

Conference Report

Diskursanalyse in der Wissenschaftsgeschichte

Annika Wellmann (Bielefeld)

Diskursanalyse in der Wissenschaftsgeschichte (Discourse analysis in the history of science). 2. Internationale Tagung zur historischen Diskursanalyse, University of Zürich, 27th-28th of May 2010, hosted by Franz X. Eder (Wien), Achim Landwehr (Mainz/Düsseldorf), Jürgen Martschukat (Erfurt) and Philipp Sarasin (Zürich), organized by Peter-Paul Bänziger, Mirjam Bugmann, Pascal Germann and Philipp Sarasin

It seems that in the history of science, discourse analysis has passed its apex of popularity. Although the concept of discourse coined by Michel Foucault is still in use, historians of science today favour other methods which are more likely associated with the iconic or practical turn. This development provokes a range of questions: Are discourse-analytical perspectives so common and self-evident today that they do not need to be explicated any more? Or have they become outdated? And how can historical discourse analysis contribute to the historization of science? These questions were to be debated at a conference held at the University of Zürich under the auspices of Franz X. Eder, Achim Landwehr, Jürgen Martschukat and Philipp Sarasin. The objective of the conference was to discuss the assumptions outlined above and to present new forms of historical discourse analysis. Hence, its focus should have been on recent methodology – a goal that the conference in most parts failed to achieve, as the majority of papers presented empirical findings or considerations on discourse theory rather than considerations on methods.

Introduction

Philipp Sarasin (Zürich) opened up the conference with a concise introduction on the characteristics of Foucauldian discourse analysis and the

alleged withdrawal of the history of science from this method. As Sarasin pointed out, discourse analysis was developed in the context of the history of science, but refused to contribute to narrations about progress, »great men« and discoveries. Furthermore, there were similarities to other constructivist concepts and theories such as Ludwik Fleck's thought-styles or Thomas S. Kuhn's paradigm shift that have been widely acknowledged. Yet it is hard to say what historical discourse analysis exactly is. Sarasin outlined five characteristics: the denial of the subject as an active and willing founder of his or her world; emphasis on the power of the discourse to produce reality; a focus on disruptions rather than continuities; the analysis of conditions that allow for certain statements while suppressing or excluding others; the assumption that discourses are »copy machines«. While most of these points are common, the last aspect highlights a specific characteristic of Foucauldian discourse analysis by using a stunning metaphor: Discourses, as Sarasin pointed out, produce objects just in the same way as copy machines do. Copy machines can reproduce reprints over and over again, but neither do they have an intention while doing so nor do they produce identical copies. By introducing this metaphor, Sarasin added an aspect that is widely neglected in historical discourse analysis – and was, unfortunately, not paid any further attention to in the course of the conference: Discourses are material structures and they work technically. Subsequently Sarasin dealt with the turn towards objects instead of discourses in the history of science. He pointed out that, inspired by Bruno Latour's Actor-Network-Theory and Hans-Jörg Rheinberger's suggestions to investigate into experimental systems, it has become common to analyze images and practices at laboratories. Here Sarasin pointed out a striking gap: By ignoring discourses, spaces are treated as being free from them. Instead, there is a strong focus on evidence, presence and »things as such« – just as if they were really there and as if they would appear before ones eyes if one did not consider discourses. According to Sarasin, this development causes risks: First, there was a positivism of »pure« description; second, media were seen as having material logics that determine things.

Basic questions of Foucauldian discourse analysis

The first section of the conference dealt with basic questions of Foucauldian discourse analysis. Looking at Foucault's works on literature and painting, *Roberto Nigro* (Zürich) discussed the relationship between the sayable and the visible. He thus showed how discourse analysis could be connected to the iconic turn. Nigro concentrated on Foucault's analytical handling of pictures. The philosopher's interest in pictures was defined by their function. He utilized analyses of pictures to fix his view on epochs. According to Nigro, Foucault perceived pictures not as representations but as diagrams. What is more, discourses and pictorial outlines are seen as having their own way of being, but still they correlate. The discussion centred on the relationship between the sayable and the visible. Furthermore it was hotly debated what the invisible was and how it could be studied. It was stressed that Foucault, being positivistic, argued for analysing existing – that is: visible – structures.

Maximilian Schochow (Leipzig) took a look at the role of figures of crisis in historical discourse analysis. He discussed disruptions and continuities as seen by Foucault, concentrating on figures of change. Schochow pointed out that Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and de Sade's *Justine und Juliette* can be seen as symptoms of change and disruption: They heralded new phenomena. Schochow explicated his concept of figures of crisis in historical discourses by presenting a case study. During a period of change that emerged in the 16th century, a person perceived as being female who had had sexual intercourse with an other woman and had worn men's clothes was regarded by some as a woman, whereas others perceived her/him as a hermaphrodite after examining her/his body. Schochow's argument that this was a figure of crisis representing a dramatic change of knowledge was questioned by the conference's participants. In sum, they argued for emphasizing simultaneity rather than disruption. Moreover, the analysis should concentrate on continuities that accompany changes and, in addition, take a look at the social contexts of discourses.

Aleksander Miłoś Zielinski (Bern) talked about the role of epistemes in post-structural history of science. He presented a case study on the struggle between Gabriel Tarde and Emile Durkheim, at their time fierce

opponents in social theory. According to Zielinski, Durkheim outdated Tarde as a leading sociologist because he represented an episteme that was more up to date: While Tarde tried to constitute sociology on the basis of a larger historical-philosophical system, Durkheim established sociology as a distinct discipline and promoted the virtualization of thinking. Zielinski tried to situate the change of epistemes in a broad socio-historical context. He paralleled it with changes in transport and media systems, starting with the invention of the printing press and the 'discovery of America' in the 15th century, considering the effects of railway systems in the 19th century and the broad scope of communication in the late modern age. Participants criticized this historical *tour d'horizon* as simplifying too much and suggested to concentrate on concrete cases. With regard to epistemes it was asked to consider that, firstly, different epistemes could appear parallel in history; secondly, that Foucault increasingly favoured to look at discourses rather than epistemes; and, thirdly, that this category was useful only for explaining broad developments. Still, discourse analysis is usually not called into question on the historical macro level, but with regard to its implementation in laboratory studies.

Production of alterity

The second section was dedicated to the production of alterity. *Birgit Stammberger* (Vechta/Lüneburg) argued for a kind of discourse analysis in the history of science that should be extended by a perspective on gender. Looking at the history of 19th century monsters she argued that discursive constructions should not be played off against the materiality of the body – and vice versa. The monster was a bodily phenomenon, but it only appeared within discursive formations. In the discussion the focus on monsters was called into question, as it was considered to be well explored. There was an argument about the fact that some topics and aspects attract a lot of research interest while others – such as diversity in and of discourses on monsters – are neglected. At this point the important general question about the historian's own perspective was raised. The allegation was formulated that one only takes those discourses or fragments into account which suit one's own position.

Also looking at an empirical case, *Cécile Stehrenberger* (Zürich) analyzed the strategies of the Instituto de Estudios Africanos to generate knowledge and located it in the context of the history of science. From the 1940s to the 1960s a network of Spanish experts from various disciplines investigated the physical and mental characteristics of the *indígenas* in Equatorial Guinea. To gain a wide range of results, they applied different strategies. These were tied to political aims such as the progress of colonial policy and often contradicted each another. Adopting a micro-historical perspective, Stehrenberger illustrated how scientific knowledge was generated and diffused in a specific political-historical situation. Participants approved of that perspective as well as the focus on the production of knowledge within a network: By analyzing a dispositive – that is interwoven discourses, institutions and practices – it is possible to identify the character of specific discourses. That is its social and political contexts, the situation of the actors involved, the impacts of research instruments and methods on outcomes, the effects of media that are applied to disseminate findings, and how all these factors are inter- or co-related. Stehrenberger's ironic presentation was criticised for producing a colonial view on the historical objects she had investigated. It was thus argued that historians have to be very careful not to adopt a colonial view on their historical objects.

Sexuality and economy

Combining perspectives on sexuality and economy, as the third section did, is not odd: In the modern age both these fields are distinctively characterized by the imperative of productivity. *Mike Laufenberg's* (Berlin) depiction of Foucault's discourse analysis as a historical ontology was not concerned with methodology but with theory. Laufenberg postulated that Foucault's concept of discourse was mostly perceived as epistemological. But, as he argued, in his works on sexuality Foucault also considers historical conditions and feasibility. On this basis, Laufenberg drafted a historical-epistemological concept of discourse, concentrating on debates on scientific discourses on sexuality and sexual subjectivity. As he pointed out, sexuality emerges from a heterogeneous constellation of power: It is not just an effect of the *scientia sexualis* but also about the

ethical question of how to lead one's life. As Laufenberg was dealing with theory rather than methodology, the question was raised as how to combine his approach with discourse analysis. Laufenberg argued that the integration of subjects revealed the limits of discourse analysis. He emphasized that subjects were not simply determined by discourses but that they have the ability to carry out changes. He stressed that objects and subjects modify each other.

Ute Tellmann (Basel) took a look at the history of modern economy and thus brought a field into focus that until now has been underrepresented in historical discourse analysis. Perceiving economy as an epistemic object, she explored the reconfiguration of this object in the early 20th century. Tellmann proposed to take an archaeological view on economy and argued that this view reveals a crucial turning point at around 1930: Since then, money was not perceived any longer »as a medium of representation but as a time machine«. Consequently, there was a new emphasis on loans and thus future and measuring time, a »break-in of time in the discourse of economy«, as Tellmann concluded.

Life Sciences

The last section was about life sciences – like the history of sexuality a well established object of historical discourse analysis. *Heiko Stoff* (Braunschweig) advocated a combination of discourse analysis and Actor-Network-Theory while looking at the history of research in active pharmaceutical ingredients (*Wirkstoffe*). In a historical perspective he outlined methods and concepts that were applied to analyze how industries, states and sciences cooperated in producing knowledge. According to Stoff, methods such as community research could explain how trilateral networks work, but they do not help to analyze how things were constituted. The concept of translation that was introduced by Actor-Network-Theory allowed for looking at the state, industry and science interpreting problems in the same way, while the concept of the dispositive was useful to study research in active pharmaceutical ingredients, because it emphasizes problematization and mobilization. In addition, dispositives produce options as well as things that can be analyzed. However, it was

not really clear for the audience how Actor-Network-Theory and discourse analysis are related to each other.

Lisa Malich (Berlin) criticized the preoccupation with change and discontinuities of discourses as well as their perception as closed topical or disciplinary entities. In critical distance to this, she proposed to integrate Michel Serres's concept of folded time into historical discourse analysis. Malich tried to prove that through this concept multi-temporal and overlapping fragments originating in different historical periods can be theorized and investigated. She illustrated this idea with the discourse of mood swings during pregnancies. In this example, discursive fragments deriving from various periods coexist and overlap. In the discussion it was stressed that until now the dimension of time has been underexposed in the research on historical discourses. Still the question was left open why the concept of folded time should be preferred to Foucault's archaeology of knowledge, which also enables the historian to trace different fragments occurring at the same time.

Julia Diekämper (Bremen) shifted the focus from discourses in science to discourses in the media. She argued that scientific knowledge was generated not so much at laboratories than in the course of public negotiations in mass media. Looking at press coverage on preimplantation diagnostics in *Der Spiegel* and *Die Zeit*, she explicated how different discourses dating back to different times have recently been circulating. As Diekämper pointed out, the »ethic of healing« competes with the »holiness of life«. Moreover, mass media do not simply offer advice and information but set norms that have effects on self-technologies. With her neat analysis, Diekämper gave insight into recent discourses on preimplantation diagnostics. Unfortunately, like most other papers, there was no reflection on methods. Diekämper could have brought in a new perspective by discussing how exactly the media produce discourses and how this production could be investigated in terms of discourse analyses. She also ignored the question of how knowledge circulating in the media affects science. If she had covered this aspect, she could have enriched discussions on historical discourses, since historical research still concen-

trates on the popularization of scientific knowledge through the media and neglects possible influence in the other direction.

The last paper presented a combination of empirical findings and reflections on methodology. *Jens Elberfeld* (Bielefeld) lamented that by stressing the local situation and contingency of the production of knowledge, laboratory studies fail to adopt a critical view on society. Presenting the history of the Biological Computer Laboratory of the University of Illinois, founded in 1958 and closed down in 1974, he argued that discourses »don't stop at the steps of laboratories«. On the contrary, laboratories have to be seen as material results of historical discourses and thus as a part of complex power relationships. That is why the genealogy of knowledge of the laboratory and the production of knowledge at the laboratory need to be analyzed. It would thus be possible to »bring society back in«. The disputants acknowledged that the analysis of knowledge was missing with laboratory studies. But how can knowledge circulating within laboratories be discourse-analytically analyzed? Elberfeld suggested that laboratory-books documenting works and processes could be a valuable source.

Synopsis, final discussion, assessment

Achim Landwehr (Mainz/Düsseldorf) presented a synopsis and a comment. From his point of view, discourse analysis is still flourishing, but studies are just not labelled as discourse analyses anymore. Landwehr highlighted that in the history of science questions about power and society have indeed been dropped. Most speakers had critically pointed at Rheinberger, Latour and the works of those who had stepped into their footprints, noting that they used theories and methods that did not take the presence and effects of discourses into account. Landwehr proposed to integrate the topics dealt with in the history of science into discourse analysis. Indeed, this would be a way to bring discourse analysis back in and at the same time open up new fields of research in the history of discourses. But Landwehr, on the other hand, also wondered what could be achieved by discourse analysis. He opposed the reproduction of grand narratives. Instead, he favoured »complexifying« histo-

tical processes and pointing out relationships between different elements – the latter a classical demand in discourse analysis as coined by Foucault. Furthermore, Landwehr, with a reference to Wittgenstein, urged to »make the visible visible« by applying discourse analysis and to reformulate theory through empiricism.

In a final discussion the question of why discourse analysis has passed the apex of popularity in the history of science was taken up again. There was a consensus on the thesis that it is not favoured anymore because of political reasons: Politics and society ask and provide means for research on »reality«, there is a »hunger for the real«. What is more, only utilizable knowledge is accepted. Historical discourse analysis with all its premises and aims is completely opposed to these demands: It is not about what the world is like but how it has been made; it does not provide narrations that help to keep up identities but deconstructs them; it does not simplify but complexifies history, and that is: our lives. Thus, historical discourse analysis at its very heart is a critical method that calls into question the world that is usually taken for granted. And that is why it is a useful method that should by no means be neglected.

The conference, which attracted a great number of attendants who lively joined the discussions, showed that discourse analysis is not outdated and that obviously there is an interest in historical discourse analysis. But although the hosts and organizers of the conference did their best to create a good atmosphere by choosing an attractive locality and producing a coherent event by connecting the sections' papers, they did not achieve their main objective. First of all, most papers dealt with topics that are very common in historical discourse analysis. And, more important, there were hardly any reflections on historical discourse analysis as a method.

It seems urgent to ask why historians and researchers from neighboring disciplines are rather prepared to present their findings from discourse analysis than to scrutinizing and developing this (heterogeneous) method. The answer would by no means be one-dimensional. Still, the key element causing the reluctance in challenging discourse analysis by those who practice it might be the unchallenged perception of the person who

is regarded as its founder: Foucault's statements about discourses are widely adopted in a rather uncritical way. They are either treated as initial points that stimulate research or they are referred to as confirmations of empirical findings. Hence, Foucault is treated as an authority, although his thinking and his »works« should be perceived – strictly speaking from the point of discourse theory – as effects of historical discourses. To deal with Foucault more critically would lead to challenging and developing historical discourse analysis: His writings on discourses are, as everybody knows, only a tool box. These tools can be rearranged and supplemented: by looking at the way that institutions work, scientists generate knowledge and media effect meaning.