

Discourse—Theory and Literature

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Discourse is not an imposing concept. The name of the accompanying method—*discourse analysis*—pretty much speaks for itself. A layman’s understanding of “discourse” is not too far off (except for the way that Foucault uses the term). The word *discourse* is often casually used in the OT literature. And qualitative empirical work, such as *frame analysis*, often constitutes a sort of discourse analysis. But few are talking *specifically* about discourse as a concept or process. In the OT literature Maguire and Hardy hold a virtual monopoly on *recent* work: there are two dormant conversations—one in *Organizations* (e.g., Burrell, 2000) and one in *Organization Science* (e.g., Grant & Hardy, 2004).

Most works of Maguire and Hardy follow a similar pattern, with only slight changes over time. The articles shine light on the discourse around chemicals—specifically, DDT, BPA, and VAM. The articles usually take after the work of (Fairclough, 1992), who attempted a synthesis of authors as diverse as Foucault, Giddens and Habermas. In the front end, their papers generally provide some form of introduction to discourse, beginning with very basic concepts in the early years. For instance, the first empirical paper introduces front and center the *social construction* of *objects* through discourse, and the crucial role of this process for the formation of institutional fields (Hardy & Phillips, 1999).

A full discussion of the theoretical underpinnings of this current strain of discourse analysis in the mainstream OT literature can be found in Phillips et al. (2004). The article highlights the importance of language for the formation of institutions. Institutions, so the claim, cannot be understood without an analysis of the accompanying language in the form of “a discourse that constitutes [the institution]” (p. 647). The article holds a promise: find me the appropriate body of corpus of texts, and I can show you the world. And in the conclusion a preview of things to come: an analysis of texts and their fate—either being ignored or becoming canon—“reconnects institutional theory to a concern with power and politics” (p. 648).

Two examples of their early work shall illuminate the kinds of texts usually selected for analysis (Hardy & Maguire, 2010; Maguire & Hardy, 2006). The articles analyze the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants. As with their other works, Maguire & Hardy focus on the specific discursive event, with most data being either conference documents, or documents that directly influence the debate. The coded data reveals a discursive construction process that is bound in time and space. The contribution stems both from empirically demonstrating the process of social construction of the new object through discourse, and from shedding additional light on specific concepts within the discourse literature. For instance, Maguire and Hardy (2006) demonstrates how the present and the past are intertwined in discourse. Actors either *reconcile* their standpoint or with legacy discourse, or they *challenge* the existing discourse—regardless, past discourse acts as a reference point and new texts do not stand in a vacuum. Similarly, Hardy and Maguire (2010) focuses on the role of *narratives*.

At the same time, Lok and Willmott (2006) point out that the analysis of language is not followed all the way through—we shall return to their comments later. In Maguire & Hardy’s empirical work, there is an—arguably necessary—

selection taking place. What makes their work stand out¹ is their resolute focus on texts, and the entirely empirical demonstration of concepts, that allows for their work to stand side by side with quantitative work (cf. Phillips et al., 2004). Over time, they have included a broader array of materials in their work, as a comparison between two of their articles on *translation* shall demonstrate (Hardy & Maguire, 2020; Maguire & Hardy, 2009).

Translation and Chains of Actors

Translation is a great example both of the merit of Maguire & Hardy’s work, and on opportunities for extension, as translation is a central concept in Actor-Network Theory. It describes how a sign or token—such as “DDT”—does not take its meaning from an initial power or force with enough inertia for it to “survive” rounds of transmission. Rather, the meaning of the sign is derived from the entirety of translations that have taken place. Each and every participant in the chain of translations is an actor who has a part in the perpetuation and inevitable alteration of the sign (Latour, 2005). For instance power is not constituted by the existence of the “powerful”, an individual who “hoards” power. Rather it is the many individuals who act on command—and while doing so interpret the order—who allow for power to exist. Power, like other signs, is constituted by its application and cannot be directly stored (Latour, 1984).² The result is a *star-shaped* (cf. Nicolini, 2009) practice as connected individuals share common understandings of signs that can be identified through research.

Maguire and Hardy (2009) emphasizes the transformative character of translation. The article begins to introduces the notion of a negotiated understanding of DDT. The final understanding is shown not to be a direct adoption of the findings in Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*. *Silent Spring* problematizes multiple issues concerning DDT and pesticides more generally. As experts in other areas investigate those problematizations, some persist, relatively unscathed, while others are dropped or altered. Rachel Carson’s claim regarding the dangers for human health for instance is qualified—its negative impacts are subsequently regarded as neither proven, nor disproven. Maguire and Hardy (2009) only begins to shake the image of the “hypermaskular” (cf. Suddaby et al., 2017) institutional actor. The agency of others only comes into play when they interpret her accounts.

In contrast—and while the conceptualization of translation in the front end changes relatively little—Hardy and Maguire (2020) demonstrates the simultaneous investigation into BPA at multiple points in a network, by researchers from different disciplines, governments, and businesses in different countries. The translation process here is an inherently social one, where multiple events occur at multiple places at the same time. Toxicologists question the notion that the “dose makes the poison”, while endocrinologists research the potential for BPA to interact with cellular hormone receptors, and Canadian retailers reconsider

¹Especially in their journal of choice, AMJ.

²This derivation of power is the purpose of Latour’s original work on the concept.

their reputational risk and the potential backlash from consumers, returning products in the thousands. In the words of Latour (1984): "the chain is made of *actors*" (p. 269, emphasis in original).

Production of Texts

Over time, Maguire & Hardy redirected the attention of their empirical inquiry toward interaction between many actors. Yet, the conceptualization of institutional work processes underlying Maguire & Hardy's empirical work—Phillips et al. (2004)—is incomplete (Lok & Willmott, 2006). Their approach to discourse analysis applies a constructivist lens only to the production of knowledge on objects. When attending to texts, Maguire & Hardy tend to switch to a "realist mode":

"Symptomatic of this realist mode is the absence of any indication of (reflexive) awareness of how the identification of actions, texts, and so forth is itself an articulation of specific (and contested) language games. Instead, key components of Phillips et al.'s 'discursive model of institutionalization' [...] are represented as if they are immediately accessible" (Lok & Willmott, 2006, p. 478).

In the empirical work on discourse, Maguire and Hardy (2009) provides a lonely glance of what the constructivist mode would look like in the empirical analysis of texts. After Carlson publishes *Silent Spring*, the chemical industry publishes various countertexts that try to disrupt Carson's participation in the discourse. These countertexts are not limited to *challenging* the validity of Carson's statements in her book (cf. Maguire & Hardy, 2006). Rather, they challenge the legitimacy of Carson's participation in the discourse. Carson's "allegations" meet industry "facts" and her words should not be taken "at face value" (Maguire & Hardy, 2009, p. 165). Concerns are raised about the "emotional outbursts" in her book and because she is a woman (Nicolini, 2009, p. 166). These findings speak to the taken-for-grantedness of the institution, and how it is defended (Steele, 2021). Arguments are not limited to *challenging* and *reconciling* (Maguire & Hardy, 2006) but concern the admissibility of accounts into the discourse.

Research Opportunity

We can build on Maguire & Hardy's empirical research on discourse and extend their models by focusing on the construction of accounts. What texts and accounts become "officially sanctioned" and enter the discourse? My last note included five empirical examples that I will interpret accordingly.

- (1) In an official meeting of the Nebraska Natural Resource Committee between the legislature, TransCanada, and the Sierra Club, the participants celebrate the latest decision to reroute Keystone XL

and conduct a state-funded Environmental Impact Assessment. Senator Mark Christensen presses for Ken Winston of the Sierra Club to abide by the new status quo and cease resistance against the new route, since the demands of the Sierra Club were met (NRC, 2011).

Previous exchanges between the Sierra Club and the Nebraska legislature focused on the rerouting of the Keystone XL pipeline. Senator Mark Christensen attempts to exert social pressure on the representative of the Sierra Club and hold him to his past stance as calls for the cancellation of Keystone XL are on the horizon.

(2) A public hearing on Keystone XL in Nebraska. A majority of participants seems concerned about the issue of pipeline safety. All questions concerning pipeline safety are rejected, since it is a matter for a national agency (PHSMA).

In the existing institutional order, pipeline safety falls under the jurisdiction of the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHSMA). The Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality³ effectively enforces this segmentation of the discourse through formal rules. PHSMA holds no public hearings on the issue, effectively limiting the scope of the discourse.

(3) Following the President's decision to revoke the permit for Keystone XL, TransCanada files a claim with the NAFTA arbitration in the amount of \$15 billion.

Segments of the discourse on Keystone XL are regulated through formal rules. The NAFTA arbitration institution might find that under these formal rules, the revocation of the permit by the president is not a sanctioned contribution to the discourse.

(4) Although indigenous groups make for some of the most persistent opponents of Keystone XL, their voice is rarely heard in the official discourse. Many of their claims revolve around treaty rights—the relevant authority is the national government.

The discourse on treaty rights between indigenous groups goes back decades. Their claims to the lands are not taken for granted and not sanctioned to enter into the discourse. Note—this issue is much more salient with the Dakota Access Pipeline.

(5) Ahead of planned protests in Montana, governmental agencies create a "joint terrorism task force". A police department vows to stop the protesters "by any means".

³At least I believe they organized the meeting...

An additional level of conflict becomes relevant as presumably conservative leaning police forces and more liberal-minded protesters are about to clash. Terms such as "tree hugger" highlight that in the conservative eye, environmental protesters may be seen as anti-modernist and illusory—in other words, as a potentially dangerous mindset that should be suppressed. For the protesters, successful nonviolent action is a way of breaking into the discourse without having to follow the many formal rules that have been set up as barriers around it.

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