

"Qualitative" Methods of Social Research in France: Reconstructing the Actor, Deconstructing the Subject

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Abstract: This contribution gives an overview of the numerous tendencies of open non-standardised social research in France. For various reasons, the label "qualitative" seems to be less distinctive than in the Anglo-Saxon world and Germany. While the interpretive-hermeneutic (*verstehend*) approaches have recently come to play a certain role as a result of international reception, a strong tradition that does not fit into the quantitative-qualitative divide has to be noted: discourse analysis which I will label "quasi-qualitative". A comparison between the interpretive-hermeneutic tendencies of qualitative sociology and the semiologically informed strands of discourse analysis reveals fundamental differences as well as points of convergence.

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1. Introduction

Among the many problems and questions that the social sciences have dealt with in the last 150 years, most have touched, in one way or another, upon the issue of the social production of "meaning". Thus, while Karl MARX emphasised the socio-historical embeddedness of the "ideological" representations of a social system, Max WEBER's focus was on the "intended meaning" (*gemeinter Sinn*) underpinning social action. Today, classical sociology's assumption that the production of social meaning rests on the solid, "pre-symbolic" rock of social relations and structures has come under attack from various sides. Theoretical strands as different as North American pragmatism and Parsonian structural functionalism, Habermasian normative discourse theory and Niklas LUHMANN's systems theory as well as numerous current developments in media and cultural studies concur that social processes and structures cannot be considered independently of the signifying dimension. [1]

This judgement holds as true for sociology in Germany and the UK as it does for sociology in France. If the symbolic expression of social life was a central question for classical sociologists such as Émile DURKHEIM (1991) and Marcel MAUSS (1950), the decipherment of social signification was forcefully taken up during the heydays of structuralism in the 1960s. Claude LÉVI-STRAUSS (1958), Roland BARTHES (1957, 1967), Jean BAUDRILLARD (1968, 1972), and Pierre BOURDIEU (1971, 1972) can be cited among the most faithful adherents to the Saussurean project of a general semiology whose objective was to decode the fundamental codes and structures of the sociosymbolic fabric. With the notion of a stable and "total" society waning since the 1980s, a number of approaches, sometimes referred to as "nouvelles sociologies" (CORCUFF 1995), have emphasised the non-unitary, imaginary, and refracted constructions of social worlds. Jean-François LYOTARD's post-Wittgensteinian reflections on the argumentative and narrative construction of legitimate discourse (1979), Michel de CERTEAU's neo-pragmatic investigation of the strategies and tactics of daily life (1990), Michel MAFFESOLI's focus on the constitution of "neo-tribal" communities in postmodernity (2000), Luc BOLTANSKI's normative universes of discourse (*cités*) (1991) and the heterogeneous networks of actor-object ensembles in Bruno LATOUR (1984) have directed the attention to the manifold, fleeting and impure processes of the social construction of signification. Consequently, like other sociological traditions in Europe today, French sociology leans toward non-reductionist accounts of society and stresses its open and complex character (PASSERON 1991; MORIN 1990). [2]

Yet there is one characteristic difference. Outside France, especially in Germany and the UK, the sociological analysis of social meaning has had frequent

recourse to so called "qualitative" methods of social research. "Qualitative" methods are opposed to "quantitative" methods in that the former stress the complexity and uniqueness of their objects. As a rule, the aim of qualitative approaches is to reconstruct the tacit rules, the shared experience and the collective knowledge of social actors. The reconstruction of meaning structures resists complete formalisation and measurement but they are open to empathetic understanding (*Verstehen*). While preferring "interpretive-constructivist" to "causal-realist" epistemologies, qualitative social scientists usually oppose the "positivist" model of the "hard sciences". [3]

By contrast, in French social science discourse many sociologists tend to sidestep the term "*qualitatif*", which, taken as such, lacks specificity and is prone to ambiguity. While "qualitative" methods like participant observation, semi-structured interviews, case studies, and document analysis are widely used in French social research, many practitioners have difficulty situating themselves on this or that side of the qualitative/quantitative divide.¹ As a consequence, with many researchers constantly switching between different methods or applying a mix of them, methodological eclecticism is perhaps more acceptable than methodological purism. However, if interpretive or phenomenological sociology is "hardly developed in the French academic world", as one of many observers has remarked (BLIN 1995, p.11), a great deal of methodical instruments and a rich tradition of methodological reflection is available in the more general field of *sciences humaines*, which comprises linguistics, anthropology, sociology, information and media studies. The latter tendencies, established under the label of "discourse analysis" (*analyse du discours*, rarely *analyse de discours*) in the late 1960s, commonly dissociate themselves from the "humanist" emphasis on empathy, interpretation, and intersubjectivity. Yet even though discourse analysis does not share certain presuppositions of what is called "qualitative sociology" outside France, discourse analysis does not follow the causal-realist logic of "positivism" either. Therefore, it should be useful to characterise discourse analysis as a "quasi-qualitative" method. According to PAILLÉ (1996, p.181), "quasi-qualitative" methods can be distinguished from "qualitative methods" in that the latter aim to reconstruct and comprehend lived experience ("meaning") stored in a certain way in texts whereas the former methods "concentrate on the form of the material to be analyzed" and strive for some kind of measurement (1996, p.181). In this contribution, I will map both the dispersed field of "qualitative" approaches which include non-standardised ethnography, the hermeneutic reconstruction of meaning and what may be termed the "quasi-qualitative" or "third way" tradition of discourse analysis in France, which for the most parts falls neither into a hermeneutic nor into a positivist camp. [4]

1 Dominique SCHNAPPER, former president of the French Sociological Association, emphasises this point by asserting that "there are no two sociologies. Sociological understanding (compréhension) is one; it does not consist only of the analysis of data produced by statistical observation, nor by the interpretation of observations and discourses collected in the field by means of those methods employed by anthropologists. Interviews, observations, and statistical correlations, which, too, have to be subjected to critical scrutiny, have the same scientific status and share the same ambition, namely to contribute to the elucidation of social relations" (SCHNAPPER 1999, p.118).

2. "Qualitative" Social Research: The Discovery of the Human Actor

Notable exceptions notwithstanding (MUCCHIELLI 1994; 1996),² most work published in French language under the "qualitative" rubric is from Quebec (DESLAURIERS 1991; MAYER, OUELLET, SAINT-JACQUES & TURCOTTE 2000; POUPART, DESLAURIERS, GROULX, LAPERRIÈRE, MAYER & PIRES 1997) or a product of Quebecois-French cooperation (GIORDANO 2003; PAILLÉ and MUCCHIELLI 2003). Even though there is abundant social research in France that is clearly not quantitative (see CÉFAÏ 2003a for an exhaustive overview), such social research is rarely labelled "qualitative". However, there is an array of alternative terms available to designate different approaches to "field research" ("enquête du terrain", PENEFF 1995; MENDRAS & OBERTI 2000), for instance "ethnographique" (BEAUD & WEBER 2003; LAPLANTINE 1996), "ethnosociologique" (BERTAUX 1997; LAPASSADE 1991), or "compréhensif" (BLIN 1995; KAUFMANN 1996; MAFFESOLI 1985). Thus, if the term "qualitative" has a strong semantic affinity with approaches from the "Anglo-Saxon" world³ and with interpretive-hermeneutic traditions from Germany (such as WEBER and SCHÜTZ, see WATIER 2002), non-standardised research methods are well established in France. [5]

While participant observation and non-standardised interviews were of rare use in French sociology before the 1970s (SCHWARTZ 1993, p.265), field work has since become more widespread (BÆCHLER 1975; ALTHABE 1985), especially in those areas whose point of departure is the level of human action. Thus, a certain affinity with "qualitative" methodology is apparent in the sociology of organisations (CROZIER & FRIEDBERG 1977; FRIEDBERG 1997, p.306), in the sociology of strategic action and movements (GAGNON 1987), in the sociology of social problems and migration (DEMAZIÈRE 1992; MAUGER 1991; SAYAD

2 MUCCHIELLI's *Que sais-je?* volume (1994) is probably one of the most original introductions to qualitative methods in French language in that it not only refers extensively to approaches from North America, but also from France and other European countries. Yet, this work, which argues for the irreducibility of "human facts" against DURKHEIM's classical epistemology, is hardly exhaustive if it identifies five major sets of "qualitative research methods": biographical, monographical (or case study), action-theoretical ("actionniste") methods and the methods of "scenarios" and of "role play", the latter two methods attributed to GODET (1983) and MORENO (1965). Also, some of MUCCHIELLI's points of departure, such as the emphasis on "introspection" and "self-knowledge" (p.22) or the focus on "world visions" ("Weltanschauungen") (p.59) may be controversial among contemporary practitioners in "qualitative" and "quasi-qualitative" social research alike.

3 Especially the Chicago School, cf. COULON (1996) and GUTH (2004). Some of the major texts in symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, and grounded theory have been translated as well, see e.g. CÉFAÏ (2003b). It is telling of the dominance of certain North American approaches that GEORGIU rubricises the interpretive approaches from Germany (e.g. Fritz SCHÜTZE, Ulrich OEVERMANN) under the label of "Anglo-Saxon" methods (2001). Yet even though the qualitative approaches from the U.S. of the 1960s and 1970s are certainly well known in Germany, such an equation is problematic. More often than not, it seems, the German reception "hermeneuticises" influences from abroad by blending them with an emphatic notion of meaning (SCHÜTZE and OEVERMANN may be cases in point) or by ignoring developments that do not fit into the interpretive mould (such as the post-Boasian, "postmodern" anthropology, cf. Clifford GEERTZ's later work). Interestingly enough, the same tendency seems to be taking place with the current reception of Michel FOUCAULT, whose discursive approach has been hailed as geared toward a Berger/Luckmannesque "reconstruction of collective knowledge" by certain German sociologists such as KELLER (2003, p.69).

1991), in the sociology of everyday life (MAFFESOLI 1998) and in biographical analysis (BERTAUX 1997; DEMAZIÈRE & DUBAR 1997). [6]

To illustrate the array of different approaches in this area, I want to direct the attention to a few studies which, even though hardly representative for "qualitative" sociology in France,⁴ may stand in for important orientations, namely ethnographic, idealtypic/action based, and interpretive approaches. I will also point out two "hybrid" approaches (documentation and computer-aided analysis), which may characterise social research in France in that they fall only partially into the camp of "qualitative" methodology. [7]

2.1 Ethnographic sociology

Ethnographic methods, well established in anthropology, seek to exhaustively describe the cultural universe of a social group. Olivier SCHWARTZ's study of a miners' milieu in Northern France can be cited as an example for an approach relying heavily on participant observation (2002). His methodology is informed by Georges DEVEREUX's psychoanalytical reflections (1980) on the "disturbance" caused by the participant observer in the ethnographic situation and the knowledge-generating effects of this "transfer". Furthermore, drawing from MAUSS's notion of "total social fact", Schwartz points out the "transversality" of the phenomena under scrutiny. Thus, for SCHWARTZ, "ethnographic facts are characterised in various ways by transversal properties which are linked to their 'intersecting character' between different social spheres and organisational levels" (1993, p.303). Given that the object of "qualitative" research cuts across heterogeneous dimensions of the social, SCHWARTZ's insistence on the impossibility of "pure" methodology for empirical work comes as no surprise (1993, p.305). [8]

2.2 Idealtypic based action sociology

Close to Weberian ideal type methodology, organisation sociologists such as the CROZIER/ FRIEDBERG group have produced a number of case studies of complex ensembles of strategic action. The objective of these studies is to generate ideal type descriptions of empirically observed configurations of social action and to develop models that account for rule-based social action that typically takes place under the conditions of social power. An example for this type of work is Erhard FRIEDBERG's and Christine MOUSSELIN's study of universities, in which the authors trace the constitutive contradictions at work in these complex organisations (FRIEDBERG & MUSSELIN 1989). Methodologically speaking, their approach rejects the "'epistemological break' that pretends to situate the researcher theoretically and methodologically outside the subjects of observation" and pleads for "taking into account the psychology or, rather, the subjectivity of the individuals placed in the context of action" (FRIEDBERG 1997, p.306). The semi-structured interview is their preferred

4 Thus, among other trends, more widespread among linguists than among sociologists, there should at least be mentioned conversation analysis, frame analysis, and interactionism (KERBRAT-ORECCHIONI 1998).

instrument by means of which the authors attempt to gain access to "the actors' interiority" while remaining faithful to the "priority assigned to the principle of discovery" (p.310). [9]

2.3 Interpretive sociology

Influenced by Weberian and Schützian sociology, interpretive sociology aims to reconstruct the life-worlds of social agents. Jean-Claude KAUFMANN (e.g. 1999), for instance, investigates the postmodern individual in his/her intimate world. KAUFMANN's method has some affinity with GLASER/STRAUSS's grounded theory. The analysis of open interviews, letters or documents—KAUFMANN's preferred materials—is accompanied by the production of a great deal of notes. "Guided as much as possible by [his] momentary desire for knowledge", the researcher registers the ideas and associations while reading the material. The kind of "free play" interpretivism espoused by KAUFMANN inspires a "surprise by the material" (KAUFMANN 1996, p.80) and allows to emerge sociological models from the indigenous categories of the interviewee. The results are stylistically painted representations of the "micro-practices" of daily life in postmodernity. [10]

2.4 Techno-social network research

While qualitative sociologists outside France should be more or less familiar with the first three approaches crucially informed by international reception,⁵ the remaining three approaches are less indebted to qualitative sociology as it is commonly understood in the Anglo-Saxon world and Germany. Nicolas DODIER's case study of the post-Fordist transition in a small industrial plant (1995) can be cited as an example of social research that has recourse to a "postmodernized" DURKHEIM ("technical solidarity"), a model of techno-human hybrids ("operators", cf. LATOUR, SIMONDON 1989) as well as theories of the network society (CALLON 1991). DODIER describes organisational life as a non-transparent web of constantly evolving links. While looking into the various modes of creating heterogeneous chains of human beings and objects, he looks into patterns of responsibility attribution, accident management, and chains of causality in "planified" (rigid) as well "distributed" (flexible) organisations. Given his theoretical insistence on the heterogeneity and openness of the social, it comes as no surprise that his methodical approach consists of an eclectic mix of document analysis, participant observation, and interviews. By insisting on the openness ("indefiniteness") of the network, DODIER partakes in a certain trend away from society as "definite entity" (1995, p.93)—a trend that is characteristic of the ongoing deconstruction of a total notion of "society" in contemporary French sociology (cf. MOEBIUS & PETER 2004). [11]

5 Concerning the case of organisation and interpretive sociology, this should not come as a surprise since this type of work is most influenced by tendencies from North America and Germany.

2.5 Biographical documentation

Biographical analysis is a dynamic field that has produced not only excellent research results (e.g. BERTAUX 1997), but that has also at times created a stir beyond the confines of the academic debate. The biographical investigations of the BOURDIEU group is an example of the media resonance a certain strand of social research has met with in France. In the early 1990s, BOURDIEU et al. conducted in-depth interviews with inhabitants of the *banlieue*, the suburbs of Paris known for a number of social problems. Some of these interviews are reproduced in the voluminous *The Misery of the World* (1993). The authors decided to leave most of the interviews in their brute state ("to be read as such", BOURDIEU 1993, p.9), arguing that this way the plurality of possible viewpoints can best be taken into account and the "position of misery" ("misère de position", p.10) in contemporary society could be seized from below. Short accompanying comments attempt to give an "objective analysis of the position" (p.8) of the interviewer, while the symbolic violence inherent in the encounter between sociological observer and interviewee is reflected upon extensively in the final chapter (p.905ff). Following BOURDIEU's rejection of "spontaneous sociology", which confines itself to the reproduction of "common sense" (BOURDIEU, PASSERON & CHAMBOREDON 1968, p.37), the objective is not so much to generate new sociological models and hypotheses from the texts, but rather to illustrate an underlying theory of social structure and inequality. Even though the methodological innovation of this project is controversial, this work has turned out to be a remarkably successful best-seller. [12]

2.6 Computer-aided text analysis

Inspired by *nouvelle sociologie* theorists such as Luc BOLTANSKI and Bruno LATOUR, a group of younger sociologists headed by Francis CHATEAURAYNAUD have developed the "literary technology" *Prospéro* (CHATEAURAYNAUD 2003), which complements the already broad range of sophisticated applications in lexicometry and textual statistics (MARCHAND 1998; JENNY 1997). *Prospéro* is a software utility that processes "complex files" and generates conceptual dictionaries. This software produces intermediate layers of codes and categories between the level of the text and the sociological model. The research procedure can be called "qualitative" in that the human interpretive act plays a crucial role in the constitution and codification of the corpus. Yet in contrast to the existing qualitative software in accordance with a Glaser-Straussian research design, the codification takes place in close interaction with the computer which stores and accumulates the coding routines so as to codify new texts of the corpus more or less automatically. Since the researcher is constantly forced to develop new categories and to confirm or modify older ones, the research design is more flexible than much of the software coming out of the tradition of automated discourse analysis established by Michel PÊCHEUX (1969). Initially conceived in order to analyse the written texts of public debates and controversies, *Prospéro* is a highly innovative attempt at crossing lexicometry, artificial intelligence and "qualitative" codification principles. [13]

2.7 Beyond the qualitative-quantitative divide

None of these approaches can be said to be especially fond of the term "qualitative"—a fact which may reflect the feeling that privileging a certain methodology over another is obstructive to the description of the complex, multi-dimensional object which is the social.⁶ In making a case for the combination of interpretive and standardised techniques of analysis, the last approach (*Prospéro*) in particular is probably better classified as "quasi-qualitative". As we will see below, concerning the qualitative and the quantitative opposition, which JENNY has qualified "artificial, fallacious, and sterile" (2004), "third" way approaches have a long tradition in France. Yet before having a closer look at various tendencies in "French" discourse analysis, I want to shortly address the question why, in contrast to contemporary developments in the Anglo-Saxon and German world, the proper "qualitative" schools and methodologies have not developed in the French social sciences. [14]

2.7.1 *Disciplinary divisions*

Let us not forget that despite the considerable influence that U.S. qualitative sociologists of the 1960s and 1970s have in Europe today, their approaches have never been firmly institutionalised in U.S. sociology. If we pass over those that survived the 1980s, many of them close to linguistics (conversation analysis) or to the humanities ("postmodern" sociology), the quantitative/qualitative split in the U.S. social sciences goes roughly alongside the disciplinary frontier between sociology ("hard" pole) and anthropology ("soft" pole). In Germany, by contrast, anthropology is weakly institutionalised, and a number of interpretive-hermeneutic and ethnographic ("qualitative") research schools have been established within sociology since the 1970s. In France, the methodological difference between anthropology and sociology is much less pronounced than in the U.S., with eminent figures such as DURKHEIM, MAUSS and BOURDIEU straddling both terrains. Therefore, unlike their German counterparts, French sociologists may have had recourse to ethnographic methods from anthropology without having to develop methods and methodologies of their own. [15]

2.7.2 *(Re-)production of the symbolic producers*

Contrary to the U.S. or Germany, the question of method may be less distinctive in French social science discourse. In the U.S. and Germany many of the dominant social science clusters that have developed since World War II started from elaborate sets of methods and methodological assumptions applied to a wide array of thematic objects. The French social sciences, however, tend to be organised according to clans each engaging in "multi-methodical" research practices on the basis of a "mono-theoretical" edifice (FRANK 1977). Therefore, the highest "symbolic profits" in the field, to use the terminology of a well-known conceptual clan leader (BOURDIEU 1984), go to leaders who are strong in

6 Cf. PASSERON's criticism of the "metaphysical debate that finally swallowed up in Germany the investigations on culture or history in the name of an absolute opposition between natural and 'spiritual' sciences the theorist of which was Dilthey" (PASSERON 1991, p.19).

conceptual and theoretical innovation and manage to rally collaborators of various methodical backgrounds and thematic interests. Even though it is not judicious to say that the question of "sociological method" lacks prestige in French sociology, reserved for rank-and-file collaborators and manual writers, the major social research networks in France seem to be integrated more by theoretical programs than by certain methods. [16]

2.7.3 "Third way" epistemology

While the split between a "hard" and a "soft" science pole (or *Geisteswissenschaft* vs. *Naturwissenschaft*) is a hallmark of U.S. and German social sciences, the French scene is not as neatly organised and may better be described, if at all, in terms of a ternary structure. On the one hand, concerning the "quantitative" pole, there is a certain "positivist" penchant in some of the most important sociological projects of the last 150 years (such as COMTE, DURKHEIM, BOURDIEU), but these projects were at the same time linked with ambitious intellectual and epistemological programs. Thus, perhaps in contrast to post-war sociology in North America, these strands cannot be qualified in terms of some sort of intellectually deficient technocracy. On the other hand, the sociological paradigms closest to so called "qualitative" methodologies are generally those focusing on the level of human action. It is possible that in France the discovery of the "human" dimension of social construction was inspired by certain kinds of philosophy, as scattered references to "humanist" philosophers like SARTE (BERTAUX 1997, p.119), MERLEAU-PONTY and GUSDOFRF (MUCCHIELLI 1994, pp.15, 27) can be found. But the whole picture would not be complete without a third tradition, the intellectually most visible one, anchored in a strong theoretical tradition of constructivist epistemology and critical science theory reaching from CANGUILHEM and BACHELARD to ALTHUSSER, FOUCAULT, and LATOUR (ANGERMÜLLER 2004c). Especially dominant during the 1960s and 1970s, these theorists turned against both the causal and realist underpinnings of classical sociology and the humanism of traditional philosophy. Thus, precisely at the time when the movement against the positivist model of the "hard" sciences began to take shape and the human actor was put back in place in the Anglo-American and German social sciences, the French *sciences humaines (et sociales)* discovered formal linguistics and engaged in the deconstruction of the speaking subject (see ANGERMÜLLER 2004a).⁷ It is against the background of the "structuralist" effervescence of the 1960s that numerous "quasi-qualitative" approaches were developed and the field of discourse analysis was constituted. [17]

7 In Germany, a systematic critique of the "humanist" underpinnings of *Geisteswissenschaften* (including equivalent strands in sociology) did not take place until recently (cf. the "anti-humanist" epistemologies in Niklas LUHMANN's systems-theory, in the cognitive sciences and in cultural and media studies influenced by North American poststructuralism).

3. "Quasi-Qualitative" Research: The Decentering of the Speaking Subject in Discourse Analysis

"Quasi-qualitative" approaches are often influenced by linguistics such as "discourse analysis" and "sociolinguistics". Discourse analysis, which I want to give special attention in this chapter, does not only have a strong indigenous tradition in France; it also has crucially inspired the methodical and methodological innovation in social sciences. If discourse analysis asks how texts are used in certain contexts, the various discursive approaches in France typically focus on the organisation of discourse beyond a given situation. However, even though the differences with the more "micro-sociological" approaches from the U.S. like conversation analysis are striking, the frequently used label "French (school of) discourse analysis" (GUESPIN 1976; MAINGUENEAU 1994; WILLIAMS 1999), has become problematic. Not only has the prominent role of French theorists in the international debate on poststructuralism called into question the alleged "Frenchness" of their theories (ANGERMÜLLER 2004b), but today many practitioners claiming the "French" label are outside France (see ANGERMÜLLER, BUNZMANN & NONHOFF 2001). Yet while such nationally tainted labels like "German" for interpretive-hermeneutic approaches, or "North American" for pragmatist-interactionist orientations, are increasingly dispersed on an international level, the unity within and the commensurability between these tendencies implied by these labels are equally questionable. [18]

In the following, I will not attempt at engaging in the long overdue exchange between these fields of research (cf. e.g. KELLER, HIRSELAND, SCHNEIDER and VIEHÖVER 2001, 2003); rather, my ambition is to give a brief overview of the major traditions, tendencies, and features of major strands of discourse analysis in France (for an overview of the German situation see ANGERMÜLLER 2005c). Thus, I will start by discussing the triad of "structuralist" pioneers, Michel FOUCAULT, Jacques LACAN and Louis ALTHUSSER—the theorists who gave major impulses during the establishment of the field in the 1960s; I will then try to sketch the evolution from structuralism to pragmatics; finally I want to point out a few analytical instruments by means of which I want to highlight the non-interpretive and anti-subjectivist tendency which has characterised French discourse analysis from its structuralist beginnings up to its more recent turn to the pragmatic dimension of the utterance (*énonciation*). [19]

3.1 Pioneers

If the common denominator of the various tendencies in discourse analysis is the attempt to reach beyond the levels of classical linguistics, i.e. beyond isolated signs and individual sentences, the first practitioners in the field of discourse analysis in post-war France took two more or less alternative ways in order to come to terms with the level beyond the sentence: The distributional linguistics inspired by Zellig HARRIS, who was close to Franz BOAS' cultural anthropology and later became an important teacher of Noam CHOMSKY's, conceived of discourse as the syntactical construction of complex linguistic ensembles on different hierarchical levels (HARRIS 1963). By contrast, the linguists in the

Saussurean tradition opted, as a matter of rule, for a semantic approach geared toward the decoding of meaning. It is SAUSSURE's structural linguistics (SAUSSURE 1962) that, in the 1960s, became the role model for the *sciences humaines*, whose broad academic and intellectual success resulted in the establishment of numerous new fields and disciplines, among others, discourse analysis. With its attempt at reducing an unlimited number of linguistic products to a given number of distinctive elements and structural rules, Saussurean linguistics held out the promise to come up with a general science of social and cultural life (cf. BAUDRILLARD 1968; BARTHES 1967) and, thus, became the natural model for a science whose aim was to investigate the symbolic household of a society in its entirety. [20]

1969 is commonly considered the year when discourse analysis was officially established as a field of academic research in France. Other than the special editions of linguistic journals like *Langages*, its foundation was heralded by the publication of Michel FOUCAULT's *Archeology of Knowledge* (1969) and by Michel PÊCHEUX's *Automatic Discourse Analysis* (1969). PÊCHEUX was one of the leading figures during the pioneering period of the field. Strongly influenced by the Marxist philosopher Louis ALTHUSSER, he put into practice the theory of ideological state apparatuses according to which the individual turns into a "subject" by entering discourse. PÊCHEUX's "non-subjectivist theory of subjectivity" (1975, p.120) is also informed by Jacques LACAN's psychoanalysis. Less noticed by international reception, LACAN's theory has inspired numerous intellectual schools which highlight the discursive dimension for the constitution of the subject and for the social institutions in which it is invested. I will start by giving a brief overview of the discursive approaches of the three major theoretical strands of the field: Foucauldianism, Lacanianism, Althusserianism (see ANGERMÜLLER 2005a). [21]

3.1.1 Michel FOUCAULT: statements and discursive formations

FOUCAULT's interest in the analysis of discourse dates to a rather short period between 1966 and 1971 (cf. ANGERMÜLLER 2004d). Indebted to the Saussurian vision of a general science of social life, FOUCAULT's *Les Mots et les choses* (English: *The Order of Things*) of 1966 constitutes an attempt to trace back the varieties of protoscientific thinking at different historical moments to general rule systems modelled on SAUSSURE's notion of *langue*. In the *Archeology of Knowledge* of 1969 FOUCAULT begins to free himself from the Saussurian vocabulary of *langue* and *parole* and introduces the pragmatic focus on the production of discursive events and statements. Oftentimes considered the discursive theory of the *Order of Things*, the *Archeology* in fact departs from the former structuralist orientation by introducing the notion of discursive formation. Having both a static and a dynamic aspect, a discursive formation is a set of disparate elements that are tied together by specific discursive acts which FOUCAULT delineates according to the dimensions of *énonciation* (utterance) and *énoncé* (statement). In the *Archeology*, FOUCAULT asks how utterances are produced so as to articulate complex discursive ensembles whose specificity, singularity, and heterogeneity need to be taken into account. In the context of

strong formalist tendencies in French literary criticism, linguistics and philosophy, FOUCAULT's discursive approach can be considered rather innovative in that he points to extra-textual levels, such as institutional places, historical configurations, and genre. Yet even though his project aims at describing the discursive rules governing the combination of text and context, FOUCAULT retains a clear anti-hermeneutic stance. Far from rehabilitating the speaking and acting subject or rooting discourse in the meaningful universe of a life-world, FOUCAULT insists on the positivity and materiality of discursive praxis. [22]

3.1.2 Jacques LACAN: enunciative subjectivity and signifying chains

While FOUCAULT's theory of discourse has enjoyed considerable attention on the international level, it is in fact the academically much less established psychoanalyst Jacques LACAN, who founded one of the most important intellectual schools after World War II in France. LACAN's theory of the discursive constitution of the subject has turned out to be enormously influential for practitioners and theorists alike, among which ALTHUSSER and, to a lesser degree, FOUCAULT. For LACAN, subjectivity is an illusory, but necessary effect of the subject entering the symbolic order (LACAN 1975a). By using signifiers whose meaning is ever ambivalent and shifting, the Lacanian subject produces signifying chains ("L'instance de la lettre" in LACAN 1971). Resembling in some way a Foucauldian discursive formation, a signifying chain is an ensemble of signs characterised by an in-built tension, a desire (*désir*) which aims at suturing a constitutive lack. LACAN strips desire completely from its biological overtones. Desire and lack result from the formal-semiotic structure of the discourse in which the subject is invested. LACAN's theory of discourse is unusually rich (see ANGERMÜLLER 2005a) and comprises a number of important elements which I only want to allude to in a cursory fashion: the excess, the fluidity, the jouissance of meaning, the missing of the imaginary other, the institutional order of the "Big Other", the gaps and fissures in the symbolic order, all of which exist at the basis of a split, non unitary subject that is completely bereft of a non-symbolic, pre-discursive core (cf. LACAN 1973). [23]

3.1.3 Louis ALTHUSSER: ideological state apparatuses and interpellation

While FOUCAULT always remained a rather singular figure and LACAN was influenced by a broad, semi-academic psychoanalytical culture, the Marxist philosopher Louis ALTHUSSER inspired the establishment of a properly academic school of discourse analysis headed by his disciple Michel PÉCHEUX. In some way synonymous to the notion of ideology, the Althusserian notion of subjectivity points to the way in which the individual finds his or her place in the social structure. ALTHUSSER's theory of "ideological state apparatuses" (1993; 1995) asks how individuals are subjectivated (*assujetti* in the double meaning of subjugated and socialised), i.e. installed into certain discursive subject positions. Subjectivation is no innocent discovery of one's own inner experience or social role; rather, it designates the way discourse recruits its subjects by hailing or naming them (for an application see ANGERMÜLLER 2004e). Strongly influenced by LACAN's non-subjectivist theory of subjectivity, ALTHUSSER

stresses the performative constitution of the subject whose ideological nature is brought to light precisely when the subject thinks to know in "spontaneous and interior self-evidence" who he or she is. [24]

3.2 Evolutions

Since the late 1960s, the field of discourse analysis has seen a number of important changes, among the most important ones are the pragmatic turn, certain thematic shifts, and the consolidation of a field of systematic research. [25]

3.2.1 *The pragmatic turn*

The field of discourse analysis was established in the late 1960s as an offspring of Saussurian structural linguistics. In the course of the 1970s, however, the structural analysis of discursive "grammars" was increasingly called into question by a French version of linguistic pragmatics. Pragmatics brought attention to the dimension of the utterance or enunciation. As BENVENISTE defines it, the utterance (or *énonciation*) is the enactment of language, i.e. the specific discursive use of language in a given situation. Influenced by AUSTIN's speech act theory, most French pragmatic linguists hold on to a non-subjectivist and non-interpretive stance. Their question is how certain discursive events are brought forth, tied in with other discursive statements, inscribed into institutional places and given certain illocutionary forces and voices. The FOUCAULT of the *Archeology* can be considered a pioneer of the pragmatic turn which swung into full motion with the publication of the works of Oswald DUCROT (1972; 1980), Jean-François LYOTARD (1979), François RÉCANATI (1979a; 1979b), Antoine CULIOLI (1990) and Dominique MAINGUENEAU (1993; 1997). [26]

3.2.2 *Thematic shifts and consolidation*

The 1970s have seen the waning of grand intellectual projects and the dissolution of tightly integrated schools like the one led by Michel PÊCHEUX at St. Cloud. With the assertion of systematic research, the field has since undergone a normalisation process in the Kuhnian sense. If there is still a strong accent on political discourses (BONNAFOUS 1991), other discourses, such as social and religious history as well as women, media and philosophy, testify to the field's considerable differentiation. Following the innovations at the lexicometrical centre at St. Cloud, a rich tradition of textual statistics has developed which coexists with more qualitative tools. The non-interpretive methodology of French discourse analysis has certainly been conducive to a certain degree of integration between quantitative and "qualitative" approaches. [27]

Since the 1980s a broad international reception has made French discourse analysis a truly international phenomenon, albeit often in terms of the "high-theoretical" movement of "French Theory" or "poststructuralism": ALTHUSSER's ideology and discourse concept was particularly well received in British Cultural Studies (the Birmingham group around Stuart Hall, *Screen*). Drawing from LACAN, ALTHUSSER and FOUCAULT, the Essex school of ideology and

discourse analysis around Ernesto LACLAU and Chantal MOUFFE (1990; 1985) have developed a discursive theory of hegemonic articulation. Fredric Jameson's Marxist hermeneutics is influenced by structuralist models (JAMESON 1972, 1981). Judith BUTLER has put forth an important post-Lacanian approach to legal discourse (1997), and a huge number of international scholars in various disciplines have been inspired by FOUCAULT's ideas on discourse, power and subjectivity (e.g. FAIRCLOUGH 1992; BUBLITZ 2003). [28]

3.3 Instruments

Disposing of a wealth of analytical instruments and tools, linguistic theory has traditionally been a strong field in France with considerable ramifications for adjacent fields in the *sciences humaines*. It is impossible to come up with an exhausting overview, and I want to restrict myself to four analytical tools that I deem especially typical. [29]

3.3.1 Semiotic discourse analysis: The School of Paris

FOUCAULT's *Order of Things* (1966) and the early work of Michel PÊCHEUX (1975) bear witness to the strong influence of structural linguistics, which soon came under general attack for its presumed bias for static and homogeneous structures. The semioticians led by the Hjelmslevian Algirdas J. GREIMAS (1966; 1970)—sometimes called School of Paris—by contrast have remained faithful to the structural model while modifying it considerably. Inspired by logical semantics, GREIMAS' theory of the semiotic square allows a dynamic view of structure. GREIMAS considers meaning as an effect of the operational constitution of semiotic relations—a model which has been applied to the analysis of public discourse by Eric LANDOWSKI (1989). [30]

3.3.2 Discursive subjectivity

It is the Saussurean Emile BENVENISTE—apparently influenced by Karl BÜHLER's *origo* theory (1965)—who outlines an influential theory of discursive subjectivity (1974). In pointing out the deictical system of enunciative particles like "I", "here", "now", BENVENISTE asked the question how individuals appropriate the "subjectivity in language". According to BENVENISTE, language is organised by the indexical markers of enunciation which, once put into practice, may render visible the position of a "speaking subject" (TEMMAR 2000). ALTHUSSER's theory of ideology gave this theory another twist by insisting on the performative dimension of subjectivation (see PÊCHEUX 1990, p.168). ALTHUSSER grasps subjectivity as a performatively induced effect of symbolic practices by means of which the individual stabilises an illusion of subjective self-evidence and, thus, finds her position in the social structure. Linguists like KERBRAT-ORECCHIONI look into the variety of linguistic markers (including tenses, adverbial expressions, modal verbs) the use of which may produce an effect of subjectivity (1980). And sociologists like ACHARD analyse the deictical organisation of discourse in order to describe the position of the subject in the discursive space of the nation-state (1997). [31]

3.3.3 *Polyphony*

The discovery of the pragmatic dimension of enunciation has given birth to general approaches that are geared toward the description of the complex discursive universes evoked by the enunciation of a text. Following the pragmatic insights into the enunciative dimension of linguistic activity in the spirit of Mikhail BAKHTIN, Oswald DUCROT's analyses of phenomena like irony, argumentation and negation have revolutionised the way language is seen in France. DUCROT produces an analysis of the different layers of voices and meaning. Distinguishing between locutor, enunciator and speaking being, as well as between sense and signification, he points out the different layers of meaning (1984). DUCROT, like LACAN, underlines the heterogeneous nature of discourse. Discourse does not form a harmonious whole since it is governed by the contradictory dimensions of the saying and the said. In a similar vein, ROSIER dissects the different enunciative levels of indirect speech (1999) and RABATEL describes the discursive construction of a point of view (1998). [32]

3.3.4 *Presupposition and enunciative scenes*

While DUCROT's focus is largely on the technical analysis of linguistic micro-phenomena, his approach has given a new boost to the "macro-discursive" analysis of presupposition and argumentation (ANSCOMBRE & DUCROT 1983). Thus, the exclusive focus on the text is called into question and the presuppositional organisation of larger discursive formations as well as the pragmatic constitution of inferential knowledge comes into view. The post-Foucauldian linguist Dominique MAINGUENEAU has proffered a theory of scenography according to which the use of a text institutes a theatrical scene of discursive "roles" (1993). In his analyses he highlights the specific tone (*ethos*) that comes along with the use of a text in specific institutional places, and his theory of self-constituting discourses interrogates the method in which texts organise their proper enunciation, the scenography of which is presupposed and instituted at the same time (1995). In a similar vein, Frédéric COSSUTTA has extended the insights of enunciative analysis to a discursive analysis of philosophy (1989; 1995). According to COSSUTTA, a philosophical text must find solutions to the need of self-legitimation by the very act of its enunciation. [33]

4. Comparing "Qualitative Sociology" and "Discourse Analysis"

While qualitative sociology and discourse analysis share a number of common problems and questions, the zones of contact have to be emphasised as much as the fundamental differences between these paradigms. To be sure, certain "qualitative" approaches, from Anglo-Saxon schools like conversation and frame analysis (e.g. SCHEFFER 2004) and Karin KNORR-CETINA's sociology of knowledge, are in certain respects close to discourse analysis. Inversely, certain discourse analysts from the "French" tradition, such as Jacques GUILHAUMOU (2004), have adopted some of the hermeneutic-interpretive axioms of qualitative sociology. Yet given the different historical and disciplinary backgrounds, the epistemological points of departure as well as the research objectives often point to

opposite directions (see ANGERMÜLLER 2005b). Thus, it should be kept in mind that while interpretive sociology is rooted in hermeneutic approaches prolonging in a certain way the theological, philosophical, and philological heritage of the 19th century, the discursive approaches take their departure from formal linguistics, semiotics, and logics. I want to conclude my tableau by pointing out the major differences between "qualitative" and the "quasi-qualitative" tendencies. [34]

4.1 Object of analysis: "discourse in situation" vs. "discursive formation"

Since "qualitative" approaches often focus on the interaction and conversation between two or more social actors, the individual actor in her/his life-world is oftentimes given special emphasis. Moreover, qualitative approaches from both North America and Germany largely share the assumption that the individual has certain degrees of freedom vis-à-vis the constraints and determinisms of social structure. Discourse analysis, by contrast, typically focuses on discourse independent from the interactive situation. According to its non-subjectivist methodology, the symbolic is a "transsubjective bond" (LACAN) that exceeds not only individual control but also organises the relations between individuals beyond the interactive situation. Yet discourse analysis, especially the more linguistic strands, cannot be easily situated on a continuum of action and structure, freedom and determination. While the epistemological critique of the "speaking subject" is not easily reconcilable with sociological action theories, discourse theory's axiom of the individual's decentering and loss of discursive control does not necessarily imply that it becomes a puppet of anonymous social forces. Thus, the more sociologically minded theorists of discourse have always guarded against the notion of society as a closed structure of determining forces. PÊCHEUX (1990, p.257), e.g., warns against a model of social relations of forces outside discourse. Even though the problem of the relationship between discourse and the social totality is as yet little theorised (but see LACLAU & MOUFFE 1985), many discourse analysts seem to be ill at ease with the notion of society "behind" its discursive expression. According to PÊCHEUX, for instance, social domination is not external to discourse: it is a "a domination which manifests itself in the internal organisation of a dominated ideology" (1990, p.257).⁸ [35]

4.2 Ontology of the empirical object: "intersubjective meaning" vs. "interdiscourse"

Typically, "qualitative" sociologists, be they from North America or from Central Europe, attempt to isolate some sort of common basis between the actors. Their focus is on tacitly shared rules or intersubjective life-worlds, which are considered essential for mutual understanding and, more generally speaking, for the unity of the social. Thus, "culture", "knowledge" or "identity" typically designate empirical objects whose intersubjective or collective dimension qualitative research sets out to reconstruct. For discourse analysts, however, the presupposition of some unitary basis is problematic and risks the trap of essentialism. Accordingly, discourse does not constitute a basis of shared meaning and norms that permits

⁸ The most radical version of this theme can be found in BAUDRILLARD's hyper-structuralist simulacra theory, which conceives of the social as firmly anchored within the symbolic (1972).

the subject to look toward the other in order to understand his/her meaning. Discourse analysts prefer to see discourse as organised around constitutive fissures and interior contradictions, which Michel PÊCHEUX has called the interdiscursive character of discourse (1975; cf. MAINGUENEAU 1983). The axiom of interdiscourse is defended by structuralists and pragmatists alike. The former tend to understand the constitution of "I" to be in a binary opposition to an "other", whereas the latter emphasise the complex superposition of different enunciative layers within the very act of discourse. [36]

4.3 Methodology of knowledge production: "empathetic understanding" vs. "epistemological break"

If "qualitative" sociology aims at the reconstruction of "intersubjective meaning", it is the capacity of mutual understanding that gives the sociological observer (like any other human being) access to the intended meaning of the other. While subject and other share the potential of each taking the point of view of the other, the sociological observer cannot aspire to a more objective access to socially shared meaning than any other human being. This is why for qualitative sociology the researcher is in an equal or in an "inferior" position to the subject under investigation, who is "in the role of the star" (KAUFMANN 1996, p.51). Inversely, following epistemologists like BACHELARD, most French discursivists stress the chasm between the object and its description. For discourse analysts, the constructivism espoused by the qualitative paradigm is not consistent since it runs the risk of hypostasising the life-world and its meaning structures as objective pre-discursive entities. If the discourse analyst aims to generate quasi-linguistic rules and abstract formula from her/his empirical material,⁹ the assumption is of course not that the world of formal laws and structures is any more "objective" than the world of human subjects. In fact, it is precisely by insisting on the "epistemological break" between the language of science and the language of the human world that she/he turns out to be a constructivist since the production of knowledge is not the reconstruction of some meaning already there, but the construction of something new, which GREIMAS has usefully described as the translation of one language (object language) into a different language (meta-language) (GREIMAS 1966). The "method", then, serves to transform the empirical material into some kind of "theoretical counter-world", by means of which the discourse analyst hopes to gain critical distance and produce accumulative knowledge. [37]

4.4 Definition of the symbolic as "instrumental" vs. "material"

Many "qualitative" sociologists, at least those in the interpretive-hermeneutic mould, conceive of the symbolic as an expression of some underlying order, hidden as it were "behind" the text. Discourse then transmits some kind of "transcendental" world of meaning or pre-discursive social objectivity to be reconstructed by the qualitative researcher. Discourse analysis, by contrast,

9 LÉVI-STRAUSS's "mathematical" equations (1958, p.282), LACAN's topologies (1975b), GREIMAS' semiotic square (1966), BOURDIEU's correspondence analyses (1979) or PÊCHEUX's algorithms (1969) come to mind.

rejects the instrumental view of the symbolic and takes its point of departure from the discursive material. For those working in the semiotic-structural tradition, it is the materiality of the sign, its differential constitution and its manifold meaning effects (cf. BARTHES' *jouissance* of the text), rather than the represented world that is at the roots of the production of meaning effects. This is why FOUCAULT (1969), for instance, has characterised his project as "positivist". Accordingly, there are no two worlds of discursive expression and of pre-discursive reality: what is relevant is what has really been produced or uttered in discourse and not what is culturally latent, collectively repressed or intended by the subject. Thus, both structuralists, who privilege the signifier over the signified (PÊCHEUX 1975, p.119) and the "excess" of meaning effects (BARTHES 1970), and pragmatists, who stress the reflexivity and opacity of discursive production (RÉCANATI 1979a, p.20), can be said to be "materialists", i.e. in favour of a non-representationalist notion of discourse. [38]

As a consequence, the St. Cloud school of lexicometry, which comes out of PÊCHEUX's project of automatic discourse analysis (1969), continues to thrive, and textual statistics, more established in France than in the U.S. or Germany, enjoys considerable attention in the social sciences (BULLETIN DE MÉTHODOLOGIE SOCIOLOGIQUE 2005, also see the software Prospéro above). Indeed, if materiality precedes meaning, the primary focus is on the various forms of discourse (such as word forms or statements), which, as a first step, may be subjected to formal linguistic analysis or systematically registered by information technology. As a second step, the specific meaning effects, discursive contexts or scenographic worlds these forms bring about in given contexts are examined. Among the exemplary studies which have investigated the way a given material form "manages" its various contexts, there is Alice KRIEG-PLANQUE's study of the many uses of the formula "purification" in the press coverage on the Balkan war (2003) as well as Dominique MAINGUENEAU's analysis of the scenographic dimension of literary discourse (1993). [39]

4.5 Objective of the research process: "thick description" vs. "rules of discursive formation"

As a rule, the goal of "qualitative" analysis is to account for a life-world in its richness. Like GEERTZ's "thick descriptions", good empirical accounts let the material "speak". Yet, it is probably useful to make a (sometimes artificial) distinction within "qualitative sociology" between more hermeneutic and more pragmatist approaches. While the hermeneutic approaches, with their emphatic notions of meaning, knowledge and identity, tend to go in the opposite direction of discourse theory; the pragmatist approaches tend to be on a terrain oftentimes close to discourse theory. Thus, certain strands from the Anglo-Saxon world (especially speech act theory, conversation and frame analysis) and the standard "French" tendencies share the focus on the rules of discursive formation rather than the interest in the reconstruction of "cultural contents". Discourse analysis analyses the rules of discursive formation—non-positivist "laws", which organise the production of specific discursive acts, their combination to complex

ensembles of distinctive elements as well as their inscriptions into certain institutional contexts. For discourse analysis, meaning is a product of discursive operations—more a (necessary) illusion than a foundational category. [40]

5. Conclusion

As a conclusion, the question may be raised: What does the "French" contribution to the sociological discussion about qualitative methodologies in Europe look like? As has been noted, the distinction between "soft" and "hard" sciences, between *geistes-* vs. *naturwissenschaftlich* objects, between understanding (*Verstehen*) and explaining (*Erklären*), between a realm of culture and meaning and a realm of natural laws is not constitutive for the French debate on the social production of meaning. This may have the salutary effect that the split between quantitative and qualitative approaches is less profound than elsewhere, and the combination of different methods is not as easily mired in dogmatic methodological bickering. Furthermore, if FOUCAULT, LACAN, and ALTHUSSER are usually perceived as the high-priests of poststructuralism on the international scene, then the rich analytical background and the great deal of rigorous instruments and applications of the French discourse tradition must not be overlooked. Even a short glance at recent discourse dictionaries (MAINGUENEAU & CHARAUDEAU 2002; DÉTRIE, SIBLOT & VERINE 2001; MOESCHLER & REBOUL 1994) reveals the wealth of linguistically informed instruments that have been developed in the last 35 years. Largely untapped by "qualitative" sociology, this reservoir of "quasi-qualitative" tools may help overcome the recourse to some sort of interpretive imagination that the "qualitative" sociologist frequently evokes in order to engage in the interpretive reconstruction of her/his object. For if the research process is based on empathy, understanding or introspection, how can the miraculous act of interpretive reconstruction be reconciled with the need for rigorous method and analysis? Even though the systematic exchange between "qualitative sociology" and "discourse analysis" has hardly started, there can be little doubt that the difference between interpretive sociology and discourse analysis constitutes one of the major interdiscursive boundaries in the field of "qualitative" social research in Europe. [41]

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