The Dispositive of Intercultural Communication

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the concept of dispositives as it has been introduced by the French philosopher Michel Foucault. The concept will be contrasted with competing approaches from discourse analysis, and it will then be explored in its potential as a basis for empirical analysis. Dispositive analyses provide insights into how discourse, power, and knowledge shape society on a very general macro-level. Instead of linguistic, textual analyses, dispositive analysis helps to re-read the emergence, the development, and, as an example here, the inner composition of academic fields. This article sketches insights from a dispositive perspective into the field of intercultural communication research that is then interpreted as maintaining the dispositive of intercultural communication even if recent debates primarily aim at transcending old cementations of the discipline. The article will close with a discussion of shortcomings of the method that culminate in the challenge of argumentative circularity.

KEYWORDS

Discourse Analysis, Dispositive Analysis, Intercultural Communication, Le Dispositif, Michel Foucault

INTRODUCTION

French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984) in his works has developed a discourse perspective on history. Instead of considering history as a linear sequence of events, Foucault argued that society and social phenomena emerge in a complex interweaving of discursive formations. From the beginning, the discursive construction of power had been a central aspect for Foucault, whereas his late works even more focus on the question of how society produces power relations and how at the same time, power shapes society. Notions like those of *dispositif*, (Foucault, 1977b, p. 63; cf. Engl. "apparatus": Foucault, 1980, p. 194) *gouvernementalité* (Foucault, 2004b, p. 111; cf. Engl. "governmentality": Foucault, 2007, p. 108) and *bio-pouvoir* (Foucault, 1976, p. 184; cf. Engl. "bio-power": Foucault, 1978, p. 140) helped Foucault to precisely name these constellations. However, Foucault did not develop these concepts as bases for methodology-led empirical analyses. Instead, he invited his scholars to use his texts as a "tool-box" (Foucault, 1994a, p. 523) and to see his considerations as a "game" (cf. French: "un jeu": Foucault, 1977b, p. 62) that others are invited to actively join.

This article starts with a very short introduction to Foucault's concept of the dispositive. It will then present and discuss a selection of applied research methods relying on this concept. Since the concept of dispositives excels other tools from discourse analysis in its ability to consider a wide heterogeneity of empirical material, it is best suitable for large-scale analyses of social phenomena. Accordingly, instead of a textual analysis, this article will explore the potential of dispositive analyses for an evaluation of the general field of intercultural communication research and teaching. Instead of a fine-grain inspection, dispositive analyses may also be considered as a "reading experience" (Nowicka, 2013, pp. 37-38), and the examples given in this article cannot be more than impulses for

critical reflections of the field. The article will close with some critical remarks on the methodological soundness of the approach paying particular attention to argumentative circularities of the method.

Foucault's Notion of Discourse

The concept of dispositives evolves from Foucault's uses of the notion of discourse in his earlier works. According to Foucault, history will always need to be conceived of as a discourse. Instead of seeing history as a linear line-up of events, concepts or ideas that presumably will make sense as a whole in the end, we should acknowledge that history is full of short-hand ruptures and crossings. We should not fall for the illusion that we can objectively reconstruct the historical origins of now existing phenomena. We will always need to acknowledge that today's phenomena are complex in their nature and that we will not be able to adequately reduce them to presumably unambiguous explanations or roots (Foucault, 1969, p. 16; 1972, p. 8). Foucault titles one of his monographs *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Foucault, 1972; cf. the original title: "L'archéologie du savoir": Foucault, 1969) and he uses this notion of the technique of archaeology as a metaphor to describe the methodological considerations that should also form the basis for discourse analyses.

In his early works, Foucault considers discourse as the sum of all statements belonging to the same discursive formation (Foucault, 1969, p. 157; 1972, p. 119). Later on, Dreyfus and Rabinow conclude that the notion of discursive practices entails the totality of statements that can be taken seriously at a given point in time or during a given epoch. Dreyfus and Rabinow criticize this concept as too general and as no longer being suitable to contribute any additional new insights. Instead, the notion of discourse could equally be replaced by "man" or "finitude" (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982, p. 92).

Seven years after *L'archéologie du savoir* had been published, in his 1976 monograph *Histoire de la sexualité I: La volonté de savoir* (Foucault, 1976; cf. Engl. "The History of Sexuality. Vol. 1: An Introduction": Foucault, 1978), Foucault placed a stronger emphasis on the influence of power on social life. This shift modified Foucault's notion of discourse, too, andaccordingly, Foucault then sees discourse as always primarily shaped by power influences. Although social discourse may contain different and even opposing opinions and strategies, discourse as a whole will always be designed to confirm one given power structure in society (Foucault, 1976, p. 134; 1978, pp. 101-102).

Comparing Foucault's notion of discourse with other approaches from today's spectrum of discourse analysis, Foucault's concept addresses abstract forms of knowledge from a very wide and large-scale macro-perspective. At the same time, it refrains from too detailed micro-analyses as they are promoted for example by approaches from text linguistics. To illustrate this broad spectrum , Wodak and Mayer (2009, p. 6) take a meta-analytical perspective and summarize several systematics on notions of discourse in discourse analysis. In their overview, all other approaches schedule much narrower foci of analysis to concise pieces of text than Foucault's concept. Foucault's abstract notion of discourse leaves and transcends mere textual analyses, although Jäger and Maier claim that even Foucault's notion of discourse and dispositive can and must be traced back to their origins in small-scale rhetorical and textual analysis (Jäger & Maier, 2009, p. 6).

Foucault's Notion of Dispositives

Foucault does not define his notion of dispositives in a too precise manner. Instead, Foucault sometimes tends to use the term as a placeholder that takes into consideration the complexities of what Foucault wants to describe. Furthermore, the notion of dispositives does not focus on single phenomena, but instead on the interrelations between them. This is why Raffnsøe, Gudmand-Høyer, and Thaning (2016, p. 279) conclude that applying this abstract concept to a concrete example may be the best way to properly describe it (Raffnsøe et al., 2016, p. 279). In fact, Foucault makes extensive use of the notion of dispositives in his monographs *Histoire de la sexualité I: La volonté de savoir* (Foucault, 1976; cf. Engl. "The History of Sexuality I: An Introduction": Foucault, 1978) as well as *Surveillir et punir* (Foucault, 1975; cf. Engl. "Discipline and Punish": Foucault, 1977a). Subsequently, in his 1977/1978 lectures at *Collège de France*, Foucault elaborates the dispositive of security (cf. "Sécurité, territoire,

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