

## **DISCOURSE THEORY AND ANALYSIS IN SOCIAL SCIENCE - OVERVIEW. (Made by MBR with help from Gemini)**

**Based on Laclau & Mouffe - Discourse Theory + “The English Handbook”, ibog.Systeme.**

The word *discourse* comes from the French word *discours* which means *talk or conversation*. **A discourse is a certain way to talk about a certain topic.** Therefore, in a discourse you have a certain perspective on a certain topic which is reflected by your use of words and concepts in the discourse. You can, for example, talk about a working-class discourse, a business discourse or a gender discourse.

The main focus of discourse analysis is, therefore, to analyze the discourse used in a text. This involves looking at the way the text talks about or understands a certain problem, notion, concept or phenomenon. In other words, discourse analysis will reveal hidden motivations behind a text or a speech and show which understanding and conception the sender/writer wishes to “plant” in their audience. If you are successful in promoting YOUR discourse, then you will hold the power of people’s perception of things and their understanding of reality.

Therefore, according to Michel Foucault, discourse is not just language, but a practice producing knowledge and defining “truth” – and thus an important tool for power and control. Language and a certain way of talking about things “constructs” our reality and adds certain connotations to various topics – also political which equals **POWER** according to Foucault and social constructivism, including Laclau&Mouffe, which has developed discourse analysis. Norman Fairclough also adds **social practice and context** to the analysis which looks at social norms and structures and how they influence the text – important for social science. The textual analysis is taken to a higher level by looking at the text in the context in which it is written and not just the text itself. A text can be influenced by the social structures and norms in society according to Fairclough.

**Discourse analysis and social science:** Discourse analysis can be used to examine and disclose POWER-structures and which political understanding and narrative someone tries to put forward.

### **CENTRAL CONCEPTS:**

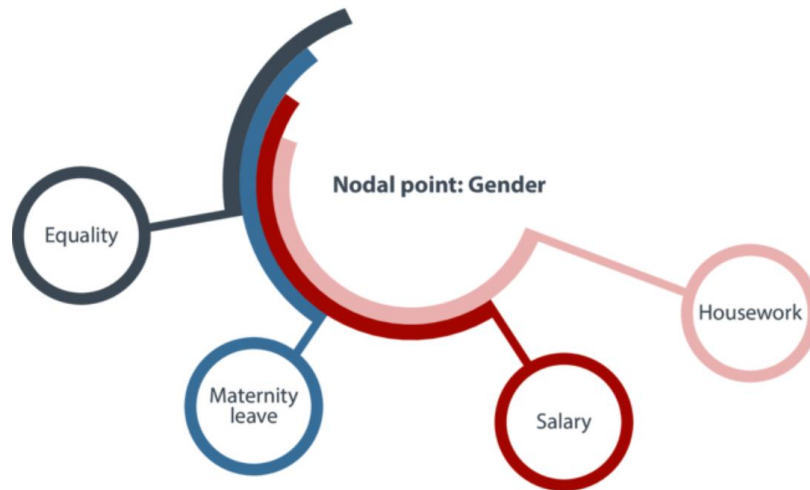
**Discourse** (*Diskurs*):

- A fixed system of meaning. A specific way of describing the world which attaches a certain meaning to it. It attempts to organize the world so we can understand it. For example: Describing “SU” as either “Educational support” (=positive meaning and connotation) or “Café-money” (=negative meaning and connotation)

- **Nodal Point** (*Nodalpunkt*):
  - The key problem/notion or concept -> the main word which describes the theme/main focus of the speech and or text.
  - *Example*: In the article about the gender cleavage in DK-politics, "Gender Equality" (Ligestilling) acts as a nodal point, but men and women struggle to define what it means.
- **Floating Signifier** (*Flydende betegner*):
  - A sign (word) that different discourses struggle to fill with meaning. It has no fixed meaning in itself -> "neutral" words which all will recognize, and which be defined differently depending on which discourse they are part of.
  - *Example*: "Freedom," "Justice" - words that typically hold connotation of being important. Both sides use the word, but they mean different things by it.
- **Chain of Equivalence** (*Ækvivalenskæde*):
  - A chain of words/concepts that are linked together to describe and add a certain value to the Nodal point and establish a clear "Us" vs. "Them."
  - *Example*: A young man might link "Anti-woke," "Liberal Alliance," and "Freedom" in one chain, which describes "Equality".
- **Chain of Difference** (*Differenskæde*):
  - The opposite of equivalence and that which stands in contrast to the nodal point. Here, you try to break down the polarization and show that things are nuanced and not just binary opposites. You try to strengthen your own argument and discourse.
- **Antagonism** (*Antagonisme*):
  - A conflict where one identity is threatened by another. It is the limit of the discourse; where "we" stop and "the enemy" begins.
  - *Example*: Describing a growing antagonism between young men and young women, or between "the people" and "the elite", or the immigrants and the "natives"
- **Hegemony** (*Hegemoni*):
  - The dominance of one perspective/discourse over others, to the point where it becomes "common sense" or the "natural" way of seeing things. For example "Migration is a problem"

- **Social practice:** Which social structures and norms are the context of the text – who wrote it? Where? What was going on at the time – how does that shape the discourse? For example: Right now the war in Ukraine is a central event shaping society particularly in Europe.

**Example of Nodal Point and Chain of Equivalence**



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## Step by Step Guide to Discourse Analysis (from “the English Handbook”).

Discourse analysis is primarily used when analysing non-fiction texts such as articles, blogs etc. Here is a guide which can help you when using discourse analysis.

1. Read the text and find the nodal point of the text.
2. Look for the chain of equivalence after finding the nodal point. These are words connected to the nodal point. In order to find the words, ask yourself if they give added value to or more information about the nodal point.
3. When you have found the words which, you believe, are part of the chain of equivalence, ask yourself the following questions:
  - a. What is the exact meaning of the words (=denotation) in the chain of equivalence?
  - b. Which connotations do the words invoke with the way they are used in the text?
  - c. What effect do the words have?
4. Sum up your findings and draw a conclusion regarding your findings.

3iSA. Hand-out on discourse analysis.

5. When there are two nodal points and two opposing chains of equivalence, you have a chain of difference. Do the same analysis of the chain of difference by asking the same questions and sum up by making a comparison of the two chains of equivalence.
6. Social practice – look at the societal context of the text. What characterizes and shapes the society and time when the text was made?