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DISCOURSE AND MEDIATION: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THEORETICAL NARRATIVES AND RESEARCH AGENDAS

ABSTRACT

This article examines key conceptualizations of discourse that have shaped scholarly analyses of mediation, communicative networks, and practices of digital modernity across the social sciences and humanities throughout the 20th century. It traces four influential frameworks through which discourse has been appropriated: (1) discourse as communicative power, (2) discourse as popular empowerment, (3) discourse as the textualization of power, and (4) discourse as symbolic power. These frameworks reveal distinct analytical orientations to the political and popular dimensions of mediation, and reflect varying understandings of the power of discourse as shaped through language and visuality in the construction of social realities. The article concludes by briefly addressing how these conceptualizations of discourse and power are being reconfigured in the context of machine learning, algorithmic mediation, and big data in the digitized landscape of the 21st century.

Keywords: *mediation, textuality, discourse, digital governance*

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ΛΟΓΟΣ ΚΑΙ ΔΙΑΜΕΣΟΛΑΒΗΣΗ: ΜΙΑ ΙΣΤΟΡΙΚΗ ΑΝΑΣΚΟΠΗΣΗ ΘΕΩΡΗΤΙΚΩΝ ΑΦΗΓΗΣΕΩΝ ΚΑΙ ΕΡΕΥΝΗΤΙΚΩΝ ΚΑΤΕΥΘΥΝΣΕΩΝ

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Το παρόν άρθρο εξετάζει βασικές εννοιολογήσεις του λόγου που έχουν διαμορφώσει την ακαδημαϊκή ανάλυση της διαμεσολάβησης, των επικοινωνιακών δικτύων και των πρακτικών της ψηφιακής νεωτερικότητας στις κοινωνικές και ανθρωπιστικές επιστήμες κατά τη διάρκεια του 20ού αιώνα. Επικεντρώνεται σε τέσσερα επιδραστικά εννοιολογικά πλαίσια μέσω των οποίων ο λόγος έχει προσεγγιστεί: (1) ο λόγος ως επικοινωνιακή εξουσία, (2) ο λόγος ως λαϊκή ενδυνάμωση, (3) ο λόγος ως κειμενοποίηση της εξουσίας, και (4) ο λόγος ως συμβολική εξουσία. Τα εν λόγω πλαίσια αποκαλύπτουν διακριτούς αναλυτικούς προσανατολισμούς ως προς τις πολιτικές και λαϊκές διαστάσεις της διαμεσολάβησης, και αντικατοπτρίζουν διαφορετικές κατανοήσεις της ισχύος του λόγου, όπως αυτή συγκροτείται μέσω των γλωσσικών και των οπτικών πόρων στη διαμόρφωση των κοινωνικών πραγματικοτήτων. Το άρθρο ολοκληρώνεται με μια συζήτηση για το πώς οι εννοιολογήσεις του λόγου και της εξουσίας αναδιαμορφώνονται στο πλαίσιο της μηχανικής μάθησης, της αλγοριθμικής διαμεσολάβησης και των μεγάλων δεδομένων στον ψηφιακό ορίζοντα του 21ου αιώνα.

Λέξεις κλειδιά: *διαμεσολάβηση, κειμενικότητα, λόγος, ψηφιακή διακυβέρνηση*

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of discourse has long been established as an important keyword in the study of mediation, of the practices of representation and communication that occur on and through the media. Given that mediation has always been an interdisciplinary object of study in the humanities and social sciences (and increasingly the STEM sciences), it follows that the definition of discourse across these domains is characterized by substantial variation. This is because each domain operates within its own epistemological premises, research agendas and methodological designs and, in so doing, each throws into relief competing definitions of what discourse is, how it produces meaning in the form of text and what its relationship to societal power relations is.

In this article, I provide a historical overview of the four most influential accounts of discourse in the social sciences and the humanities in the 20th century with the aim to identify how each account developed its own distinct conceptions of *text/textuality* and *power* and, thus, how each circumscribed the study of mediation within its own distinct nexus of possibilities and limitations. Together, these four accounts have informed a tremendous body of theorising and research on our mediated societies and still today define the ways we conceptualise and analyse the communicative networks and practices of digital modernity.

I begin with a discussion of ''discourse'', situating the concept within the historical context of structuralist (Saussurean) and critical/poststructuralist theory, as this context has been dominant in the use of the term in both the social sciences and the humanities (in "Definitions of Discourse"). I subsequently zoom into the (late) 20th century and engage with two key appropriations of the term within the social sciences, in *Discourse as Communicative Power* and *Discourse as Popular Empowerment*, and two in the humanities: *Discourse as the Textualization of Power* and *Discourse as Symbolic Power*. In conclusion, I sketchily touch on the emerging 21st century appropriation of the concept of discourse in machine-learning and big data processes, where textuality is disconnected from hermeneutic agency yet its power relations are still deeply embedded in the societal hierarchies of digitized societies; and I point to the persistent and urgent need of engaging with plural and versatile conceptions of discourse in our critical methodologies for the study of mediation.

DEFINITIONS OF DISCOURSE

Originating in Linguistics, discourse refers to the capacity of language to produce representations of the world. The "linguistic turn" that today informs the dominant epistemological strands in both the social sciences and the humanities is inspired by a particular theory of meaning-making, that of the structuralist linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure (Giddens, 1987; Luke, 2002).[1]

The Saussurean theory of meaning posits that representations of the world, far from the outcome of sensory perception (seeing or hearing) that links the outside world with our minds, come about from the structure of language itself —from the possibility of linguistic signs to be different from one another and yet to complement each other in meaningful relationships within the structure of signs. Building on Saussure's theory of language, critical and poststructuralist linguistic theory argue that these relationships of meaning-making are not purely systemic (i.e., appertaining to the language structure itself) but also social because they have their "conditions of possibility" in the historical and political relationships in which they are embedded (e.g., Williams, 1975, p. 20). In Foucault's (1980) terminology, linguistic relations appertain to particular systems of "power/knowledge relations" specific to their historical juncture.

If the Saussurean view emphasizes the "referential" power of language, that is the capacity of language to represent the world, the critical and poststructuralist views draw attention to the performative power of language, that is the capacity of language to constitute the world in meaning at the moment that it claims to simply represent it. In this sense, the concept of discourse draws attention to the linguistic dimension of social power not as an add-on to the material power of class, gender, or race relations but as a central terrain for struggle over other forms of social power. Every linguistic utterance, according to this view, comes about from a position of social interest (be this race, gender, or class), and every linguistic utterance makes a claim to truth that seeks to reclaim these interests and re-establish their power through meaning (Foucault, 1980, p. 131).[2]

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1. Given the emphasis on language and power, my overview inevitably excludes important discourse analytical traditions, such as ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, which may have contributed in major ways to the study of performativity in mediated communication but have not explicitly focused on the link between linguistic performativity and power (e.g., Fairclough, 1992).

2. Textuality refers to the property of individual texts to emerge within specific historical

Consequently, whereas both views of discourse focus on the textuality of language as the primary object for the study of mediated representations, the performative view further alerts us to the historicity of this textuality. This historical dimension of discourse is important because it points to the analysis of discourse as a form of social explanation and critique. That is, if linguistic text is already articulated in the power relations of its social use, then the analysis of text serves precisely the task of identifying not just the linguistic properties of meaning but, more important, broader social processes of contestation, domination, or resistance.

Having informed the study of social life since the linguistic turn, this performative view of discourse provides the study of mediated communication with similar analytical and normative orientations across the humanities and the social sciences. In terms of analytical orientation, discourse poses the question of what we can learn about the social process of mediation by analysing the texts of mediation. In terms of normative orientation, it asks how the relationships of power that play on the constitution of texts of mediation impact on the social world—whether they do so in reproductive or transformative ways. The use of discourse in the study of mediated communication can thus be productively discussed in terms of this dual focus on the analytical dimension of mediated textualities (the semiotic dynamics that come into the production of texts of mediation), on the one hand, and the normative dimension of the power of mediation (the social dynamics that enable or constrain the production of mediated texts), on the other hand.

My brief overview of the four historical accounts of discourse proceeds, accordingly, by referring to the ways in which, in the second half of the 20th century, the social sciences and the humanities appropriated, each in their own way, these two orientations to research on mediated communication: the analytical, focusing on the *textualities* of mediation, and the normative, focusing on the *power relations* of mediation. I next turn to my accounts of these appropriations.

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and social conditions of possibility, which are systematically reflected in the discursive structure of each text despite the singularity of each text's semiotic choices (Kristeva, 1980; see also Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, for intertextuality as a category for the analysis of historicity in texts).

DISCOURSE IN THE 20TH CENTURY

Social Scientific Accounts of Discourse

Covering a broad range of disciplines (from social psychology to politics and from sociology to cultural studies and anthropology), this historical overview is bound to be partial. However, there have been (at least) two major appropriations of discourse in the social sciences, each of which provides its own influential understanding of textuality and power in mediation. The first appropriation refers to *Discourse as communicative power,* focusing primarily on textualities in the public/political realm of mediation, whereas the second appropriation can be defined in terms of *Discourse as popular empowerment,* focusing on textualities in private/domestic or popular realms of mediation. Although the discourse perspective has effectively problematized the distinctions between public/private or political/domestic, pointing at the co-articulation between the two realms, this analytical classification corresponds, in fact, to a key traditional distinction in the study of mediated communication. This is the distinction between the study of mediated communication as "mass communication" versus "communication as conversation" (Schudson, 1978, pp. 320-329) or between mediation as "broadcasting" versus mediation as "dialogue" (Peters, 1999, pp. 33-62).

1. Discourse as Communicative Power

This hugely influential strand of research was informed by a particular version of 20th century critical theory (Calhoun et al., 2002, pp. 351-357) that problematized the Marxian concept of ideology on the grounds that it turned language one-sidedly into a vehicle of domination and people into dupes manipulated by the economic interests governing language use (Hall, 1982, pp. 56-90). Born out of an inflection of the "linguistic turn" (Lee, 1992, pp. 402-420), the view of discourse as communicative power recognized that language is deeply embedded in social struggles over power but avoided linking it straightforwardly with economic domination. Instead, this critical project posited language as a terrain of struggle among multiple and diverse interests while putting forward a normative ideal for public communication as possible to take place outside the constraints of power (Habermas, 1980). Emerging out of this "ideal speech situation", Habermas thus envisaged a utopian view of society that is founded not on struggle over interests but on consensus.

The textualities of the public realm, in this intellectual project, were therefore understood as formal procedures (or pragmatic principles) that regulate communication in ways that promote rational debate among participants and allow for the best argument to win. Seeking to rescue the "unfinished project of modernity" from postmodern attacks on reason (Habermas, 1998, pp. 35-55), Habermas' view of discourse rested on a firm belief in the immanent potential for rationality in language and in the capacity of social actors to use language properly so as to overcome conflict and reach intersubjective understanding.

Whereas this view of discourse has been instrumental in much theory production across the social sciences, still today informing normative conceptions of digital governance and social justice based on communicative rationality (e.g., Habermas, 2023; Thiel, 2023), it had always stood in a tenuous relationship to mediation. Instrumental as the textualities of mediation may be in summoning up dispersed publics and providing platforms for collective deliberation, the Habermasian account nurtured a deep suspicion of technological communication. This was really a suspicion toward the institutions of the state and the market, which colonize the media with a strategic means-ends rationality and, in so doing, replace the rationality of communication with the manipulative mechanisms of propaganda or advertising (Habermas, 1989).

Criticisms of this view of discourse as communicative action primarily spoke to Habermas' somewhat rigid normativity (Calhoun, 1995). His strong views on proper communication rest on a universalist ideal of power-free dialogue as a positive thing, on the one hand, ignoring the significance (and indeed necessity) of conflict in society, and a negative conception of mediation as sold to manipulative interests; on the other hand, ignoring the positive potential of technological communication in facilitating public debate and forging crucial moral ties of proximity at a distance (Chouliaraki, 2008, pp. 831-52).

An alternative account on the constitutive role of discourse in the public realm, widely used across the social sciences, originated in the field of Politics and Government, specifically in Laclau & Mouffe's seminal political theory work on "Hegemony and Socialist Strategy" (1985). Informed by a poststructuralist view of language, discourse theory proposed a view of textuality that, rather than striving for the ideal of power-free communication, was inseparably bound up with perpetual struggles among competing meanings and could not, therefore, achieve final closure. Indeed, whereas political discourse theory, like Habermas, also conceived

of the textualities of mediation as a terrain for the achievement of social consensus, it did not view such consensus as the benign endpoint (or telos) of communicative rationality but rather as the always unstable outcome of social power.

Drawing on a post-Marxian perspective of power as hegemony, consensus was here defined as the provisional subordination of some social interests by others that manage to disguise their particularity and present themselves as universal. Consequently, communicative rationality was recast as an ongoing agonistic struggle over the hegemony of meanings in society—a struggle traversed by irrational as well as rational forces and by public as well as private interests that never manage to fully dominate the public realm.

Despite the extensive use of the discourse theoretical perspective in studies on mediated political communication and public opinion as well as new media, civil society, and cultural citizenship, this approach had been criticized on two accounts: (a) for its overemphasis on the openness of discourse and the fluidity of society, paying relatively less attention to the structural properties of power that close off new possibilities of representation in mediated discourse; and (b) for failing to attend to the detail of the textualities of mediation, ignoring the semiotic makeup of texts, and sustaining an abstract style of discourse analysis that often fails to link theoretical claims with empirical reality (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, pp. 118-36).

2. Discourse as Popular Empowerment

This paradigm, which rose in prominence in the 1980s and 1990s, cut across several fields of social scientific research, including sociology, anthropology, social psychology, and cultural studies and can be seen as a response to the determinism of Marxian and early Frankfurt School theorizing, which emphasized the ideological effects of mediated discourse in terms of disempowering people and sustaining social order (Morley, 1996, pp. 279-293).

The textualities of mediation here referred broadly to the circulation of mediated meaning in popular culture and its creative reappropriation by audiences—starting with Hall's (1980/2001, pp. 166-176) encoding–decoding model, which departs from linear models of communication effects, and culminating in Fiske's (1987, pp. 224-240) celebration of mediated textualities as sources of popular pleasure and resistance.

These textualities of mediation were now characterized by polysemy: the quality of a text to articulate competing meanings, thereby opening itself up to a multiplicity of divergent and conflicting readings rather than a singular dominant one (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994; see also Kristeva, 1980). Simultaneously, the power of mediation, rather than referring to institutions of power (state or the market), was reconceptualized in terms of social agency. The concept of the active audience referred precisely to the capacity of social actors to engage creatively with the decoding process, providing oppositional or resistant readings of mediated texts rather than preferred or collusive ones (Livingstone, 1990/1998, pp. 172-175).

Polysemy and agency, as epistemological properties of discourse, consequently shifted the focus of study in mediated communication. From textuality as distorted communication or as hegemonic meaning, the emphasis here turned onto textuality as audience interpretation, and, from power as institutional domination, attention was drawn to power as popular empowerment. As Fiske (1987) put it, referring to televisual communication, "Television's playfulness is a sign of its semiotic democracy, by which I mean *its delegation of production of meanings and pleasures to the viewers*" (p. 236; italics added).

Two important arguments followed from this approach to discourse: a political and a theoretical one (Livingstone, 1990/1998, pp. 171-89). The political argument thematized the possibility of resistance through discourse. Combining a view of text as polysemic, that is as having more than one meanings at once, with ethnographies of viewing, which took into account people's own interpretations of the media, the political argument privileged an analytical focus on "moments of viewing"—on people's situated engagements with the flow of mediated textualities[3]. Some foregrounded the experience of playfulness and desire (e.g., Fiske, 1991), whereas others focused on the subversive dimension of audiences' appropriations of mediated texts, emphasizing their capacity to challenge hegemonic meanings and resist social stereotypes (e.g., Morley, 1980). Despite their differences, both perspectives ultimately reformulated the power relations of mediation in terms of empowerment; introduced a more nuanced accounts of the interplay between media texts and their spectators; and acknowledged the centrality of identity as a crucial terrain for the exercise of a politics of resistance —more recently reformulated

3. Influential here is the concept of ''interpretive repertoires'' in the field of discursive psychology (Potter & Whetherell, 1988, pp. 138-57).

in terms of the agency of social media users to navigate digital platforms through informed calculations of risk and opportunity (Livingstone & Stoilova, 2021).

This political argument on the empowerment of audiences, at the same time, challenged the long-standing theoretical duality between (dominant) text and its (subversive) interpretation, highlighting instead that identities are not shaped through an exclusive engagement with media texts but are always constituted in broader societal contexts of power and discourse, of which mediated communication is only one. Consequently, the theoretical argument on empowerment usefully complicated traditional 20th century views of power-and-resistance as a rigid duality. Instead, it put forward a fuller understanding of human agency as it occurs within holistic contexts of everyday life and includes situated negotiations with media texts without being reduced to them and their "effects" (Grossberg, 1996, pp. 87-107).

In understanding power as a generalized economy of freedom and control that operates in a multiplicity of intersecting and overlapping contexts (Hall, 1996, pp. 1-18), the 20th century perspective on discourse-as-empowerment introduced a novel research agenda to the study of mediated communication– an agenda that included the importance to reconfigure the distinction between the cultural and political and the need to expand our definitions of public communication toward more cultural understandings of political legitimacy and civil action. Despite its acknowledgment of power, however, the popular empowerment perspective was criticized for a rather underdeveloped conception of the structures of control that operate within contexts of reception. Research on audience resistance, according to this criticism, tended to focus on the creative aspects of people's accounts about mediated texts while downplaying the nature of the texts that are being interpreted by audiences, as well as the broader structural-institutional and psychological-cultural constraints that play on and may further constrain the production of identity (Hall, 2001; McRobbie, 1994). As a result, this perspective tended to produce celebratory accounts of popular culture that did not fully reflect a more complex understanding of the interplay between discourse and power in processes of mediation.

Humanistic Accounts of Discourse

If 20th century social science concentrated broadly on how discourse shaped the nature of the social world, looking at articulations within and between the public/political and private/popular realms, the research agenda of the

humanities focused on the role that language and visuality, as the core semiotic modalities of mediated meaning-making, played in constructing the social world. Although there are productive complementarities between the two agendas, the concept of discourse figured in distinctive ways within the agenda of the humanities. Specifically, discourse brought together two different understandings of textuality, thereby providing two different views of the power of mediation: discourse as the textualization of power and discourse as symbolic power. I briefly discuss each in turn.

3. Discourse as the "Textualization" of Power

Grounded in the field of postmodern cultural studies, this late 20th century strand is a literary-based, postrealist version of the linguistic turn that takes the thesis of the linguistic nature of the social to its logical extreme and conflates the social with the textual (Shapiro, 1989, pp. 11-12). Inspired by a "grammatological" deconstruction of modernist conceptions of truth as meaning that corresponds to an external reality, the postmodern account of discourse emphasized the thoroughly textual nature of reality and refuted the possibility of truth beyond the linguistic meanings through which claims to truth are made intelligible in the first place– "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte" (Derrida, 1976, pp. 157-164).

Combining this textualist view of the social with critical cultural theory that held the technophobic view that the media were responsible for emptying content out of social meaning-making, this view of discourse considered mediation to be a catalytic force in turning communication into a pure play of forms, thus stretching too far McLuhan's claim that "the medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 7). Although the critique of technology as corroding the communicative potential of discourse echoes Habermas' colonization thesis, the textualist conception of discourse was less interested in rescuing the rationality of modernity as Habermas was (and is) and concentrated on a thoroughgoing rejection of modernity as a "society of the simulacra"– a society of representation without referents (Baudrillard, 1994).

Indeed, for Baudrillard, whose textualization thesis came about from his own radical elaboration of the French Situationists' critique of image-driven capitalism in the 1960s (Debord, 1995), the dominant textuality of modernity is the spectacle. More than simply denoting a marketized visuality, as in the Situationists, however, Baudrillard's spectacle came to define the mediated sociality of (Western) late modernity as simulation. Simulation, for him, was not a representation of something external to

itself but a representation of already existing spectacles that referred to themselves as the "real." In this self-referential definition, simulation cancelled any claim to reality except for the reality of the spectacle itself. Simulation, therefore, he writes, "… is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real" (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 2).

The power relations of mediation, consequently, also operated in and through the realm of technological signification. Power here worked through the capacity of technology to manipulate representation (by use of analogue or digital techniques of reproduction, alteration, and editing) so as to create specific reality effects known as "hyperreality" (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 44). Although such effects came about through media manipulation, hyperreality was not a quasi-real or a faded representation of the real, but an accentuated or perfected sense of the real that blurred the distinction between image and reality. Power, therefore, worked by subjecting people to a social experience, which, in collapsing the distinction between the social world and its representations, rendered the possibility for critique and social change obsolete. Indeed, according to Baudrillard (1988), late modern societies no longer call on people to utilise their capacities to interpret and reclaim meaning. Rather than exercising reflexivity, media audiences had become voyeurs who surrendered to the seductive attraction of TV and its "ecstasy of communication", where everything is on constant display and nothing really matters.

The extreme pessimism of this view of discourse reflected a lack of nuance in its conceptualizations of power and textuality in mediated communication. Starting from a semiotic understanding of the workings of power in society in terms of spectacular visuality (and its reality effects), the textualization of power view not only reduced power to an abstract system of technological signification, but further reduced the plurality of mediated textualities to one specific form of sign, the spectacle, with one specific meaning-making operation, simulation (Chouliaraki, 2008, pp. 831-52). Despite its global uptake as a popular critique of consumerist capitalism, this reductive view both exaggerated the implications of mediated communication in the experience of social life and underestimated the plurality and unpredictability of mediated meanings. As a result, this literary-based theory of mediated communication ultimately provided an amoralistic social theory of modernity as a bittersweet *joie de vivre* that had abandoned both the intellectual project of critique and the political vision of social change (Kellner, 2003).

4. Discourse as Symbolic Power

Perhaps the most influential, but also the most heterogeneous, strand of a 20th century humanities-grounded conception of discourse, is the idea of symbolic power – a conception that permeated, and still does, the fields of cultural studies (originating in the Birmingham School), as well as media and communications studies (The Glasgow Group), film and literary criticism, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and social semiotics (see Threadgold, 2003 for overviews).[4]

This is a strand that emerged out of a normative imperative across those fields to combine a critical view of language as socially practice with neo-Marxian views of the workings of power through ideology (Frochtner & Wodak, 2017). While sharing similar assumptions to the conception of discourse as communicative power (in that both acknowledge the constitutive relationship between language and power) and to discourse as popular empowerment (in that both recognise the polysemy of texts), discourse as symbolic power is nevertheless grounded on a more analytical approach that seeks to bridge the gap between grand questions on social power with the detailed study of language; that is, "…to capture," in Luke's (2002) words, "the dynamic relationships between discourse and society, between the micropolitics of everyday texts and the macro-political landscapes of ideological forces and power relations, capital exchange and material historical conditions" (p. 100).

Textuality is here considered to be a complex articulation of semiotic choices, situated within broader social and political contexts of mediation, rather than wholly constituting those contexts or treating them as fully textual (Fairclough, 1995, pp. 53-74). Certain perspectives within this strand emphasized a view of textuality as a dialectic between structures of meaning and the micro-agency of linguistic practice (Fairclough, 1992), whereas others drew attention to textuality as the interface between sociocultural resources of human cognition and the situated interpretative practices of linguistic actors (van Dijk, 1997). Such differences rendered this strand a productively diverse body of research, with certain perspectives more actively engaging with the research agendas of political theory and sociology, whereas others being closer to studies of social psychology, human cognition or historical sociology. Both perspectives, however,

4. See Thompson (1995) for a Bourdieuian view of the power of mediation as symbolic power; and Christensen (2023) for a comparative view between Bourdieu, Habermas and Foucault.

refused to collapse the textual with the social, thereby making possible a critique of mediation as a particular modality of power, namely symbolic power, that coexists with and reproduces, but may also change, dominant relationships of power (economic, political, and cultural).

Mediated representations as symbolic power were, consequently, approached as semiotic representations of other forms of power that could be analysed in terms of the specific ideological implications they may have on media publics. Specifically, this renewed form of ideology critique – "the return of the repressed" (Hall, 1982) deconstructed and demystified hegemonic arrangements of power in discourse in two ways. On the one hand, it deconstructed operations of power *within* mediated discourse, identifying the ways in which, for example, racist discourses of immigration dominate the media and which ideological implications such dominant representations of racism may have (van Dijk, 1988); or how far-right populist discourses persist in time, shifting contexts of media use but retaining their function of dehumanising and othering vulnerable groups (Wodak, 2023). On the other hand, it deconstructed operations of power *through* mediated discourse, identifying, for example, emerging genres and styles of communication in press and electronic media, such as the confessional interview or the reality show (Fairclough, 1995) or the shifting configurations of language and the visual in new multimodal texts (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, 2001).

The main purpose of analysing discourse as symbolic power, therefore, was to demonstrate that, despite its appearance as a sedimented structure, mediation is in fact a relatively contingent, semiotically constituted arrangement that can potentially be transformed. Discursive change was thus seen to participate in broader struggles for a more equalitarian society, rendering the study of media textualities an important space for social critique (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, pp. 258-84). At the same time, the conception of discourse as symbolic power was criticized for downplaying the role of media audiences in the construction of mediated meanings. Despite its theorization of text as polysemic and its recognition of the active audience, most of the studies on mediation as symbolic power understood the textualities of mediation in terms of hegemonic operations of social reproduction, downplaying the ways in which media texts are negotiated through the everyday practices of culture (Meinhoff & Smith, 2000). This deterministic bias may have been connected to the explicitly normative focus of much research in this strand, which tended to concentrate on media texts in the domain of public/political communication, focusing primarily

on "the public representation and repression of diversity and difference" (Luke, 2002, p. 108), rather than on practices of media use, appropriation and resistance.

DISCOURSE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Fusions with STEM Sciences

Despite differences in the logics of knowledge production between the social sciences and the humanities, there has been an obvious permeability in their research agendas and hermeneutic methodologies regarding the study of mediated communication as discourse. More recently, the concept has also become relevant to STEM-adjacent research on media technologies, social media platforms and AI generative applications. As these developments have come to generate new meaning formations and power relations, the study of discourse has emerged as a valuable lens that can infuse the study of the novel textualities of AI with socially sensitive understandings of how they shape the formation of our reality and identities.

In the terminology of my argument, one of the major concerns with AI-generated discourse is that its textualities may be disconnected from an immediate grounding onto human agency and its hermeneutic capacities, yet AI's deep learning models are infused with millions of prior textualities that reflect the representational biases of our societies and reproduce its power relations along the axes of gender, race and sexuality among others. The requirement of critique in AI-generated discourse continues, then, to be crucially important, dictating that any "research agenda on critical machine vision" should be "situated at the interface of media and cultural studies, computer science, and discourse-analytic approaches to [mediated] communication" (Laba, 2024, p. 1599).

Within this hyper-digitised environment of AI-generative technologies and big data, the analysis of discourse itself has simultaneously undergone further mutations, as traditional forms of qualitative, in-depth and text-intensive methodologies are now complemented by the quantitative analysis of large language corpora, or corpus linguistics (CL). Discourse here takes on a more ambivalent meaning as CL moves away from a view of the text as social practice of meaning-making situated in contexts of power and, instead, treats textuality as data, that is as large collections of text made accessible through corpus linguistic software that enables us

to search for a range of language features (Cheng, 2012). Concomitantly, there is no explicit theory of power in CL, even though the method can be used to identify how repetitive and cumulative uses of words or language structures may bear certain discursive effects, of say causality or agency, that are not detectable through hermeneutic interpretation but through computer-assisted quantification (Baker et al., 2008). While these tensions in contemporary conceptions of discourse have generated debate in the field of Critical Discourse Studies, in fact, the two perspectives can and do usefully work together, as in the analysis of collocations and concordances on large social media feeds (or social big data), performing a range of functions that remain out of remit in qualitative Discourse Analysis yet can strengthen its critical social engagement (Unger et al., 2016). As Baker and colleagues put it, "CDA can benefit from incorporating more objective, quantitative CL approaches, as quantification can reveal the degree of generality of, or confidence in, the study findings and conclusions, thus guarding against over- or under-interpretation" (Baker et al., 2008, p. 297).

Indeed, no approach alone can address the crucial question of the nature of mediated textualities and their role in the processes of social transformation, but productive synergies between them, existing and potential, are evident. To this end, although my historical overview of social scientific and humanistic accounts of discourse and mediation through the 20th (and into the 21st) century cannot resolve the epistemological controversies of interdisciplinary research, it can modestly contribute to refining our conceptual sensibilities and methodological choices in the study of mediated communication. It is through such reflexive interdisciplinary dialogues within specific theoretical and empirical projects that the analysis of discourse can continue to inform our understanding not only of how the social world is like but also of how it could (and should) be.

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