Discourse on Language (L’Ordre du discours)

Prepared by: Prof. B. H. McLean, Knox College


Outline

I. Foucault is anxious about beginning a discourse, but there is not need for anxiety; the institution prepares a place for discourse which both honours and disarms it (215.1-216.3)

• quote from Malloy (215.2) › ironic reply
• if discourse has power, it is the power given to it by the institution (216.1)
• where is the danger in people speaking, and their speech proliferating? (216.3)

II. Hypothesis: logophobia (216.4)

“In every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality.” (216.4)

A. External systems which exercise control over the production of discourse (216.5)

1. First External System of Exclusion: Prohibitions to what is spoken; speech as object of desire and conflict (216.5)

Corrected translation: “We know perfectly well that we do not have the right to say everything, that we cannot speak of anything at all in any circumstance whatsoever; not just anyone, finally, may speak of just anything. In the taboo on the object, the ritual of the circumstance [cf. sect. C, 2], and the privileged or exclusive right of the
speaking subject, we have the play of three types of prohibition which interrelate, reinforce and complement each other, forming a complex web, continually subject to modification." (216.5) [trans. Meaghan Morris]

- this web is most tightly woven in the “danger spots”, politics and sexuality
- speech is linked with both power and desire; it is both an object of desire and conflict

2. Second External System of Exclusion: opposition of the speech of reason to the speech of madness (216.6-217.2)

3. Third External System of Exclusion: Will to truth: opposition between true and false (217.3-220.1)

“Certainly, if we place ourselves on the level of a proposition, inside a discourse, the division between true and false is neither arbitrary, nor modifiable, nor institutional, nor violent. Putting the question in different terms, however—asking what has been, what still is, throughout our discourse, this will to truth which has survived throughout so many centuries of our history; or if we ask what is, in its very general form, the kind of division governing our will to knowledge—then we may well discern something like a system of exclusion (historical, modifiable, institutionally constraining) in the process of development.” (218.2)

a. Historically constituted: defeat of Hesiod and Sophists in favour of Plato, separating true discourse from false; the true discourse of the Sophists was routed because it was not linked to the exercise of power (218.3)

b. Historically constituted: modern form of will to knowledge/truth (science) (218.4)

i) will to knowledge, in 16th-17th C (esp. England), sketched out possible observable, measurable, and classifiable objects (218.4)

ii) will to knowledge imposed upon the knowing subject a certain viewpoint: observe rather than read, verify rather than comment (218.4)

iii) will to knowledge prescribed the technological level at which knowledge could be employed as verifiable and useful (218.4)

iv) will to knowledge relies on institutional support and distribution: e.g., pedagogy, publishing, libraries, learned societies, laboratories (219.2)

v) exercises a power of constraint on other forms of discourse in society: e.g., morality, literature, economic practices, justifies penal code (219.3)
c. Will to truth is masked by truth itself and its necessary unfolding: Nietzsche, Artaud, Bataille are signposts demonstrating the impossibility of opposing this will to truth (power) in favour of truth itself (219.4-220.1).

“We are unaware of the prodigious machinery of the will to truth, with its vocation of exclusion.” (220.1)

Corrected translation: “There are of course many other procedures (not ‘systems’) for the control and delimitation of discourse. . . they concern that part of discourse which brings power and desire into play.” [trans. Meaghan Morris]

B. Internal systems whereby discourse exerizes control over its own production (220.3)

1. Commentary: limits the hazards of discourse through an action of identity taking the form of repetition, recovery, reiteration and sameness (220.4)

   a. Gradation of discourse different types of discourse within society: principles of classification and ordering (220.4)

   b. Unstable boundary between categories of discourse (220.5); but principle of hierarchy is always at work. "Janet"

   (i) permits us to create new discourses ad infinitum (221.3)

   (ii) on account of multiple or hidden meanings the final saying of what has been articulated in a primary text is not possible (221.3)

Corrected translation: “…commentary’s only role is to say finally that which was silently articulated deep down. It must—according to a paradox which it always displaces but from which it never escapes—say, for the first time, what has already been said, and repeat tirelessly what was, nevertheless, never said.” (221.3) [trans. Meaghan Morris]

2. Author-principle of rarefaction
Not the (historical) person who wrote the text in question but the unifying principle which unifies a particular group of writings into an œuvre; limits the chance element of discourse through the action of an identity whose form is that of individuality and the I. (221.4-222.4)

“Of course, it would be ridiculous to deny the existence of individuals who write and invent. But I think that, for some time at least, the individual who sits down to write a text, at the edge of which lurks a possible œuvre, resumes the functions of the author. What he writes and does not write, what he sketches out, even preliminary sketches for the work, and what he drops as simple mundane remarks, all this interplay of differences is prescribed by the author-function. It is from his new position, as an
author, that he will fashion—from all he might have said, from all he says daily, at
any time—the still shaky profile of his œuvre.” [trans. Meaghan Morris] (222.3)

The ‘author’ and ‘oeuvre’ are both ways of organizing texts around a function, or system
of control.

3. Disciplines: (not sum total of truths) (222.6): systems which control the production of
discourse and fix its limits; forms of constraint.

   a. opposed to author-principle (as unifying system) because disciplines are defined by
   an anonymous system of methods, propositions, definitions, technical tools, whose
   validity is not tied to an author who invented them (222.7)

   b. opposed to commentary (as unifying system) because the point is not the recovery
   or reiteration of old meaning but the possibility of constructing new statements and
   fresh propositions (223.1)

   c. disciplines consist of errors as well as truths; these errors have their own valid
   history and roles (223.2)

   d. for a proposition to belong to a discipline it must fulfill certain conditions and fit
   into a certain theoretical field (223.2); there are conditions for statements to be
   “caught within the true [dans le vrai]” (Canguilhem), i.e., within what are recognized
   as the limits of the area of knowledge (223.2-224.5)

C. Systems controlling when discourse can be employed (224.6)

1. Verbal ‘Rituals’ (224.6-227.2)
   a. Defines qualifications required of a speaker; who is qualified to enter into the
   discourse? (224.6-225.3)

   b. Lays down accompanying gestures, behaviour, etc. that must accompany discourse
   (225.3)

   c. Lays down the supposed significance of the words used, their effect upon those to
   whom they are addressed, limits their validity (225.3)

2. ‘Fellowships of discourse’ whose function to preserve or reproduce discourse,
   ensuring that it circulates in a closed community according to rules of formation (225.4-
   226.2)
   a. Archaic models: Rhapsodists

   b. Personality of the writer occurs within a constraining fellowship of discourse
c. Other examples

3. Doctrine and doctrinal groups (religious, political, philosophical) (226.3)
   a. Rules of exclusion and rejection come into play when a speaker formulates a rare utterance.
   b. Doctrine limits individuals to certain kinds of utterances and bars them from others.
   c. Dual subjection: speaking subject is subjected to discourse; discourse is subjected to a group.

4. ‘Social appropriation of discourse’: the educational system is the political means of maintaining or modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and powers that it carries (226.4-227.1)

Verbal rituals, fellowships of discourse, doctrinal groups and social appropriation (educational system) are linked together "constituting great edifices". (227.2)

III. Conspiracy of philosophy with genealogy (i.e., activity of limitation and exclusion) (227.3-228.3)

A. Philosophical themes conform to this activity of limitation by: (227.3-4)

Western thought has tried to make discourse appear as the interjection of thinking, speaking and producing meaning = theme of the founding subject.

1. Proposing an ideal truth as law of discourse
2. Proposing immanent rationality as principle of their behavior
3. Accompany an ethic of knowledge which promises truth only to the desire for truth itself and the power to think it

B. Deny the specific reality of discourse: discourse permits no room between speaking and thinking (227.5-228.3)

1. Muzzling of sophistry (227.7)
2. Modern themes
a. discourse as activity of writing: theme of the founding subject (author) permits us to elide the reality of discourse; the subject is thought to originate meaning (227.8-228.1) [transcendentalism]; contrast disqualified phenomenological subject

b. discourse as activity of reading: opposes theme of originating experience prior to being shaped by the cogito; i.e., there is meaning in the world we can be found (228.2) [metaphysics]

c. discourse as activity of exchange: theme of universal mediation of the logos to humanity via discourse, between discourse and things/events. Discourse (signifier) also becomes the signified, and disappears (228.3). [ennunciative function]

IV. Discourse nullifies itself by placing itself at the disposal of the signifier: logophobia (i.e., fear of the mass of spoken, uncontrolled, disordered things) hides behind our apparent logophilia (228.4-231.2)

A. Three decisions necessary in order to analyze the conditions, activities and effects of this logophobia (229.2)

1. We must question will to truth

2. Restore the event-character of discourse (cf. IV, B, 2)

3. Abolish sovereignty of signifier

B. Methodological demands of exploring these themes (229.3)

1. Four negative principles for analysis of discourse

a. Principle of reversal: where we recognize the source of discourse, the principles behind its flourishing and continuity, we traditionally think of the positive role of author, disciplines, and will to truth; instead, we must recognize the negative activity of cutting-out and of rarefaction of discourse (229.4)

b. Principle of discontinuity: there are no great continuous repressed discourses, no unsaid or unthought thing floating about in the world, which interlaces all discontinuous discourses. Discourse must be treated as a discontinuous activity (229.5-6)

c. Principle of specificity: a particular discourse cannot be resolved by a prior system of significations; “discourse does not work hand in glove with what we already know. . . . We must conceive of discourse as a violence that we do to things, or, at all events, as a practice we impose upon them” (229.7)
d. Principle of exteriority: we are not to burrow to some hidden core of discourse to discover its true meaning, but rather look for the external conditions of its existence (229.8)

2. Positive principles for analysis of discourse (230.1)

Corrected translation: “Four notions must therefore serve as regulatory principle for analysis: event, series, regularity and condition of possibility. Term, for term, as you see, these notions oppose event to creation, series to unity, regularity to originality, and condition of possibility to signification”. (230.1) [trans. Meaghan Morris]

- event vs. creation
- series vs. unity
- regularity vs. originality
- condition of possibility vs. signification

**event of discourse**: its exteriority, discourse does not presuppose ‘new ideas’, invention or creativity, rather ‘misprision’ (re-inscription as deliberate mistaking or parody), transformations in practice and in their common articulation; contrast creation; (transcendental) ‘author’ does not have the exclusive and instantaneous right

**series**: contrast notion of the unity of a book, work, oeuvre

**regularity**: the regular formation of objects in discourse/disciplines on the basis of consensus based paradigms; contrast originality in the romantic sense of the word

**condition of possibility**: not external to discourse, but rather the rules that determine what can be counted as knowledge in any epoch; contrast signification, i.e., the privileging of (metaphysical) meaning.

C. “Two (additional) remarks” (230.2ff)

1. Contemporary history which has removed the individual discursive event (e.g., official price lists, title deeds, parish registers, harbour archives) from its previously privileged position and revealed the more enduring structures of history (230.2):

- a. Do not consider a discursive event without defining the series to which it belongs, without specifying the method of analysis used, without seeking the probable limits of the occurrence, without enquiring about variations, without desiring to know the conditions on which it depends; but these conditions are not understood “in terms of cause and effect in the formless unity of some great evolutionary process, . . . It did not do this in order to seek out structures anterior to, alien or hostile to the [discursive] event. It was rather in order to establish those diverse converging, and sometimes divergent, but never autonomous series that enable us to circumscribe the ‘locus’ on an event, the limits of its fluidity and the conditions of its emergence.” (230.2)
b. Fundamental notions are not consciousness (related to author/liberty) nor (historical) continuity (related to causality), nor sign and structure (230.3)

“They are, rather, the notions of [discursive] event and of series, with the play of notions which are linked to these; it is around such an ensemble that this analysis of discourse I am thinking of is articulated, certainly not upon those traditional themes which the philosophers of the past took for 'living' history, but on the effective work of historians. (230.2) [trans. Meaghan Morris]

2. Philosophical or theoretical problems posed by this analysis of discourses (=ensembles of discursive events) (230.4-231.1)

a. Foucault introduces notions of chance, discontinuity and materiality. Discourses are to be treated as ensembles of discursive events; an event is neither substance, accident, quality nor process. Yet it is not immaterial. It takes effect on the level of materiality (“incorporeal materialism”). (231.1)

b. We must elaborate a theory of discontinuous systematization. Not a matter of a succession of instants of time, nor a plurality of thinking subjects. The ‘philosophy of event’ should advance in the direction of caesurae which break the instant and disperse the subject in “a multiplicity of possible positions and functions” (cf. Deleuze, Logic of Sense).

c. If these discursive, discontinuous series have their regularity, within certain limits, it is no longer possible to mechanically establish causal links. We must accept chance as a category in production of events (=lack of necessity). (231.1)

V. Forecast of future work (231.3)

Following the above principles Foucault's future analyses will fall into 2 groups:

A. “Critical studies” based on functions of exclusion (232.2): Processes of rarefaction, consolidation (ordering), and unification in discourse

1. Sets reversal-principle to work: distinguishes forms of exclusion, limitation and appropriation (see II, III above)

2. Three systems of exclusion (232.2)

   a. Disjunction of reason and madness in Enlightenment (see MC) (232.2)

   b. Taboo systems in language concerning sexuality from 16th-19th C (see HS I-III) (232.2)

   c. Will to truth (232.3)
(i) study the way truth has been selected, repeated, extended, displaced: beginning with Sophists and Platonic philosophy, leading to distinction between true and false discourse; 16th/17th C England: observational science as a will to knowledge; 19th C: modern science, modern industrial society, and accompanying positivist ideology (232)

(ii) the practices and prescriptive discourses which make up the penal code: including medical, psychiatric and sociological discourses (232.4) (see DP)

How has commentary (II, B 1), author principle (II, B 2), and discipline (II, B #), worked in practice: 16th to 19th C history of medicine (233.1); 18th and 19th century literary criticism and history have constituted the character of the author (233.2)

How did the principles of author, commentary and practice work themselves out? Look at supporting institutions, transmission and reinforcement. How did the great author principle become a principle of limitation in a given discourse? How was the practice of commentary replaced by practices of observation and verification? How did 18th and 19th literary criticism and history constitute the character of the author and the form of the work by utilizing and modifying religious exegesis, biblical criticism, and the ‘lives’ of legendary figures? (233.1)

B. Genealogical studies (233.3)

Processes of discontinuity, discontinuity, materiality

Concerns the effective formation of discourse, whether within the limits of control, or outside them, or both. While criticism looks at the processes of rarefaction, consolidation and unification of discourse, genealogy studies their formation (at once scattered, discontinuous and regular); it does not look for forms of rejection, exclusion, consolidation or attribution. The difference between the critical and genealogical is one of point of attack, perspective and delimitation.

Brings 3 other principles into play:

- how series of discourse are formed, through, in spite of, or with the aid of these systems of contraint?
- what were the specific norms of each?
- what were their conditions of appearance, growth and variation?

1. Studies effective formation of discourse: scattered, discontinuous, and regular, as opposed to rarefaction, consolidation and limitation (233.3)

2. Examples of series of discourse dealing with:
a. Sexuality: tangle of discursive ensembles (literary, religious, ethical, biological, medical, juridical) constituting a unitary discourse on sexuality (233.4-234.1)

b. Wealth, poverty, money, production, trade (234.2)

c. Heredity (234.3)

C. Critical and genealogical studies must support and complete each other (234.4)

1. Criticial studies deal with the systems that envelop discourse; they try to mark out and distinguish the principle of ordering discourse, exclusion and rarity in discourse, and its practices. (234.4)

2. Genealogical studies by contrast deal with series of formation of discourse; try to grasp its power of affirmation, i.e., its ability to constitute domains of objects in relation to which one can affirm or deny propositions. (234.4)

3. Analysis of discourse brings to light the action of imposed rarity, and its power of affirmation; not discourse as continuous outpouring of meaning (234.5) (i.e., ‘structuralism’ 234.6).

VI. Acknowledgments

A. Dumézil

Taught Foucault how to analyze the eternal economy of discourse by means of comparison in relation to institutions (235.1)

B. Canguilhem (235.1)

C. Hyppolite (235.2-237)

1. Responsible for French 20th C presence of Hegel (235.1)

2. Confrontation with Hegel: Modernity as test of Hegelianism and philosophy (235.2-236.3)

3. Inversion of Hegelian themes: Marx, Fichte, Bergson, Kierkegaard, Husserl (237)

4. Anxiety of Discourse: Hommage to Hyppolite (237.5)

Notes:
Judy Malloy, author of its name was Penelope. Cambridge, Mass., Eastgate Systems, 1993.

Janet Murray, author of Hamlet on the Holodeck.