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A Semiotic Approach to Discourse – Martin Siefkes
DiscourseNet International Congress #1
Discourse: Language, Society, Critique
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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 **énoncés** 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)

Intra-textual level	Analysis of the whole text	<i>Visual structure of the text</i>
		<i>Topic (macro structure)</i>
		<i>Topics in parts of text (meso s.)</i>
	Analysis of propositions	<i>(Micro structure)</i>
	Analysis on the word level	<i>Multiple-word expressions</i>
		<i>One-word expressions</i>



Actors	Roles in interaction	<i>Author</i>
		<i>Anticipated addressees</i>
	Analysis of propositions	<i>Social stratification; power</i>
		<i>Discourse communities</i>
		<i>Voice ...</i>
	Mediality	<i>Media</i>
<i>Genres</i>		
Trans-textual analysis	Roles in interaction	<i>Intertextuality</i>
		<i>Frames / scripts</i>
		<i>Semantic figures / topoi</i>
		<i>Ideologies / mentalities</i>
		<i>Ongoing social debates</i>



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



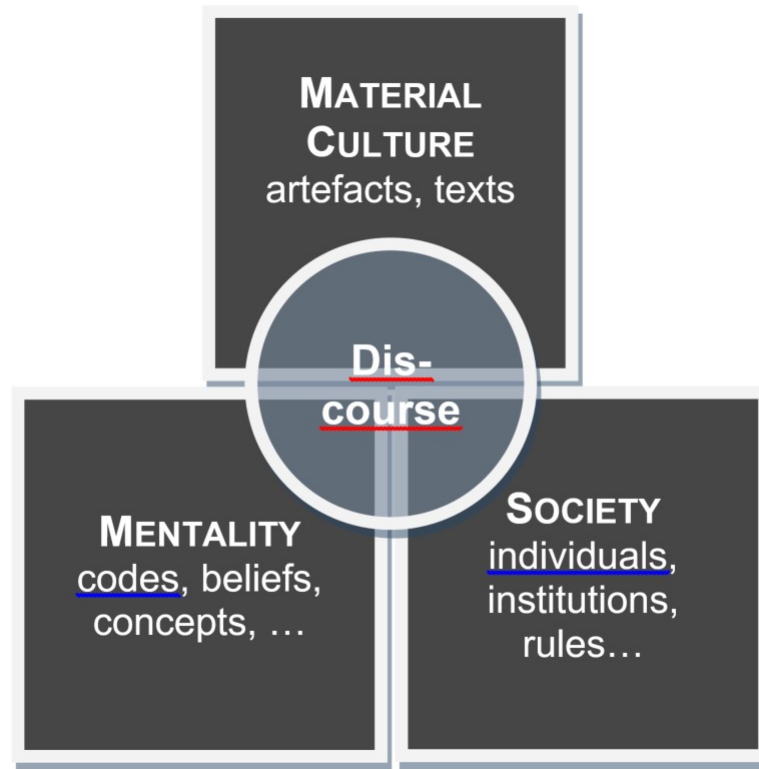
Three Areas of Culture (Posner 2004)

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**



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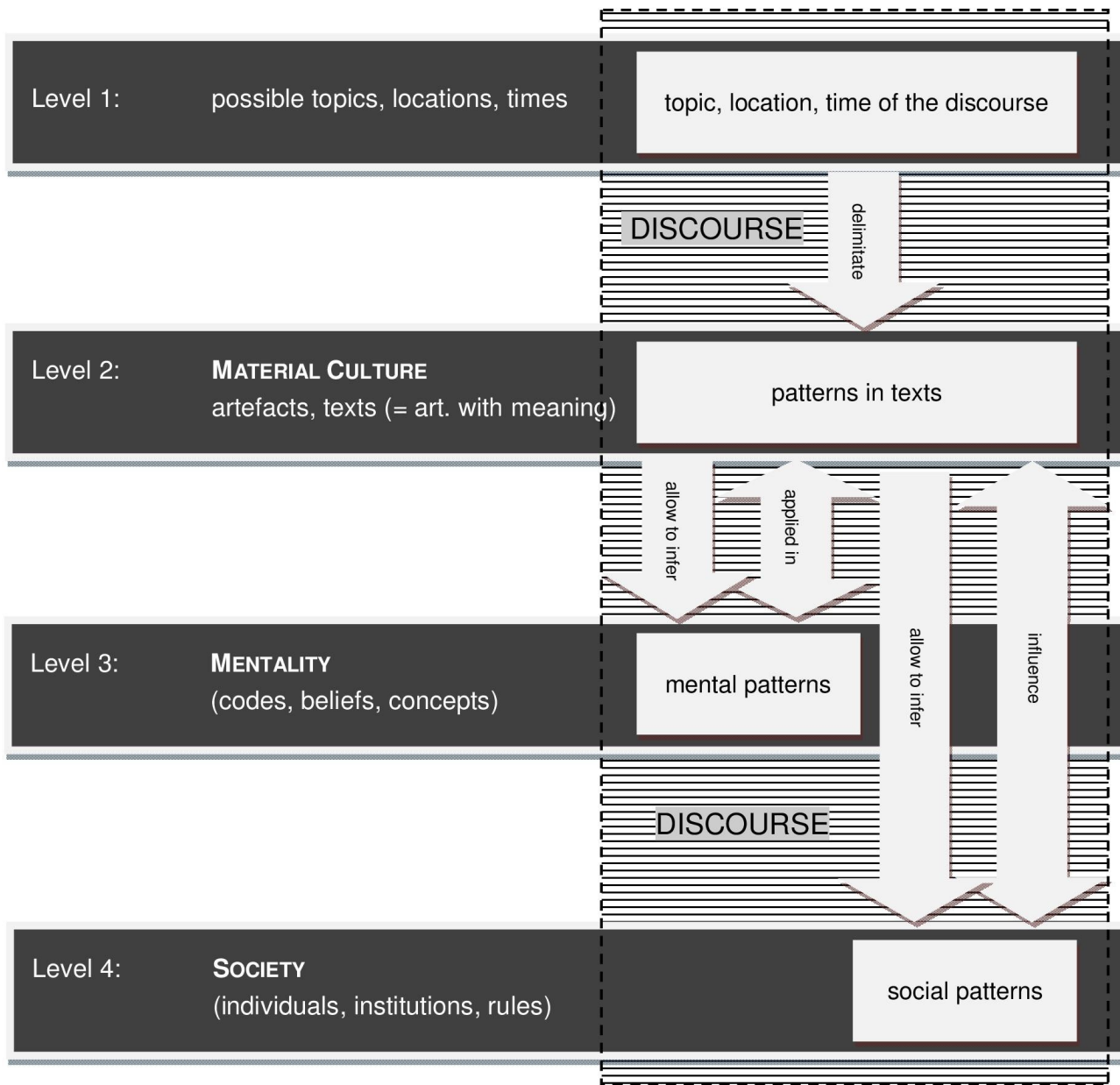
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Four Levels of Description

- (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.



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

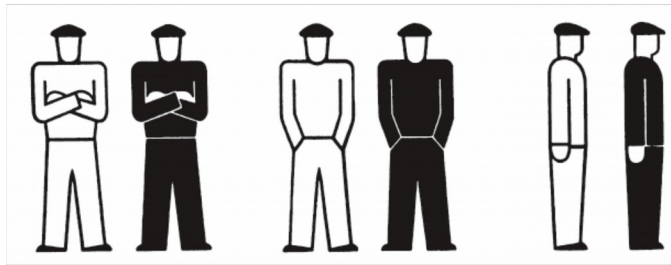
- (1) **Topic:** migrant labour, **location:** Germany, **time:** ca. 1960 – present)
- (2) **Texts:** [public discourse]
 - a) Expression: (1960s–70s) “Fremdländische”, (1980s–90s) “Ausländer”, (today) “Migrants”
 - b) Content: (1960s) focus on cultural differences, (today) focus on integration
- (3) **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



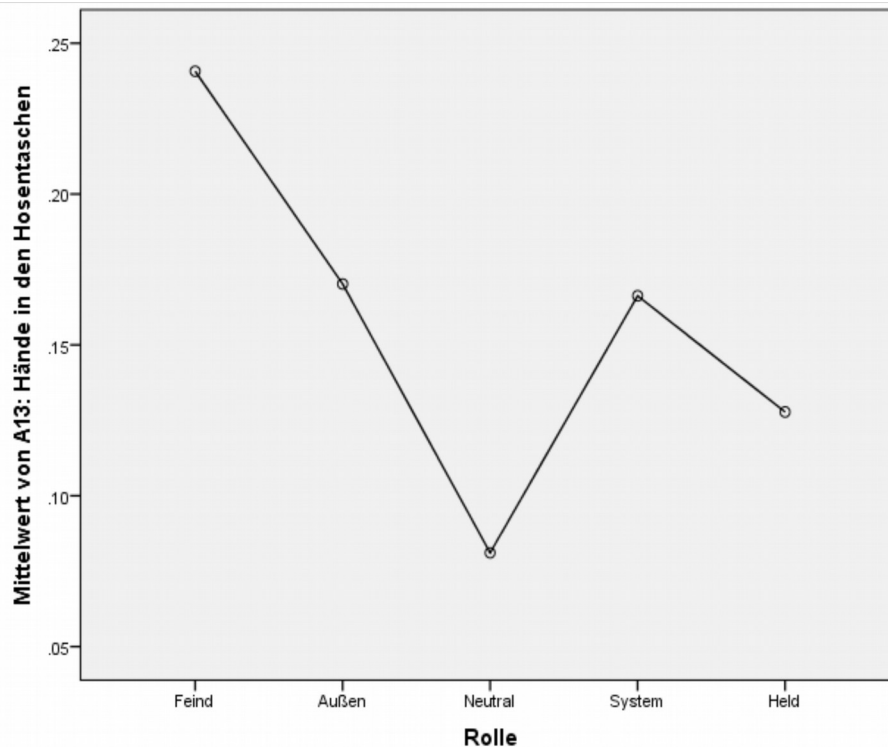
Otto Neurath (1822-1945) & Gerd Arntz (1900-1988): **International System of Typographic Picture Education (ISOTYPE)**



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

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