation of written texts from a more macro-sociological viewpoint; whereas discourse analysis, at least in its pragmatic varieties, has a background in Anglo-American debates on language in use (Leech, 1983; Clark, 1996; Verschueren et al., 1996) and social practices (Mead, 1938; Schatzki, 1996) and analyses oral conversations as situated practices. For some it may appear that the first deals with the great epistemological and political questions of our time while the latter engages in painstaking empirical observations of the minutiae of social life. However, it would be problematic to divide Discourse Studies into discourse theoretical and discourse analytical camps. Discourse theorists have, crucially, relied on discourse analysis and referred to e.g. pragmatics, not only and most notably Habermas (1985[1981]), who makes the case for a communicative turn in Critical Theory, but also Foucault (1989[1969/1971]), whose discourse theory is crucially inspired by enunciative pragmatics. Moreover, some discourse analysts with an ethnomethodological or pragmatic background (McHoul, 1982; Edwards and Potter, 1992; Smith, 2006) have built bridges with poststructuralist discourse theory. It is in this sense that the Reader points out the many productive intersections between various strands within the field of Discourse Studies and makes the plea for an interdisciplinary exchange between discourse theory and discourse analysis.

'Discourse' is one of those polymorphous notions which – despite the efforts of certain individuals to propose a rigorous definition – can mobilise a large number of theoretical options. Theoretically, 'discourse' can be perceived as having amalgamated assumptions borrowed from psychoanalysis, Marxism and poststructuralism, from analytic philosophy, speech act theory and pragmatics, from ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism. Discourse theory often revolves around the nexus of power, knowledge and subjectivity. Thus, for discourse theorists in the line of Foucauldian governmentality studies, hegemony analysis (Laclau) or psychoanalysis, social relations shape and are shaped by discursive practices. Indeed, society and its actors, social inequality and its agents, symbolic and cultural orders and their subjects are no givens; they are made and unmade in discursive practices. In this sense, discourse does not only represent what people do, think and are in the social world; representing the world can also mean constituting it in a certain way. At the same time, discursive practices testify to the intricate relationship of power and subjectivity. Who is entitled to say what from what position with what effect is discursively regulated: not everybody has the same chance to become visible and exist as a subject, to participate in exchanges with others and thus to shape what counts as reality in a community.

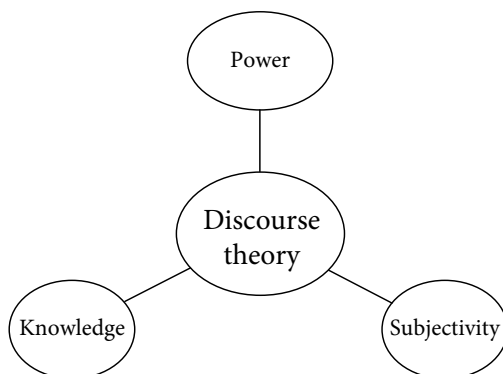


Figure 1. The triangle of discourse theory: power, knowledge, subjectivity

Methodologically, i.e. in terms of discourse *analysis*, the common ground of discourse researchers is that they understand discourse as a complex object that can be studied from various angles. Discourse analysis, therefore, needs to deal with at least three 'components': a language, a practice and a context component. In this view, discourse emerges from the interplay of these three components. In most cases, discourse analytical approaches focus on one point empirically while accounting for the other two theoretically. Enunciative-pragmatic approaches, for example, take their point of departure from utterances (i.e. 'language'), while interactionist approaches may favour turn-taking processes (i.e. 'practices'). Yet in order to be considered as a fully-fledged

discourse approach, all three components must be acknowledged and integrated. Many more disciplinary approaches outside Discourse Studies, by contrast, are often characterized by being restricted to only one or two of the aforementioned perspectives/dimensions: structural linguistics treats language but not practices, and qualitative sociology deals with practices but often neglects language. As opposed to traditional disciplines, which tend to deal with ‘pure’ objects, Discourse Studies makes the case for cooperative and integrative work going beyond individual disciplines.

The heuristic purpose of the discourse triangle needs to be emphasised: ‘Language’ designates the semiotic material (formal patterns, conventions, resources) in the broadest sense. It can consist of written and oral texts, but just as easily of audio-visual materials (images, film...), which are needed to construct knowledge about the wider context. ‘Practice’ refers to specific ways of appropriating and processing language and extends to everything that may take place between the participants in interaction, including the various claims made in the name of expertise and exclusion. ‘Context’ refers to the setting, situation or knowledge available to the discourse participants contextualizing texts. Such knowledge can be situation-dependent or situation-transcendent, individual or shared by large collectives.

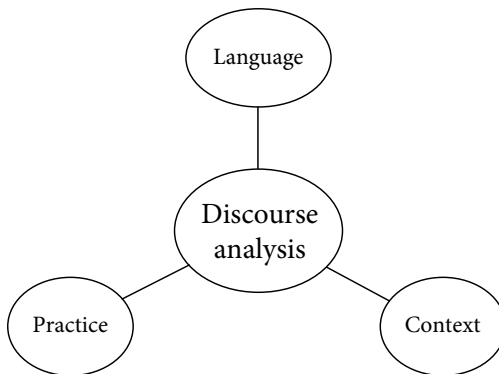


Figure 2. The triangle of discourse analysis: language, practice, context

## The development of Discourse Studies

While Discourse Studies has seen ever-increasing institutional success in the last few decades, its antecedents hark back to the origins of modern humanities and social sciences. One can think, for example, of hermeneutic traditions in theology and history, philological and formalist traditions in the literary field as well as pragmatic traditions in philosophy and the early social sciences, especially in psychology and sociology. Building on the insight that meanings are neither divinely given nor an inherent quality

of cultural or symbolic artefacts, a large number of specialised research fields have developed in the last 150 years within the disciplines, such as sociolinguistics, semiotics, linguistic anthropology, rhetoric, sociology of language, philosophy of language... Since the last third of the 20th century, a number of fields have emerged at the cross-roads of two or more disciplines, such as Conversation Analysis (between sociology and linguistics), Cultural Studies (between literary criticism and sociology), intellectual history, and so forth. Prolonging trans-disciplinary projects such as Marxism, psychoanalysis, Critical Theory, Discourse Studies brings together the entire range of disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. The fact that, today, Discourse Studies has become established as a field in its own right, in opposition to the usual disciplinary boundaries, can be explained by its preoccupation with an object that was central to the modern social sciences from the very beginning: the social production of meaning through communication and texts of all kinds.

The history of Discourse Studies began in the 1960s, most notably in France, where Discourse Studies has been established as a field under the name *analyse du discours*. Around 1970, Foucault (1989[1969/1971]) and Pêcheux (1982[1975]) proposed discourse theoretical ideas which were to delineate the contours of the new field. While Foucault and Pêcheux raised questions about power and subjectivity, ideology and knowledge, the development of Discourse Studies has also been favoured by some developments in corpus analysis (e.g. Demonet et al., 1975) and text linguistics (Adam, 1999). Joined by colleagues from history (Guilhaumou et al., 1994), sociology, political science and media studies (Charaudeau, 1983), linguists have played a leading role in *analyse du discours*, which has seen a turn to pragmatic models of language in use since the 1970s (Maingueneau, 1999; Angermüller, 2014). Since the 1990s, French Discourse Studies has extended its research agenda beyond the study of political discourse and has also started to integrate qualitative strands from social research.

In the United Kingdom, where Discourse Studies – as in France – nowadays enjoys institutional recognition, a great variety of strands exist. While poststructuralist discourse theories (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Hall, 1980; Rose, 1996) dominate in the social sciences, linguistic discourse analysis has followed the line of social semiotics (Halliday, 1978; Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996) or sociolinguistics (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975; Coulthard, 1977[1977]; Stubbs, 1983). Operating with both oral and with written texts (Brown and Yule, 1998[1983]; Hoey, 2001; Hyland, 2005), Discourse Studies comprise approaches as different as speech act theory (Widdowson, 2007) or corpus analysis (Sinclair, 2004; Baker, 2005). As in France, numerous discourse researchers share a critical interest in power and inequality, particularly as represented by *Critical Discourse Analysis* (CDA) (Fairclough, 1992), which has seen similar developments in Continental Europe (Jäger, 2007[1993]; Wodak and Meyer, 2004; van Dijk, 1985, 2009; Wodak 1989).

In the United States, Discourse Studies is probably less established than in Europe, even though ‘discourse’ has become an issue since the 1960s, particularly in the ethnography of communication (Gumperz and Hymes, 1986[1972]; Duranti and Goodwin, 1992), sociolinguistics (Labov and Fanshel, 1977; Johnstone, 2008), corpus analysis (Biber et al., 1998) and applied linguistics (Kramsch, 1998). Until recently, *discourse* was still sometimes understood as being synonymous with conversation, i.e. as regulated and situated turn-taking processes, even though the argument between conversation analysts (Schegloff, 1997) and critical discourse analysts (Billig, 1999) has contributed to the perception that ‘discourse’ refers more to written texts than to conversations. Cognitive strands of discourse linguistics have insisted on the nexus of language and socially shared knowledge (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980).

Although German-language Discourse Studies can be viewed as a relative late-comer vis-à-vis the French and Anglo-American traditions, it testifies to a particularly richness of discourse strands from the entire disciplinary spectrum, especially since the canonization of Foucault in the social sciences and humanities around the year 2000 (Angermüller,<sup>1</sup> 2011; see also the two-volume *Discourse Studies. An interdisciplinary Manual* Angermüller et al. 2014; and the *DiscourseNet Dictionary Interdisciplinary Discourse Studies* Wrana et al. 2014). In the 19th century, the German debate in the social sciences and humanities privileged organic and holistic approaches to Meaning, which have been extended in certain ways by Habermas’s deliberative, consensus-based model of discourse (1985) and social phenomenologists such as Berger and Luckmann (1966) and Keller (2005), who place emphasis on the intersubjectively shared character of social knowledge. The numerous poststructuralist developments, by contrast, typically insist on the antagonistic cleavages within discourse (Nonhoff 2006) and critically interrogate humanist theories of the subject (Bröckling et al., 2000; Bublitz et al. 1999; Link 1982). In linguistics, Discourse Studies builds upon pioneering research in text linguistics (Beaugrande and Dressler, 1981) which has explored questions of cohesion and coherence, as well as functional pragmatics (Ehlich and Rehbein, 1986), which has investigated communicative patterns in interaction. Historical semantics (Busse, 1987) has studied the intricate link between knowledge and language in their socio-historical contexts. Until the 1990s the competition between descriptive-analytical approaches (as exemplified by conversation analysis) and normative-critical orientations (such as those of CDA) stood in the way of creating one interdisciplinary field of Discourse Studies.

If Discourse Studies can be considered an international and interdisciplinary field of research today, it has been established through several stages: around 1970, local or national schools developed in France and the USA. After the mid-1970s discourse

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1. In 2012, the *umlaut* in the name was eliminated. His publications are today signed by Angermüller.

analysis emerged in the UK, while in Germany Habermas's deliberative discourse theory appeared on the scene. In the 1980s a process of transnational reception of such orientations took shape. While discourse-analytical instruments from qualitative social research in the USA found a widespread audience, discourse theories from Europe have enjoyed huge international recognition, especially Foucault's works on the nexus of knowledge and power. After some intellectual and theoretical figureheads made the traditions of other countries better known, an increasing intellectual hybridization began in the 1990s – e.g. in the project of CDA. At least in Europe a transdisciplinary field has emerged from various sub-disciplinary and national orientations, the most important of which this *Discourse Studies Reader* attempts to represent.

## About this Reader

With its 40 selections from key discourse researchers, the *Discourse Studies Reader* aims to represent the main currents in both discourse theory and discourse analysis and to bridge the gap between approaches from North America and Europe. It does not seek to address a particular audience (linguists, sociologists, historians, specialists in education, the mass media etc.), but rather all those who, for the sake of their research or education, are in need of orientation within the immense field of Discourse Studies. Thus, we have divided this book according to the major theoretical orientations and methodological approaches that have developed since the 1960s in various countries of the West. While we, the editors, are based in Europe (albeit in different countries, cities and regions), we do not want to disregard dynamic developments elsewhere, especially in Latin America over the past few decades and more recently in Asia and Africa, which will certainly increase in the course of time. We would have liked to include more contributions to Discourse Studies from these regions as well as from other domains, such as rhetorics, narratology, mass-media communication, multimodality, corpus analysis, argumentation analysis etc., to name but a few. Unfortunately, we had to restrict our choice since we could not get permission for all the contributions which we see as representative of the many strands in Discourse Studies today. For this reason, we have aimed to focus on theoretical and methodological questions rather than to demonstrate the huge variety of objects and problems which Discourse Studies has been and is dealing with. This choice has an advantage: the theoretical presuppositions and claims, as well as methods, are relatively few in number and have remained quite stable over time, whereas the objects of study are extremely diverse and changing constantly.

This Reader is divided into seven sections, each of which corresponds to various viewpoints on discourse research.

The first section ('Theoretical Inspirations: Structuralism versus Pragmatics') brings together texts from authors who are not, strictly speaking, discourse theorists or discourse analysts. As theoretical precursors, however, they have strongly contributed to the development of the field of Discourse Studies. Two of them are linguists (Saussure, Harris); one (Bakhtin) is best known as a literary critic; three are philosophers (Wittgenstein, Austin, Grice); and one (Mead) is a sociologist and psychologist.

The second section ('From Structuralism to Poststructuralism') includes various major authors who are considered to be poststructuralists in the international intellectual debate. They can be divided into two groups: four French thinkers of the 1960/70s, including a psychoanalyst (Lacan) and a Marxist philosopher (Althusser) as well as two theorists of language (Pêcheux, Foucault) whose selected texts appear for the first time in English. Their discourse theoretical contributions have been taken up and developed by poststructuralist discourse theorists in the English-speaking world (Laclau and Butler).

The third section ('Enunciative Pragmatics') presents a major trend in discourse pragmatics. Elaborated mainly by linguists in the French-speaking world, it deals with discourse analytical problems such as deixis (Benveniste, Maingueneau), reported speech (Authier-Revuz) and polyphony/subjectivity (Ducrot, Angermüller).

The fourth section ('Interactionism') is dedicated to interactional discourse analysts, from the Anglo-American world, who come from sociology (Sacks, Goffman, Cicourel), anthropology (Gumperz), education (Gee) and psychology (Potter).

The fifth section is dedicated to an approach that we characterise as 'Sociopragmatics'. Based in linguistics, the authors presented here (Halliday, van Leeuwen, Ehlich, Charaudeau, Swales, Amossy) focus on the constraints imposed by the context of communication. Their work covers a wide variety of orientations; Amossy, for example, positions herself in the field of rhetoric, whereas Halliday is strongly influenced by sociolinguistics.

Discourse Studies does not ignore the fact that meanings are produced under certain historical conditions of production. The section on 'Historical Knowledge' – not surprisingly – is strongly linked to traditions in Germany (Busse/Teubert, Luckmann, Koselleck) and France (Robin).

The book ends with a section entitled 'Critical Approaches', which brings together texts by researchers who refuse to separate discourse analysis from ethical or societal preoccupations. These researchers share an interest in the discursive dimensions of power and injustice, as well as in social and cultural change. The section includes the more theoretical explorations of Habermas and the critical ethnographic explorations of Blommaert/Verschueren, as well as those who, like Fairclough, van Dijk, and Wodak, can be counted as leading proponents of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

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