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## Discourse Analysis

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## **Discourse Analysis**

In the early 1970s, the humanities and social sciences experienced a general shift in focus away from modernist and positivist epistemologies towards a more sustained focus on culture and meaning. Inspired in particular by 1960s post-structuralist critiques of modernist epistemologies and meta-narratives, the shift became known as the ‘cultural turn’. The cultural turn involved a radical questioning of the modernist ‘picture metaphor’ view of language, i.e., the view that words and language correspond to and are able to communicate pictures of the world ‘as it is’. In sharp contrast to such views, the cultural turn instead ushered in an understanding of language as constitutive of social reality, coupled with a new focus on how our language use and other modes of representation not only fundamentally shape our own understandings of ourselves and the world, but also play a central role in mediating, validating, and strengthening power relations and hegemonic views of reality within society and culture on the whole. Michel Foucault was among the first to use the term ‘discourse’ to refer to such representations and his work became foundational for the subsequent development of a range of new approaches to the centrality of language in social processes and human meaning making which are frequently coupled together under the general label of ‘discourse studies’ or ‘discourse analysis’.

Notwithstanding the large variety of different understandings that have developed throughout the years, a ‘discourse’ generally refers to an identifiable cluster of statements, metaphors, and representations that functions to construct a certain picture of a particular social phenomenon, state of affairs, group of people, etc. Discourses, however, are never static, nor do they function in isolation from one another. Rather, particular phenomena or states of affairs tend to be simultaneously surrounded by multiple, varyingly related, mutually supporting, or

competing discourses. Discourses are therefore understood as being both constructive and constitutive of social reality – as always partly contributing to creating what they refer to. In this capacity, discourses play a highly significant role in the shaping of social relationships, the positioning of subjects, the perpetuation and reproduction of power relations, dominant ideologies and hegemonies, as well as of what counts as ‘knowledge’ in particular wider societal contexts. Discourse and discursive practice should therefore also be understood as forms of social action and social practice, typically situated at the crux of the struggles over meaning that continuously occur across different social domains, such as politics, the economy, education, or religion.

In the academic study of religion, the cultural turn served to motivate a general rethinking of previous essentialized notions of the category of religion in favor of new understandings of religion as a varyingly socially and culturally constructed category. These developments also paved the way for the gradual establishment of what has become known as the discursive study of religion. The discursive study of religion departs from an understanding of the category of ‘religion’ as an empty signifier that has no meaning in and of itself and to which discourse, communication, and representation are intrinsic. The objective of the discursive study of religion has not, however, been to develop any distinctively ‘new’ theorizations of the concept of discourse, but rather to explicate the theoretical implications of already existing theorizations for the study of religion specifically.

In the discursive study of religion, a general distinction is often made between discourses ‘about’ religion on the one hand, and discourses ‘on/of’ religion on the other hand. The former refers to discourses and discursive practices about various religious beliefs, practices, communities and so on as they appear in, for example, the mass media or public political debate.

The latter instead refers to discourses and discursive practices that play a central role in the construction of the category of 'religion' as such or in the delineation of 'religion' as a discrete social and cultural phenomenon as they appear in, for example, scholarship, national legislation, or the discourse of transnational organizations such as the United Nations.

As a particular type of method, the analysis of discourse can be described as the systematic analysis of the structure, ideational underpinnings, and meaning-making functions of various types and levels of language use and other modes of representation. Discourse analysis essentially focuses on identifying patterns and recurring key elements in a given body of textual data which appear to be central to how events, persons, phenomena, states of affairs, etc. are construed in particular ways and how, as a consequence, particular meanings are produced. Main types of data include various types of mass media content, official documents, and interviews. Main analytical categories include (but are far from limited to) *lexis* (i.e. choice of words and vocabulary, grammatical features, the identification of ascription of evaluative meanings, use of metaphors, co-referencing, etc.); *modality* (the employment of modal verbs and modal adverbials to indicate different levels of certainty and commitment to what is being said); and *genre* (i.e. various types of socially and culturally prescribed modes of interaction or communication such as newspaper editorials, political speeches, religious sermons, etc.). The analysis of discourse can also unfold on several different, although always interrelated, levels. It might, for example, limit its focus to a particular *discursive event* (i.e. the function of discourse in a particular instance or situation), or instead focus on the social effects of broader *discursive formations* (i.e. broader socially established discursive frames of reference within which, and in relation to which, certain phenomena and states of affairs are represented, talked about, and understood). In

each and every case, language use and other modes of representation will stand at the center of inquiry.

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See also Foucault, Michel; Ideology; Social Constructivism

### **Further reading**

Fitzgerald, Timothy. *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity: A Critical History of Religion and Related Categories*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Von Stuckrad, Kocku. 'Discursive Study of Religion: Approaches, Definitions, Implications'. *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* v.25/1 (2013).

Wijzen, Frans, and Kocku von Stuckrad, eds. *Making Religion: Theory and Practice in the Discursive Study of Religion*. Leiden: Brill, 2016.