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In recent decades the idea of "discourse" has become, increasingly popular. It is being applied in many contexts and research disciplines often without precisely defining its scope and meaning. The case is made additionally difficult by commonsense connotations which ascribe to discourse the meaning of an "organized discussion". This notion is presently used in psychology, sociology, pedagogy, philosophy, anthropology, linguistics and other disciplines of the social sciences in such different contexts and meanings that the formulation of a clear and conclusive definiton that would satisfy all its users seems to be an impossible task.

Ernesto Laclau, who placed the notion of discourse on the general map of the contemporary political philosophy, ranks it among the phenomena which came to prominence as a result of what one could call the transcendental turn in modern philosophy entailing the type of analysis which is primarily addressed not to *facts* but to their *conditions of possibility* (Laclau 1995, p. 541). The discursive analysis is based on the assumption that every human thought, perception or activity depends on the structuration of the field of signification which precedes the immediacy of the facts. According to Laclau, this approach differs from the Kantian reflection on the *a priori* forms of human cognition and also from the phenomenological recognition of the subject as the ultimate vehicle of meaning. In his opinion, the theorists of discourse assume a rigorously historical character of the "discursive *a priori* forms" and they propose to examine it with the use of the categories generated within de Saussure's theory of the sign. Such scholars, Laclau argues, use an idea of structure that largely ignores the role of the subject in the process of the constitution of sense.

In their book devoted to the analysis of discourse Louise J. Philips and Marianne Jørgensen offer the general definition of discourse as "a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)" (Philips & Jørgensen 2002, p. 1). The authors go on to emphasize that the shared element of all the "analyses of discourse" is that our ways of talking do not neutrally reflect the world but rather play an active role in creating and changing it. Acknowledging this determined "social constructivism", the authors outline three main fields of "the discourse analysis": Ernesto Laclau and Chantall Mouffe's discourse theory, Norman Fairclogh's critical discourse analysis and discursive psychology (e.g. Potter and Wetherell 1987).

The aim of this paper is to trace the historical evolution of the notion of discourse, beginning from de Saussure's concept of the sign, and to consider closely three post-sructuralist theories of discourse as present in Derrida, Lacan and Foucault which have cleared the way for contemporary approaches to this problem. I will attempt to show that a more detailed analysis of the conceptions of discourse in post-structuralism indicates that as early as at their beginnings there appeared some essential differences in understanding this phenomenon which challenges the thesis on the existence of a consistent reflection that could be referred to as the theory or analysis of discourse. It can be assumed though, that these differences are somewhat "natural", given the interdisciplinarity of what has come to be called "post-structuralism". Naturally, discourse considered in the context of an analysis of the structures of human unconsciousness (Lacan) is not the same idea of discourse that we can use to analyse the structures of power (Foucault). However, the aims which guide the individual theorists in their examinations of discourse often differently influence their theoretical resolutions and the specific terminologies which rarely allow themselves to be reconciled with the propositions of other scholars. "The discourse theory" thus constitutes a heterogenic field of "kin" conceptions conjoined by an emphasis put on the constructivist power of language. In this approach it is assumed that language creates social reality (in the weaker version it is assumed that language is the condition of our capability to know social reality) although the relation between discourse and the social world may take different forms in individual propositions. In Derrida the idea of discourse serves as a model for the "deconstructionist" reading of texts whereby the notion of the "center" is marginalized. In Lacan discourse is associated with the social through the individual and, in addition, it is as ungraspable as the unconscious layers of the human mind. For Foucault the main problem seems to lie in determining the status of what is called "the human sciences" as a form of knowledge whereby the question of the functioning of language intertwines with questions concerning its relations with the social and institutional environment that governs the production of statements in a given time and place.

De Saussure and his critics

In a series of lectures entitled *Course in General Linguistics* Ferdinand de Saussure divided the sign into its signifying (acoustic image, *signifiant*) and signified (the idea, *signifié*) components. In this way he rejected the referential conception of language that was based on the distinctive thing-name. De Saussure assumes that the link between *signifiant* and *signifié* is arbitrary (de Saussure 1986, p. 67). The signified has no fixed, signifying element ascribed to it, therefore no idea can assume a pre-determined acoustic image. An idea, claims Saussure, can be compared to a value which in itself is something completely arbitrary.

Ferdinad de Saussure developed an interesting analogy which compared the system of language to playing chess. For example, the chesspiece knight that is outside the chessboard and the determined conditions of the game, has no value in the eyes of the player. It becomes a concrete and real element only within the game wherein it enters relations with the other figures. It then acquires value. Now, let us suppose that during the game the chesspiece gets lost or damaged: can it be replaced with another one? Certainly, and moreover, a totally different, dissimilar figure will serve exactly the same purpose, because its value largely depends on what surrounds it. Thus de Saussure writes:

> *In the language itself, there are only differences. Even more important than that is the fact that although in general a difference presupposes positive terms between which the difference holds, in a language there are only differences, and no positive terms. Whether we take the signification or the signal, the language includes neither ideas nor sounds existing prior to the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonetic differences arising out of that system* (de Saussure 1986, p. 118).

The signifier and the signified, considered individually, have only a differentiating and negative character and it is only their conjunction that transforms them into something "positive".

A chesspiece has no positive meaning except for the one it acquires during the game. Likewise, a linguistic sign looses its meaning if we consider it in separation from the other elements of the language system. What happens in language is not determined by that which is non-linguistic. One could say that langauge "articulates" reality in some way, however this process also remains totally arbitrary. Consequently, not only is it the link between a concept and its acoustic image that constitutes its linguistic articualtion arbitrarily, but also no fixed connection exists between a concept and a non-linguistic thing it refers to. We are able to know real objects, but only insofar as our language allows us to. I want to emphasize here that de Saussure accepts that there is an ultimate isomorphism between the order of signification and the order of being signified. Every series of sounds corresponds to exactly one concept which means that

it is possible to determine at any moment how in a given language system a signifier relates to a signified. It is also worth noting that from the very beginning de Saussure emphasized the social character of language (*langue*) (ibid., p. 74). While our language (*parole*) may be shaped individually, its practical application may occur only due to the fact that language is a convention agreed upon by a social group.

There have been many criticisms levelled at de Saussure's theory of the sign, one of detractions states that if language is only a form, not substance, and if there exists a close isomorphism between the order of signification and the order of being signified, then from the formal point of view both orders become indistinguishable and so it is impossible to maintain that the character of the linguistic sign is dualistic. Hence the so-called *glossematic school* of Copenhagen has proposed to renounce the Saussurian conception of isomorphism and substitute it with the idea of the division of both orders into units that are smaller than signs:

> *Phonologists have brought to light linguistic units smaller than signs: the phonemes (the sign* ***calf*** *is made up of three phonemes k/ae and /f/. The same method applied to content allows the distinction, in the same sign, of at least three elements* (…) *or semes* (…) *bovine/male/young. Now it is clear that the semantic and the phonic units thus located can be distinguished from the formal point of view: the combinatorial laws concerning the phonemes of a language and those applied to the semes cannot be shown to correspond to each other* (…) (Ducrot & Todorov 1979, p. 22, quoted in Laclau 1995, pp. 542-543).

The break with the Saussurian tradition of understanding the linguistic sign had an important consequence for the succeeding theories of discourse. If one assumes that the abstract system of rules described by phonologists does not require any particular substance, it follows then that by the means of these rules one can describe any signifying system operating in a society, be it nutrition, structures of kinship, furniture or fashion. From this supposition the way leads directly to the renunciation of any *substantial* differences between linguistic and non-linguistic phenomena which is precisely what E. Laclau and Ch. Mouffe do in their *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. In this way the phenomenological thesis on the crucial role of the subject in the constitution of sense is also dismissed.

Derrida and deconstruction

Another point criticized in de Saussure's theory was his usage of the term "system" understood as a closed totality that somehow organizes language. This problem is closely linked with the aforementioned critique of de Saussure's idea of isomorphism.

de Saussure says that: "language is both a self-contained whole and the principle of classification" (1986, p. 10) and later on that:

> *A linguistic system is a series of phonetic differences matched with a series of conceptual differences. But this matching of a certain number of auditory signals and a similar number of items carved out of the mass of thought gives rise to a system of values. It is this system which provides the operative bond between phonic and mental elements within each sign* (ibid., p. 118).

Now, in the works of the classic structuralists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes, de Saussure's idea/theory of "system" has been modified into the idea/theory of "structure"[1]. Thus it can be argued that the post-structuralist critique of structuralism and the theory of structure is also aimed at the idea of the "totality" and "closure" implied in de Saussure's system. According to Derrida, "the notion of structure refers only to space, geometric or morphological space, the order of forms and sites. Structure is first the structure of an organic or artificial work, the internal unity of an assemblage (…) governed by a unified principle" (Derrida 2001, p. 17). Thus construed, structure becomes yet another name for a construction or an architectonic form whose internal order is determined by the existence of a privileged center. This conception, as Rodolphe Gasché has argued (1986, pp. 144-145), faces two major problems. The first one, connected with the closure of structure, consists in the recognition that the passage from one structure to another may only take place by way of a catastrophe or pure chance. The second one, linked with the existence of the center, concerns the change which may effectuate within a structure: it will always be the result of its internal logic. The fusion of these two topics clearly points to the contradictory nature of the idea of the structure and calls for its deconstruction, as Derrida tells us.

In the *Letter to a Japanese Friend* Derrida states that deconstruction is not a demolition, nor is it an analysis or a critique. It is not dismantling and destruction. In "itself" deconstruction is nothing in the sense that all attempts to predicate deconstruction are doomed to failure. That is why it needs to be understood as that which takes place "where there is something" (Derrida 1988a, p. 4). Taking into the account Derrida's contention that "there is nothing outside the text", deconstruction can be conceived of as textual labour in the form of a *double reading*. The first reading is a faitful attempt to follow the dominant interpretation of the text, its assumptions, concepts and arguments. The second reading consists in tracing its excluded, repressed and inferior interpretation that forms an undercurrent in the text. Establishing the textual hierarchy

[1] Lévi-Strauss confided to having feelings of "envy" and "melancholy" at the success linguistics had achieved presumably in comparison with ethnology. Let us quote his opinion on the phonological method and the idea of "system" which were to become the pattern for him to follow: "in the first place" – he writes –"phonology passes from the study of conscious linguistic phenomena to that of their underlying unconscious structure; it refuses to take terms as independent entities, on the contrary, in takes relations between terms as the basis of its analyses; it introduces the notion of system (…); finally, it aims at the discovery of general laws either found by induction or deduced logically" (Lévi-Strauss 1963, p. 33).

of two interpretations can demonstrate that the dominant interpretation is dependent on what it excludes. Consequently, the relation between the two interpretations becomes more important than the dominant intepretation. Derrida argues that it is so because of the supplementary character of the second interpretation which fills in the original lack in the dominant one. However, deconstruction is not content with a simple reversal of textual hierarchies of intepretations by privileging the supressed one over the dominant one, but "seeks to account for the undecidable oscillation between the different textual strategies that the inscription of a metaphysical hierarchy must necessarily presuppose" (Torfing 1999, p. 66).

The idea of "undecidability" is one of the more important aspects of the deconstructive "analysis". The existence of the "undecidables" in language that are "false units of sense" attests, according to Derrida, "to the fact that no interpretation can claim to be the dominant one". However, "undecidability" – argues Derrida – has nothing to do with "indterminacy":

> *undecidability is always a determinate oscillation between possibilities (for example, of meaning, but also of acts). These possibilities are themselves highly determined in strictly defined situations (for example, discursive-syntactical or rhetorical but also political, ethical, etc.). They are pragmatically determined* (Derrida 1988b, p. 148).

It can be argued that deconstruction is a strategic intervention into metaphysics whereby an attempt is made to confront metaphysics with its "other". Metaphysics manifests itself in a series of philosophical ideas based on the category of the "center", "ultimate ground" or "source" such as *eidos, arche*, *telos*, transcendental, consciousness, God and man whose task is to determine Being as "fully present". In *Writing and Difference* Derrida argues that the fully present center governs the structuration of the structure but itself evades the process of structuration. It follows then, that the center has somehow to be located both within and outside the structure. The source of this paradox, as Derrida puts it, lies in the "power of desire" to lessen the feeling of insecurity that accompanies a certain way of being inscribed in the process of structuration. This never fulfilled desire brings about numerous displacements and replacements of the idea of the center. As a consequence we never deal with its full presence but only with its substitutes. Therefore, one is led to think rather of the "absence of the center" or a blank space opened for other substitutions. As Derrida concludes: "in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse" (Derrida 2001, p. 354). Discourse is conceived here as a system of differences within which the play of signification extends infinitely in the absence of the transcendental signified.

In light of this argument the point of Derrida's attack on the idea of the structure's "closure" becomes clearer. The closure of the structure is the result of an effort to "totalize" and exhaust the field of identity leaving no space for that which may enter it from the outside. This idea can easily be challenged from the empirical point of view

refering to the infinite richness of the reality which cannot be bound into one, finite and cohesive discourse. It can also, as Derrida argues, be criticized from the point of view of a free play of signification:

> *If totalization no longer has any meaning, it is not because the infiniteness of a field cannot be covered by a finite glance or a finite discourse, but because the nature of the field – that is, language and the finite language – excludes totalization. This field is in effect that of play, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions only because it is finite, that is to say, because instead of being an inexhaustible, as in the classical hypothesis, instead of being too large, there is something mising from it: a center which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions* (ibid., p. 365).

In other words, the impossibility of totalization or closure results from there being no determined center which in turn extends the process of signification *ad infinitum*. Thus understood structure becomes a field of signification in which a temporary order is established by the presence of many mutually substituting centers. This establishment of a relative structural order is conditioned by the exclusion of the "constitutive outside" that threatens the order of the structure and prevents its ultimate closure (see Torfing 1999, p. 86).

Lacan and the discursive foundation of subjectivity

Another important thinker on the historical map of the discourse theory is Jacques Lacan in whose works the problems of discourse are inextricably connected with the reflection on the nature of human subjectivity. As Marshall W. Alcorn observes, there are two ways of interpreting the relation between subjectivity and discourse in Lacan. The first interpretation – the post-structuralist one – regards subjectivity as dependent on discourse and puts emphasis on the examination of the discursive systems in which it is involved, claiming that they play an essential role in the constitution of the subject's identity. The second interpretation, appreciating Lacan's psychoanalytical practice, contradicts the post-structuralist stance and asserts that it is the subject – construed in opposition to the essentialist philosophical tradition – that plays the essential role in the constitution of the discursive system. Alcorn argues that in the end both lines of interpretation are legitimate:

> *In some respects Lacan's account of the subject follows the lines of a rhetorical analysis. Lacan is interested in figures of speech and how speech, creating systems of desire and identification, moves the subject. On the one hand, this analysis is highly theoretical: Lacan is fully engaged in all the conceptual resources formulated by post-sructuralist thought. But on the other hand, Lacan's analysis is*

highly practical. As an analyst, Lacan confronted subjects who resisted, denied and displaced linguistic effects. This forced him to formulate a description of a subject much more active and resistant than the subject imagined by post-structuralist thought (Alcorn 1994, p. 29).

Mark Bracher explains the Lacanian conception of discourse as follows:

Discourse, Lacan emphasizes, is a necessary structure that subsists in certain fundamental relations and thus conditions every speech act and the rest of our behavior and action as well. These fundamental relations are of several different orders: intrasubjective or psychological relations, intersubjective or social relations, and relations with the nonhuman world. Discourse, according to Lacan, plays formative and transformative roles in each of these orders (Bracher 1994b, p. 107).

Lacan argues that the constitutive role of discourse in our relations with the external world is perhaps most visible in the example of science. Science involves not a better understanding of the world but rather the construction of realities that we previously had no awareness of. What science constructs is not just a new model of the world, but a world in which there are new phenomena. Furthermore, this constructed world occurs solely through the play of a logical truth, a strict combinatory: the system of signifiers that constitutes scientific knowledge (see ibid., p. 108). Discourse is similarily constitutive of the social order which is the consequence of a more general assumption that "it is on discourse that every determination of the subject depends" (Lacan 1991, p. 178, quoted in Bracher 1994b, p. 108) including thought, affect, enjoyment and one's sense of life.

J. Lacan often emhasized how important Freud's discovery of the unconscious was for modern psychology and philosophy. The discovery turned out to be more radical in consequences than the Copernican or Darwinian revolution in that the latter ones have maintained the belief in the identity of human subjectivity and the conscious *ego*. Psychoanalysis, says Lacan, is "at odds with any philosophy directly stemming from the cogito" (Lacan 2006, p. 93) and thus objects to linking *ego* to *cogito*. Developing and partly modifying Freud's theory particularly by accentuating the role of language in the organization of the unconscious, Lacan formulates his theory on the grounds of the idea of three orders: the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic which remain in "circular interdependence".

One of the possible points of departure in outlining Lacan's theory of subjectivity and discourse – one that proves quite helpful in explaining the meaning of the three "orders" – is the analysis of the experience of the child undergoing the so-called mirror stage (6-18 month of life). The moment the child joyfully recognizes its image in the mirror is of paramount importance for the later development of its identity. Prior to this experience the child's self does not exist as a separate entity. It is only by way of perceiving and identifying itself with the mirror image that the child recognizes itself as a functionate, separate whole or, in other words, acquires identity and unity. This

experience is naturally disturbed later on by the child's realization of the distance that separates it from the imaginary wholeness represented by the mirror self. The mirror reflection remains something alien, reversed, magnified, reduced or deformed which increases the actual feeling of fragmentation and lack of coordination of the child's body and proves further that it cannot be reconciled with the imaginary unity. Stavrakakis is correct to say that "the *ego*, the image in which we recognise ourselves, is *always an alien* alter *ego*" (Stavrakakis 1999, p. 18). Lacan emphasizes this ambiguity of the imaginary resulting from the child's constructing its identity on the grounds of what he or she is not, that means – its "other". "The ambiguity of the imaginary is primarily due to the need to identify with something external, other, different, in order to acquire the basis of a self-unified identity" (ibid., p. 18). In that sense, every purely imaginary equilibrium or balance with the other is always marked by an element of difference which subverts the whole idea of a stable reconciled subjectivity based on the conception of the autonomous ego.

If the imaginary representation of ourselves, the mirror image, is incapable of providing us with a stable identity, the only option left for acquiring one seems to be in the field of linguistic representation, the symbolic register. As Lacan argues, the symbolic is already presupposed in the functioning of the mirror. The passage from the imaginary to the symbolical order is a theoretical abstraction pointing to a certain logical and not strictly speaking chronological order. From the time of its birth, and even before that, the infant is inserted into a symbolic network constructed by its parents and family. The infant's name is sometimes chosen before it is born and its life is interwoven, in the parents' imagination, with a pre-existing family mythology. This whole framework, while the new-born is not aware of it, is destined to influence its psychic development. Even the images with which we identify in the mirror stage derive from how our parents see us (thus being symbolically sanctioned) and are linguistically structured. Lacan explicitly points out that the articulation of the subject to the imaginary and the symbolic Other do not exist separately. What changes though, is the power with which they influence us. While the image equally plays a capital role in our domain [a role dominant, although not absolute, during the mirror stage], this role is completely taken up and caught up within, remoulded and reanimated by, the symbolic order. "If the ego emerges in the imaginary, the subject emerges in the symbolic" as Stavrakakis comments (ibid., p. 19).

In this context Lacan's statements such as: "the subject is the subject of the signifier – determined by it", "it is the symbolic order which is constitutive for the subject", "the signifier is pre-eminent over the subject" gain clarity. The Lacanian understanding of the notions of the "signifier" or "language" is strongly connected with de Saussurian theory of the sign which I outlined earlier. Noteworthy though, is that the Lacanian conception of the relation between the signifier and the signified transcends de Saussure's alleged "representationism" (the conception whereby the signified is rendered the paramount importance in the process of the construction of meaning) and thus concurs with the post-structuralist critique of de Saussure. In question here is precisely the

isomorphism retained by de Saussure. Lacan is clear from the beginning that there is no isomorphism between the two domains, that of the signifier and that of the signified. Their relation is not a relationship of two equivalent levels. According to Lacan, if no natural bond exists between the signifier and the signified, then it follows that the signified belongs to the sphere of that which is non-linguistic, that is – to *the real*. The signifier is only attributed a role of a transient vehicle of meaning.

Thus in Lacan's theory it is the signifier that receives the primordial position in the process of signification which he presents with an algorithm S/s.

> *Here, the signifier (S) is located over the signified (s), this 'over' corresponding to the bar separating them, a barrier resisting signification. This barrier is exactly what makes possible an exact study of the connections proper to the signifier, and of the extent of their function in the genesis of the signified. If the dominant factor here is the bar which disrupts the unity of the Saussurean sign, then the unity of signification can only be an illusion. What creates this illusion (the effect of the signified) is the play of the signifiers: the signifier alone guarantees the theoretical coherence of the whole as a whole* (ibid., pp. 24-25).

In Lacan's scheme then, meaning is the product of the signifier and not the reverse[2]. What the signifier represents is only "the presence of difference", rendering impossible any connection between signs and things. The signified thus becomes, as Lacan once put it, the "result of a transference". We speak about it only because it is convenient for us to believe in it. The world of signifieds is none other than that of language where the signified is never to become a full presence constituted outside language. Every act of signification only refers to another act of signification. Signifiers refer only to other signifiers. In this way the signified simply disappears. It vanishes because it is no longer associated with the concept, as in de Saussure (see Marini 1992, p. 51), but is conceived as belonging to the order of the real; that is why the bar dividing signifier and signified, instead of constituting an intimate link between them, instead of creating the unity of the sign, is understood as a barrier resisting signification, as a limit marking the intersection of the symbolic with the real (Boothby 1991, p. 127).

Lacan accepts from the beginning what de Saussure denied but was forced to introduce indirectly into his work In Lacan, however, this relation between the signified and the real is accepted but then only to be located at the limit of signification and not at its kernel. The signified disappears as such, that is to say as the epicentre of signification, exactly because it belongs to the real dimension situated beyond the level of the symbolic. The *locus* of the signified is retained and is now designated by a "constitutive lack". This locus is empty, although it surely exists since the subject does not cease to

[2] To illustrate this thesis Lacan uses the famous example of toilet doors. The ladies' and the gentlemen's toilets in themselves are signifieds treated as an external reality. In this sense they do not differ. Two doors exactly the same lead to exactly the same rooms. The difference in meaning is only produced by the signifying element – the signs on the doors.

grasp the lost and impossible signifier in ever new – though still illusory in their being the effects of the play of signifiers – attempts. One is led to conclude that the signified indeed belongs both to the order of the imgainary and to the order of the real. "According to Lacan, the signified, what is *supposed* to be, through its links to external reality, the source of signification, indeed belongs to the real. But this is a real that resists symbolisation – this is the definition of the real in Lacan; the real is what cannot be symbolised, the impossible. Surely, if this real is always absent from the level of signification it *cannot* be in itself and by itself the source of this same signification. Its absence however, the constitutive lack of the signified as real, *can*" (Stavrakakis 1999, p. 27). What emerges in this way is the signified transferred to its imaginary dimension. There is, however, the third dimension to this signifying play, one that governs it. It is the symbolic – the dimension that Lacan attributes the decisive role to.

On the discoursive level these considerations have crucial consequences for the theory of the subject. The fullness of the identity that the subject is seeking is not possible, according to Lacan, neither at the symbolic nor at the imaginary level. Every process of symbolization introduces with it the "constitutive lack" of the signified and thus dooms the subject to the ceaseless symbolization in the Other in search for his/her true identity. Thus in Lacan we should rather speak of the infinity of "identifications" and not of the subject's identity, it being an impossible condition.

> *Symbolisation, that is to say the pursuit of identity itself, introduces lack and makes identity ultimately impossible. For even the idea of identity to become possible its ultimate impossibility has to be instituted. Identity is possible only as a failed identity; it remains desirable exactly because it is essentially impossible. It is this constitutive impossibility that, by making full identity impossible, makes identification possible, if not necessary. Thus, it is rather misleading to speak of identities within a Lacanian framework. What we have is only attempts to construct a stable identity, either on the imaginary or the symbolic level, through the image or the signifier. The subject of lack emerges due to the failure of all these attempts. What we have then, if we want to be precise and accurate, is not identities but identifications, a series of failed identifications or rather a play between identification and its failure, a deeply political play* (ibid., p. 29).

Foucault: the discursive and non-discursive

Many of the themes outlined above are present in Michel Foucault's theory of discourse (the relation of subject and discourse, the problem of the unity of structure/discourse). Its specificity consists however in the delimitation of the sphere of discourse and the social sphere as two distinct domains which influence one another retaining at the same time certain autonomy.

Foucault defines the subject of his investigations as "an area of discursive events which constitutes a discursive formation". Two things need to be emphasized here: Foucault stresses the historicity of the discursive configurations, discourse being for him a certain historical *a priori*, and his vision of history is contrary to the traditional approach based on the idea of a long duration allowing a historian to depict grand political events and persons and indicate long causative chains. Primarily he is interested in "a pure description of the facts of discourse", composed of the sum of "all the real statements (spoken or written) in their eventual dispersion and in the instance that is specific to each of them" (Foucault 1968, p. 16). The basic unit is for Foucault a "statement" (*l'énoncé*) which in *The Archeology of Knowledge* is defined as "a function of realization of the verbal performance" (Foucault 2005, p. 228).

What Foucault wants to emphasize is that everything a "statement" offers to read is in a way "outside" – there are not hermeneutical senses or notions whose comprehension we can gain if we follow the procedures of *Verstehen*. Foucault treats the statement as an event which is to suggest that it is something material, empirical, and also something that evades traditional historical durations. The field of discourse consists thus of dispersed statements-events having their own specificity and entering mutual relations. The archeological analysis searches among these clusters of statements for "a similar system of dispersion", for certain regularities between statements allowing the description of what Foucault calls "systems of formation". A discursive formation is a system of coexistence and mutual influence of heterogenic elements: institutions, techniques, social groups, relations between discourses that are finally formed by the "discursive practice".

The discursive formation is not to be identified with a given science or "hardly scientifized disciplines" or, contrary to this, with the forms that exlude any scientificity. The relations that govern it are certainly less strict than in science but this does not mean that they are simply gatherings of heterogenous masses of information derived from multiple domains, experiences and traditions. One can say that archeology describes the intermediate level between the everyday non-discursive practices and formalized disciplines which Foucault calls knowledge. The elements of the discursive formation "are that on the basis of which coherent (or incoherent) propositions are built up, more or less exact descriptions developed, verifications carried out, theories deployed. They form the precondition of what is later revealed as and which later functions as an item of knowledge or an illusion, an accepted truth or an exposed error" (ibid., p. 200).

Knowledge is thus understood as a group of elements, formed in a regular manner by a discursive practice which are the basis for the constitution of a science. It does not only include demonstrations but also fictions, reflections, relations, institutional regulations and political decisions. Archeology enables one to capture the moment in which science only begins to take form, when there exists no exact rules for the selection of statements, when different contents are mixed together under no rigor of truth: archeology allows a description of "immature sciences"[3].

[3] The term introduced by Ian Hacking (1991).

Under the category of immature sciences fall, according to Foucualt, the human sciences[4] which are for him the working material that serves the purpose of showing the effectiveness of the archeological method. A successful archeological investigation depends on whether the archeologist has managed to describe and analyse a given domain as an autonomous realm free of common sense beliefs. If we bracket the truth and the meaning of the statements that comprise this domain, we will not be able to systematize with the use of traditional means focusing for example on the intellectual processes in the minds of great scientists or on a science's progress in search of truth. None of these means, Foucault argues, withstands the test of time. In no discipline is it possible to point to one, distinctive feature that has remained unchanged in the course of transformations and changes which occur in it. Consequently, Foucault has to offer a new way of describing, one that does not deform the discourse by empirical or transcendental analyses. In order to resolve this problem, he comes up with four categories on which analysis of the discursive formations is to focus. These are: object, subject, concept, and strategy. In the concluding fragment of *Réponse au Cercle d'épistemologie* Foucault states that

> *there exist four criteria that allow the recognition of the discursive units but are not at the same time traditional units (such as text, work, science, domain or form of discourse, the terms applied within it and the choices thus revealed). These four criteria are not only coalescent with each other but they constitute one another: the first one determines the unity of a discourse through the rule that governs the formation of all its objects; the second one through the rule that governs the formation of all its syntactic types; the third one through the rule that governs the formation of all its semantic elements; and the fourth one through the rule that governs the formation of all its operational possibilities. In this way all these aspects of discourse overlap. And when in a given group of statements one can mark and describe a referential system (**un référentiel**), a certain type of arrangement of statements, a certain theoretical net, a certain field of strategic possibilities, one can be sure that they belong to something that can be called the discursive formation* (Foucault 1968, p. 29).

The major role in the constitution of a discursive formation is played, according to Foucualt, by a "discursive practice". By this Foucault means "a body of autonomous, historical rules, always determined in the time and space that have defined a given period, and for a given social, economic, geographical, or linguistic area, the condiitons of operation of the ununciative function" (Foucault 2005, p. 131). Apart from the rules (practices) specific only for discourse Foucault distinguishes also a set of other

[4] It is important to remember that Foucault understands this term unconventionally including (in *The Order of Things*) in the human sciences, biology and economics. Here Foucault has in mind what is generally understood as disciplines that make human beings and the social manifestations of their lives – their "doubles" – such as life (studied by biology) and work (studied by economics) the object of their study. In this sense we can say that other disciplines that Foucault was interested in: psychology, penology and medicine can also be conceived of as human sciences.

influences forming statements that a discursive formation consists of. He writes about the relations that discourse enters with the non-discursive elements and emphasizes their relevance[5]. He specifies the *primary* relations that can be determined *independently on every discourse or object of discourse* that take place between institutions, techniques, social forms, etc. and the *secondary* relations which *can be located in the discourse itself* and encountered in the ways in which the acting subjects determine their own behavior. It is however the most illusive and misleading point in his theory. Indeed the relations connected with the non-discursive play a subsidiary role when compared to the discursive relations[6]:

> *when one speaks of a system of formation, one does not only mean the juxtaposition, coexistence or interaction of heterogenous elements (institutions, techniques, social gropus, perceptual organizations, relations between various discourses), but also the relation that is established between them – and in a well determined form – by discursive practice*[7] (ibid., pp. 80-81).

As Dreyfus and Rabinow have argued, the thesis on the primacy of discursive practices over other components of the discursive formation – "composing them into relations" as Foucault states – is one of the most important, although seldom noticed, themes of *The Archeology of Knowledge* (Dreyfus & Rabinow 1983, p. 63). If discourse has its own, distinct rules that determine the shape, object and choice of the thematics of the statement and also who and from what viewpoint they are formed, then Foucault's discursive formation becomes not only independent on the rules of language or logic, but consequently it escapes subordination to the non-discursive reality. Now, it is obvious that such an approach may raise many doubts. One may ask how the

[5] In *Réponse à une question* Foucault distinguishes three main criteria that individualize the discourse: formation, transformation and threshold, and correlation. The criterion of correlation consists in "defining the set of relations which define and situate it [a given type of discourse, in this case medical discourse – *L. R.*] among other types of discourse (such as biology, chemistry, political theory or the analysis of the society) and in the non-discursive context in which it functions (institutions, social relations, economic and political situation)" (Foucault 1994, p. 676). In the same article Foucault emphasizes that "what is important to me above all is to define the play of dependencies between all these transformations: a) *intradiscursive* dependencies (between the objects, operations and concepts of a single formation); b) *interdiscursive* dependencies (between different discursive formations (…)); c) *extradiscursive* dependencies (between discursive transformations and transformations outside of discourse, for example: the correlations studied in *Madness and Civilization* and *Birth of the Clinic* between medical discourse and a whole play of economic, political and social changes" (ibid., p. 680).

[6] The discursive relations are, in a "sense, at the limit of discourse: they offer it objects of which it can speak, or rather (…) determine the group of relations that discourse must establish in order to speak of this or that object, in order to deal with them, name them, analyze them, classify them, explain them, etc. These relations characterize not the language used by discourse, nor the circumstances in which it is deployed, but discourse itself as a practice" (Foucault 2005, pp. 50-51).

[7] Foucault states that the discursive relations are neither objective nor subjective and "the autonomy of discourse and its specificity do not give it the status of pure ideality and total historical independence" (Foucault 2005, p. 182).

non-discursive relations are to influence the discursive ones maintaining at the same time relative autonomy of the letter? In what way do they unite into one discursive formation, if they are subject to the discursive practice? Should we not consider discourse to be a certain common ground on which one can analyze the social? And if so, would it not lead to the necessity of renouncing the division into the discursive and the non-discursive? Following this lead, we would take a position quite similar to that of some post-structuralist thinkers (especially that of Laclau's). On the one hand, many claims by Foucault encourage us to follow this way, since it is discourse, as he envisions it, that unites the whole system of practices and it is only on the grounds of the unity it produces that disparate political, social and economical factors can converge and function. On the other hand, Foucault thinks the society to be something more then only discourse which is evidenced in his particular interest in primary and secondary relations. In *Réponse à une question* Foucault speaks of their "direct relations" with discourse:

> *If indeed there is a link between medical practice and political discourse, it is not, it seems to me, because this pracitice first changed men's consciousness, their way of perceiving things or conceiving of the world, and then finally the form of their knowledge and its content; nor is it because it was initially reflected, in a more or less clear and systematic manner, in concepts, notions or themes which were subsequently imported into medicine. The link is much more direct: political practice did not transform the meaning or form of medical discourse, but the conditions of its emergence and functioning; it transformed the mode of existence of medical discourse* (Foucault 1994, pp. 689-690).

Therefore, the extradiscursive contributes significantly to the discursive. Why then emphasize the autonomy and specificity of discursive relations that are to decide upon the form of a discursive formation? Foucault does not provide a satisfactory answer to this question. This point in his theory to the present day remains a major difficulty for his interpreters. In the end one is led to conclude that the "system of formation" in which both the truth and the meaning of a statement are "bracketed" becomes merely an abstract creation suspended in a vacuum, which brings us back to the solution proposed by structuralists. Foucault's structuralism consists in isolating and objectifying a given domain of theoretical investigations and in a way attribute to it full legitimacy. If in structuralism this domain was anticipated for language, for Foucault it will be discourse, even though his whole theoretical framework was aimed at showing the distinctness of the phenomenon of discourse from the linguisitic system[8].

Translated from Polish by Wojciech Kruszelnicki

[8] All the methodological difficulties resulting from the idea of archeology are instructively described by Dreyfuss and Rabinow (1983) in the chapter *The Methodological Failure of Archeology*.

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