Sign Use, Social Patterns, and Mentalities:
A Semiotic Approach to Discourse

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Overview

- Can different approaches to discourse be connected?
- Multi-level theories of discourse
- The semiotic 4-level model of discourse
- Examples
Foucault

- “Rules of discourse” determine what is said and when it is said
- Discourses are based on power structures, but also create or strengthen them in turn
- Discourse practices have verbal and nonverbal (e.g. images, architecture) aspects
- Foucault’s enoncés are not simple utterances, but abstract units which can be expressed in different ways
  - also in different semiotic modes or codes?
  - abstract mental or cognitive units – how to investigate them?
Discourse Linguistics

- Various directions or subfields in discourse analysis (cf. Warnke/Spitzmüller 2008: 18f):
  - Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is interested in social conditions (such as power structures and participation) connected with discourses
  - Discourse semantics: semantic analyses above the textual level
  - Quantitative approaches: measure features of expression (e.g. frequencies of occurrence of items)
- Semiotics can be used as a common framework
DIMEAN

- Diskurslinguistische Mehr-Ebenen-Analyse (Ingo Warnke & Jürgen Spitzmüller)
- Model that achieves a synthesis for empirical linguistics including the trans-textual level (Warnke/Spitzmüller 2011: 200)

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Semiotic 4-level Model of Discourse

• Discourses can make use of all sign systems (language, images, film, kinesics = body behaviour) and also include various perceptual modes (visual, auditory … perception)

→ multimodal discourses

• Discourses are detectable patterns in the use of sign systems. They are socially caused, culturally transmitted, and are cognitively represented and understood

• Based on a semiotic conception of culture (cf. Posner 1993)

• Three areas are distinguished: material culture, mentality, society
Three Areas of Culture (Posner 2004)

1. **Material culture**: the artefacts created by a culture (material, physically measurable results of human actions)
   - Semiotic artefacts are called *texts*

2. **Mental culture** (or *mentality*): all mentefacts, culturally shared mental products: knowledge, ideas, thoughts, prejudices, ...
   - Semiotic mentefacts are called *codes*

3. **Social culture** (or *society*): all individuals sharing a culture, and the institutions created by them
   - Individuals are relevant for semiotics as *sign users*
Four Levels of Description

(1) Delimitation by topic, location, time [medium, genre]

(2) Patterns in texts:
   a) Expression patterns (e.g. frequency of expressions such as words, phrases, or n-grams; combinations colours, elements of images, …)
   b) Content patterns (propositions; speech acts; what is said and what is avoided)

(3) Patterns in mentality (ways of thinking)
   • Episteme (Foucault), structures of knowledge, cognitive knowledge, etc.
   • These patterns define what can be thought and communicated. They are influenced by discourses, and influence them in turn

(4) Patterns in society
   • Institutions; social conditions; power structures; interests of the participants; economic conditions; technologies. These patterns influence discourses.
Level 1: possible topics, locations, times

topic, location, time of the discourse

Level 2: **Material Culture**
artefacts, texts (= art. with meaning)

patterns in texts

Level 3: **Mentality**
(codes, beliefs, concepts)

mental patterns

Level 4: **Society**
(individuals, institutions, rules)

social patterns
Example 1: Romantic Love in Sentimentalist Novels

(1) **Topic**: love & marriage; **location**: Germany; **time**: ca. 1780 – 1820

(2) **Texts**: [first German novels, e.g. “Wilhelm Meister”, Wieland's novels]
   a) Expression: romantic vocabulary; enlargement of vocabulary for emotional states & relations
   b) Content: Importance of love; nuances of feeling; conflicting emotions; conflicts between emotions and external circumstances [*Empfindsamkeit; Sentimentalism*]

(3) **Patterns in mentality**
   • [to be established:] emotional basis for marriage, which had previously been conventional

(4) **Patterns in society**
   • Enlightenment; bourgeois revolutions; aristocracy and church lose influence
   • Rise of capitalism and the cities; nuclear family replaced the village as primary social unit
   • Emotional bond became important both for society (child-rearing) and economy
     > Similar developments in the UK 50 years earlier (e.g. novels by Richardson)
Example 2: Change in Immigration Discourse

(1) **Topic:** migrant labour, **location:** Germany, **time:** ca. 1960 – present

(2) **Texts:** [public discourse]
   b) Content: (1960s) focus on cultural differences, (today) focus on integration

(3) **Patterns in mentality**
   • (1960s) demand that migrant labourers should leave after working a few years, fear of people perceived as foreign; (today) demand for integration, fear of cultural difference

(4) **Patterns in society**
   • (throughout) economic need for migrant labour
   • (1960s) need for factory workers that can be easily replaced; preference for young workers
   • (today) need for well-educated, skilled employees which cannot be easily replaced
Example 3: Discourse of the Socialist Hero in East German feature film (DEFA film)

- Corpus analysis by Doris Schöps, TU Berlin (Schöps, in preparation)
- Quantitative analysis of the frequency of 42 body postures in 75 DEFA feature films (GDR socialist film)
- Character roles were defined to make the films comparable
- A number of body postures were more frequent for the negatively connotated roles (outsider, enemy): arms akimbo, legs crossed, reclining with outstretched arm(s), legs akimbo, …
- Only one was more frequent for the positively connotated roles (hero, representative of the socialist system): lowered head
A 13 as a **pose** in visual media


Conny, a „womanizer“ from West Berlin, in the role of *outsider*: Filmstill from *Frauenschicksale* (Hellberg 1952), 00:09:58, cutout.
Effects for the factor „role“ (ANOVA)

A13:

*Hands in the pocket trousers* is taken most often by the *enemy* and the *outsider*.

Apparently the body posture is appropriated to characterize negative connotated roles.
Conclusions

- A **semiotic analysis** provides an integrative perspective on discourse
- The **3-area model of discourse** (Posner 2003, 2004) allows us to describe discourses as interconnected patterns
- Links between **texts, mental structures, and society** can be investigated on a semiotic basis
- Different approaches to discourse focus on **different areas** (e.g. linguistic analysis primarily on texts, CDA primarily on society, etc.)
- Semiotics enables us to **connect already existing research** in an integral model, but also points towards new questions
Selected Literature

- Schöps, Doris (in preparation), *Körperhaltungen und Rollenstereotype im DEFA-Film. Eine korpusanalytische Untersuchung*.