

## MICHEL FOUCAULT "THE DISCOURSE ON LANGUAGE" (1971)

Foucault begins by acknowledging that, as individuals, we mostly desire for words to be transparent and for the truth to be revealed thereby. At the institutional level, however, the desire is to control discourse and give it a proper place. This is because danger inheres in the fact that people speak ('parole' or discourse) and that their speech proliferates. Consequently, in every society, "the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role it is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality" (149). 'Archaeological analysis' of the sort analysed in The Archaeology of Knowledge must accordingly be coupled with what he calls 'genealogical analysis' in order to uncover the history of "dominations and enslavements" (149) that lurks behind words.

Foucault suggests that the production of discourse is controlled via a number of procedures.

Firstly, via what he terms *externally* applied systems for the control and delimitation of discourse:

C **Censorship:** externally applied rules of exclusion prohibit speaking about certain objects (sexuality, for example, or politics), arrange certain rituals and circumstances in which it is permissible to do so, and grant certain people (and exclude others therefrom) the exclusive right to do so. Speech is not the mere "verbalisation of conflicts and systems of domination, but . . . is the very object of man's conflicts" (149).

C **The Fabrication of Binary Opposites:** certain divisions and dichotomies are created such as that between reason and insanity. Discourse created the difference between reason and madness: a "man was mad if his speech could not be said to form part of the common discourse of men. His words were considered null and void" (150), although, paradoxically, the mad man's speech was "credited with strange powers, of revealing some hidden truth, of predicting the future" (150).

C **The Will to Truth:** the "opposition between true and false" (150) that is due to a will to truth / knowledge and which is based on historical and thus modifiable systems of exclusion from the domain of the true. The historically constituted nature of truth is clear in the change from the Sophistic to the Platonic notions of truth: "truth moved over from the ritualised act of . . . enunciation to settle on what was enunciated itself: its meaning, its form, its object and its relation to what it referred to" (150). There was a shift in the concept of truth, from truth as functional to truth as an abstract immutable category. This is why the mutations of science are due not to discoveries, but to the "appearance of new forms of the will to truth" (151) which sketch out the "schema of possible, observable, measurable and classifiable objects" and "imposed upon the knowing subject . . . a certain position, a certain viewpoint, and a certain function" (151). The will to truth is subtended by both "institutional support" (151) (pedagogical systems, the book-system, the publishing industry, learned societies and laboratories) and "institutional distribution" (151), that is the "manner in which knowledge is employed in a society, the way in which it is exploited, divided, and . . . attributed" (151). This will to knowledge exercises a "power of constraint upon other forms of discourse" (151) such as literature (which has long sought to base itself upon "nature, in the plausible" [151]), economic practices, the penal code, etc.

Foucault stresses that the first two forms of exclusion are subordinate to the third form, the will to truth. This is because discourse is "incapable of recognising the will to truth which pervades it" (151) and which makes it difficult for us to realise the "prodigious machinery of the will to truth, with its vocation of exclusion" (151).

The production of discourse is also controlled, secondly, via *internally* applied rules for the control and delimitation of discourse. By 'internal,' Foucault has in mind the process whereby "discourse exercises its own control; rules concerned with the principles of classification, ordering and distribution" (152). The rules internal to discourse include:

C **Intertextual Repetition:** Foucault's term for this is "commentary" (152) (i.e. each text is a commentary on earlier texts) as a result of which discourse takes the form of an "identity and sameness" (153). Foucault argues that every society has its "major narratives" (152) privileged for "some hidden secret or wealth" (152) that allegedly "lies buried within" (152) them. Whether, for example, religious, literary, judicial and scientific in nature, these are "forms of discourse that lie at the origins of a certain number of new verbal acts, which are reiterated, transformed, or

discussed"(152). Foucault's point is that originality is impossible and intertextuality is inevitable, the possibilities for extrapolation being endless and for new (really old) discourse infinite. Commentary's role is to articulate what has already been said: it "gives us the opportunity to say something other than the text itself, but on condition that it is the text itself which is uttered and, in some way, finalised" (153).

C **Authorship:** By author, Foucault has in mind not the individual per se who wrote the text in question but the "unifying principle in a particular group of writings or statements, lying at the origins of their significance, as the seat of their coherence" (153), that is, their "identity" (153), in the form of an individuality or I, which unites a body of writing. The author has historically functioned differently at different stages: in the Middle Ages, the index of truth in scientific discourse was the sanctity of the author while the author was relatively unimportant in literary texts. However, since the seventeenth century, the author's importance has increased steadily in literature and, by contrast, decreased in importance in scientific discourse. The author in modern literature provides "its unities, its coherence, its links with reality" (153). Foucault is less interested in the biography of the individual than in the principle which demarcates one body of writing from another.

C **Discursive Formations:** by this, Foucault has in mind the "organisation of disciplines" (153) which "enables us to construct, but within a narrow framework" (153) objects of knowledge. Disciplines are "defined by groups of objects, methods, their corpus of propositions considered to be true, the interplay of rules and definition, of techniques and tools: all these constitute a sort of anonymous system . . . without there being any question of their meaning or their validity being derived from whoever happened to invent them" (153-4). The point of departure for any discipline is not "some meaning which must be rediscovered . . . it is that which is required for the construction of new statements" (154). A discipline is neither the "sum total of all truths that may be uttered concerning something" (154) nor the "total of all that may be accepted, by virtue of some principle of coherence or systematisation, concerning some given fact or proposition" (154) because all disciplines contain errors that are as indispensable to its constitution as truths are. For a proposition to belong to a discipline, it must fulfill certain conditions other than mere truth: it must refer to a specifically delimited range of objects and it must utilise certain "conceptual instruments and techniques of a well-defined type" (154). For a proposition to be considered true, it must accommodate itself to the theoretical field that prevails in the discipline into which it is inserted. Every discipline recognises truth and error only within the limits of its conceptual field, errors being identifiable only within the set parameters of a particular methodological process. The truth refers to facts, but the "true" (154) is that which is permitted within the "rules of some discursive `policy'" (155). All in all, disciplines "constitute a system of control in the production of discourse, fixing its limits" (155) via certain rules.

C **Qualification to Speak:** referring to the "subjection of discourse" (157) or "rarefaction among speaking subjects" (155), Foucault argues that "none may enter into discourse upon a specific subject unless he has satisfied certain conditions or if he has not, from the outset, qualified to do so" (155). There is no such thing as the "universal communication of knowledge" (155), he stresses. The exchange and communication of knowledge operate within complex and restrictive systems that are regulated by:

C rituals that define the respective roles of speaker and listener, the gestures and behaviour that ought to accompany statements, in short, the "whole range of signs that must accompany discourse" (155), and which specifies the supposed significances of the words used as well as their intended effects upon listeners;

C "fellowships of discourse" (156) that limit the circulation to a "closed community according to strict regulations" (156). (Note, in this regard, the distinction between creative writing and other linguistic usages.);

C "Doctrinal adherence" (156): any discipline seems to welcome all those who are prepared to recognise the same truths and to conform with certain norms. In fact, a discipline, while linking "individuals to certain types of utterance" (156), consequently bars them from others. Questions of heresy and unorthodoxy are an intrinsic part of all doctrines;

C the "social appropriation of discourse" (156): access to discourse is delimited by the

availability of an education that inevitably distributes it inequitably. As a result, every "educational system is a means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and the powers it carries with it" (156).

In short, for example, educational systems, creative writing, the judicial system, institutional medicine, and even philosophy with its emphasis on "ideal truth" and "immanent rationality" (156) and its denial of the specific reality of discourse are all means for the subjection of discourse.

Philosophy, in particular, has "permitted as little room as possible between thought and words . . . speaking and thinking" (156). Indeed, to discourse is to "constitute thought, clad in its signs and rendered visible by words" (157). By emphasising, too, the "structures of language . . . producing a certain effect of meaning" (157), philosophy has led to the "elision of the reality of discourse" (157) through the following themes:

- C the "theme of the founding subject" (157): the "task" (157) of this subject is to "animate the empty forms of language with his objectives" (157), to grasp intuitively "through the thickness and inertia of things . . . the meanings lying within them" (157) and to indicate the "field of meanings . . . in which propositions, sciences, and deductive ensembles ultimately find their foundation" (157);
- C the theme of "originating experience" (157): these are significations circulated prior to the existence of a cogito and which "make possible a sort of primitive recognition" (157) of reality that can accordingly be designated and known in the form of truth; and
- C the theme of "universal mediation" (157): this is the "movement of a logos everywhere elevating singularities into concepts" (157) and enabling consciousness to deploy rationality, when the logos was really only discourse always already in operation.

However, philosophy, in reality dependent upon the signifier whether written read or exchanged, seeks to nullify the reality of discourse. Our civilisation's "logophilia" (158) is based on the desire to control the uncontrollable, the dangerous aspects of discourse, in order to "efface all trace of its irruption into the activity of our thought and language" (158).

To analyse this process, Foucault suggests that it necessary to interrogate the will to truth, to restore discourse to its character as event, and to abolish the sovereignty of the signifier by focusing less on the traditional categories of analysis, such as creation, unity, originality and signification, and

- C rejecting the traditional emphasis on what is included and emphasising instead the "cutting-out and rarefaction of discourse" (158), its exclusionary character rather than its creative positiveness.
- C rejecting the notion that our goal is to seek for a united and cohesive discourse by restoring the unsaid or unthought elided thereby.
- C rejecting the notion that there is any prediscursive "system of significations" (158) by which the "world presents us with a legible face, leaving us merely to decipher it" (158); rather, discourse is a "violence that we do to things . . . a practice we impose upon them" (158).
- C rejecting the traditional goal (to "burrow to the hidden core of discourse, to the heart of the thought or meaning manifested in it" [158]) and instead attending to the "appearance and regularity" of discourse itself by determining the "external conditions of existence" (158) of any given discourse.

Discourse analysis seeks not to uncover the meanings possibly lying behind a discourse but to contextualise the discursive event within a "discontinuous series of relations which are not in any order of succession (or simultaneity) within any (or several) consciousnesses" (159) nor as one among a series of events connected by "mechanically causal links or an ideal necessity among their constitutive elements" (159) (e.g. base/superstructure models, teleological notions of history). Any discourse is an event that is the effect of and has an effect on other events: it is as such material.

Foucault advocates two correlated forms of discourse analysis:

- C "critical analyses" (161) that distinguish "forms of exclusion, limitation and appropriation" (161) and reveal "instances of discursive control" (161) in order to show "how they are formed, in answer to which needs, how they are modified and displaced, which constraints they effectively exercised" (16) etc. Such exclusionary movements include the dichotomy between madness and reason, the formation of sexual taboos at the same time that there was an inducement to discourse concerning all matters sexual (a movement that began in the confessional and ended in the psychiatrist's office), and the distinction between truth and falsehood (Foucault traces its

historical emergence and development). Rules for the limitation of discourse include how the such notions as the author, commentary and disciplines (for example, in the practice of medicine from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth, or how literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries constituted the character of the author and the form of the work on the basis of biblical exegesis, hagiography, or the varying role played by the author in the various disciplines such as psychiatry, physics or philosophy). In short, critical analyses analyse the "processes of rarefaction, consolidation and unification in discourse" (161), how certain things are permitted to be said on a particular subject and thus how various knowledges are formed.

- C Genealogical analyses analyse the role of ritual, fellowships of discourse, doctrinal adherence and the social appropriation of discourse, that is, the subjection of discourse and its rarefaction among speaking subjects, in the effective formation of series of discourse: "what were the specific norms for each and what were their conditions of appearance, growth and variation" (160). Genealogy attempts to contextualise the emergence of particular discourses: for example, taboos on sexuality are related to literary, ethical, biological and medical texts, that is, "wherever it is named or described, metaphorised, explained or judged" (161). Similarly, the emergence of genetics as a science is traced to discourses concerning heredity that were widely dispersed through a variety of disciplines in the early twentieth century.

Discourse analysis, unconcerned with the extraction of linguistic meaning, combines criticism and genealogy, that is, the study of rarefaction and exclusion, and the "power of affirmation" (162), that "power of constituting domains of objects, in relation to which one can affirm or deny true or false propositions" (162).