

## **DISCOURSE AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: A THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

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### **Abstract**

In this article, the relationship among international actors is understood as a communicative process in which discourse is a central instrument, a perspective that in recent decades has expanded remarkably in International Relations. This plethora has, however, been accompanied by frequent calls for greater methodological clarification in academic work. This article aims to contribute to this purpose, offering an integrated view of discursive approaches in International Relations and presenting an updated picture of context theory.

### **Keywords**

Language; Discourse; Constructivism; Context; Methodology

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## **DISCOURSE AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: A THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH<sup>1</sup>**

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Since the first half of the twentieth century, particularly from the 1940s onwards, the social sciences' interest in the meaning of language focused on the so-called *content analysis*, reproducing the dominant positivist paradigm and, in a way, demonstrating a significant aloofness regarding the intellectual legacy of Wilhelm Dilthey (Dilthey, 1883; 1900).

Dilthey had claimed, back in the nineteenth century, a scientificity specific to social sciences (Dilthey, 1883, 1900), based on the explanatory method, which opposed the traditional thinking of the natural sciences, grounded on the central paradigm of quantitative demonstration. Still, content analysis, which preceded the study of discourse, emerged precisely in Dilthey's opposite camp from techniques such as lexicography, believing in the possibility of the empirical study of the word.

Since the 1960s, due to the analytical deepening that the study of discourse has undergone (Van Dijk, 1972, 1977, 1988; Ducrot, 1972, 1980, 1984; Grimes, 1975; Hall et al, 1978), this positivist paradigm has been challenged by the need to explain the meaning of what was said, thus paving the way for qualitative analysis and the necessary interdisciplinarity between the two approaches. Accordingly, the text ceased to be considered a closed construction that statistical analysis allowed access to, and started to be understood as a structure of meanings, open and dependent on their context, which many disciplines such as sociology, history, psychology, anthropology, law, and international relations could aspire to unravel. The scientific potential of this new discursive approach would soon be demonstrated by a galloping number of studies in all areas of the humanities.

Also in the field of international relations, there was a growing interest in the study of world politics as a social construction and in the increasing use of discourse analysis as an analytical tool. According to Müller, this interest covered a wide range of topics, from "the rhetoric production of marginality, resistance and otherness" in International Relations to the "constitutive and disciplining power of geopolitical discourses as truth regimes. Similarly, discourse and discourse analysis have been among the most popular concepts to study the formation of geopolitical identities" (Müller, 2010: 1).

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Despite this growing interest in the discursive approach to international phenomena, calls for the need to use more systematic methodologies in the studies abound and include discourse analysis works produced in all fields of the social sciences.

As Müller noted, the methodological warning accompanied the emergence of the main publications in the area of discourse, and Van Dijk, one of the most prominent authors, in the first editorial he wrote for the *Discourse and Society* journal underlined the need for "explicit and systematic analysis based on serious methods and theories" (Van Dijk, 1990: 14). Over a decade after Van Dijk wrote these words, Antaki and Checkel identified, among the works written about discourse in International Relations, a descriptive and justifying gap in the "sources and techniques used to reconstruct discourses" (Checkel 2004: 7).

The need for methodological accuracy is imperative in an area that, like discourse analysis, can offer an invaluable contribution to International Relations. A discourse analysis of international practice combining textual analysis and contextual analysis allows making political and sociological inferences that can be of great use for the topic addressed here. According to Van Dijk "It is precisely this integrated analysis" that allows a better understanding of the complexity of the practices, institutions and political processes, precisely the kind of objects of analysis that interest political scientists" (Van Dijk, 1997: 41).

Van Dijk exemplifies the utility of the discursive approach in Political Science and International Relations with the study of topics such as the relationship between immigration and xenophobia, immigration policies and social integration, partisan positioning and propaganda, or how the mass media deals with ethnic affairs. According to the author,

*"What is at stake here (in the study of the discourse on immigration) is not only the socio-economic 'facts' of the immigration of others. In a symbolic perspective, what is at stake here is how politicians, journalists and the public think, speak and write about the topic and how this discourse and cognition influence political action and, consequently, the political structure. This is where the discourse analysis may allow explanations that otherwise would be absent".*  
(Van Dijk, 1997: 42)

### **The theoretical foundations of discourse analysis**

Discourse analysis has very deep intellectual roots in philosophy, linguistics and pragmatics.

In philosophy, the study of discourse arose from the intellectual movement that embodied the so-called interpretative shift in the social sciences. At the root of this shift lies, in turn, hermeneutics, which shares with analytic philosophy the emphasis on the linguistic nature of subjectivity. Authors like Heidegger, Ricoeur and Wittgenstein stressed the impossibility of studying reality without understanding the meaning (s) of the actions of social agents, which, in turn, can only be learned through the study of language. It is language that allows sharing concepts and the construction of social life, from which



important theories derive, such as Wittgenstein's, focused on language game, as well as the revolutionary schools of Heidegger and Gadamer, which underline the social and historical nature of subjectivity itself.

From a linguistic perspective, the origins of the study of discourse go back to classical rhetoric, which recognized, over 2000 years ago, that the quality of a text does not lie only in its formal correctness, but also in its "persuasive effectiveness" (Van Dijk, 1985: 1). According to Van Dijk, the success of the discipline continued even during the Middle Ages and the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the preponderance of rhetoric in the humanities was eventually supplanted by areas such as historical and compared linguistics as well as by the structural analysis of language. The Russian formalism of the 1920s and 1930s fostered the study of narrative, hitherto confined to linguistics, in other disciplines such as psychology and anthropology, and the fruits of this interdisciplinarity would still be picked forty years later in the French structuralism, in works by authors like Levi-Strauss and Barthes, to name a few. Linguistics thus became a vehicle for the study of culture, myths and now discourse, a topic first published in 1964.

This was the collective work *Communications 4*, dedicated exclusively to discourse structure analysis, which included a revolutionary set of topics, including film analysis by Metz and Barthes' rhetorical analysis of advertising, who also signed the first introduction to the newly formed Semiology discipline. According to Van Dijk, "Despite the framework, guidelines, the research subjects and methods of all these authors being far from homogeneous, the common interest in discourse analysis within the broader framework of semiotics inspired by linguistics influenced and gave coherence to these first attempts" (Van Dijk, 1985: 3).

The French structuralism set the tone for the new area of discourse that would grow over the next decade in dozens of published works and applications to various disciplines. The next increase came in the 1970s, with linguistics' discovery of the philosophical work by Austin, Grice and Searle on *speech acts*. The book *How to do things with words* (Austin, 1962), demonstrated, for the first time, how and in what circumstances *to talk is to do*, opening the field of linguistics to pragmatics. With Austin, the speaker becomes a social actor and the understanding of life in society can no longer do without the study of language and its use.

In psychology, the study of discourse allowed developing cognitivism against the prevalence of the behavioural trend of previous decades; sociology, by the hand of authors like Goffman, focused on the analysis of social structure, studying the daily conversations of ordinary speakers; anthropology, for its part, took the first steps in the so-called *ethnography of communication*, taking an interest in language and its symbols; law also yielded to the study of discourse, after realizing that its object - laws, legal action, legal documents - had an eminently discursive nature; history, whose sources and work are mostly textual, saw a fundamental methodology in discourse analysis; in the same sense, the study of mass media found in discourse analysis a powerful tool for understanding phenomena, such as the conditions of message production and reception and the meaning of the actual published message.

Although deriving from linguistics, this expansion of the discursive approach was so significant that, today, a growing number of linguists even question the qualifications of discourse analysis as an area belonging to the language science.



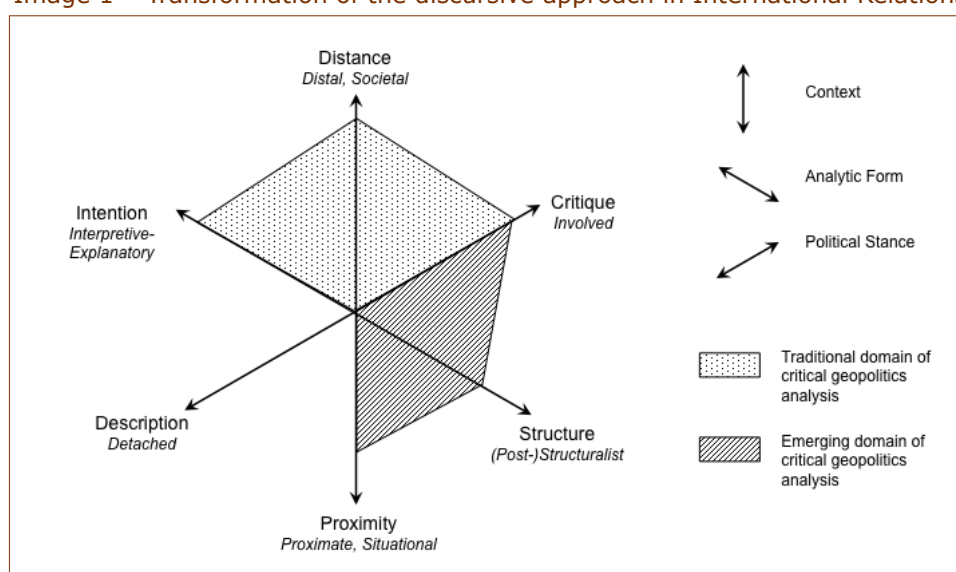
## 1. Discourse analysis in International Relations

It is in the light of the previous theoretical framework that the study of discourse in International Relations must be understood. This discipline received from pragmatics the concept of language as social action (Austin, 1962) and therefore the performative dimension of the word has become a key element to understand the relationship between international actors.

The so-called International Relations are, in essence, discursive interactions between peoples, i.e. texts that simultaneously reflect and produce a given context. The critical theory school pioneered this approach, based mainly on the study of actors and the effects that their discourse cause in international contexts (see image 1).

The critical discourse analysis is based on two fundamental assumptions: first, it indicates a particular positioning of the researcher, who leaves the distancing of conventional approaches and has a set of ideological assumptions in the way he studies reality. Second, it identifies a close relationship between social structure and language, tending to analyse political systems as linguistic systems and ideologies as texts aimed at creating a collective political will.

Image 1 – Transformation of the discursive approach in International Relations



Source: Müller, 2010.

In recent years, however, the traditional approach has been accompanied by situational and proximity analyses, interested in understanding "the micro contexts and daily practices as the focus of the discursive construction of identities" (Müller, 2010: 8). In parallel with this expansion of the object, there has also been an international "reconceptualization of discourse and identities" (Müller, 2010: 8) following a post-structuralist perspective, the latter being understood as the result of a discursive construction complex process and not as a natural attribute, which was the prevailing view in the interpretive and explanatory approaches. Therefore, it was a profound shift



in the object of analysis in International Relations. The *international actors* cease to be the central unit of analysis, with interest now shifting to the *identity* of these actors and the discursive processes that allowed its construction.

The discursive shift allowed the emergence of a wide range of topics and methodological approaches in International Relations (Müller, 2010). Wodak (Wodak, 1999) has focused on the construction of national identity, in particular studying the case of the European Union; Nonhoff (Nonhoff, 2006) investigated how the project of a social market economy in post-war Germany won such broad social support, and demonstrated the existence of a hegemonic strategy focused on the text and on the particular conditions under which it was produced. Glasze (Glasze, 2007), in turn, studied the construction process of the so-called *Francophonie* as a geo-cultural space, based on methods borrowed from linguistics, such as lexicometrics and narrative analysis. A group of authors, including Shapiro (Shapiro, 1992) also analysed the joint processes of articulating and contesting meaning in the formation of identities, concluding that these processes closely depend on the contexts in which they occur. In this sense, national identities consist of discourses in constant formation and reformulation, in permanent dialogue with the conditions of each historical moment.

Despite the primacy of the critical school in recognizing the contribution of discourse analysis to the field of International Relations, it was followed by constructivism and, more than claiming the importance of the meaning of international acts to understand the relationship between people, it was interested in demonstrating that international acts are in themselves socially constructed discursive practices, i.e., that "the objects of knowledge are not independent from interpretation or language" (Adler, 2002: 95). Thus, we can see how the constructivists incorporated areas like language, communication and discourse in the theoretical debate in International Relations, demonstrating, as Anna Holzscheiter notes, that international facts "are not natural, but rather the result" of a social building process (Holzscheiter, 2013: 4).

The volume and diversity of studies espousing the discursive constructivist approach in International Relations allow identifying different research strands, according to different criteria: the belief in the possibility of objectification of international facts, following the proposal advanced by Wendt and Kratochwil; the dimension of the analysis perspective and the identity of the power of discourse, according to the proposals of Anna Holzscheiter.

The proposal advanced by Wendt and Kratochwil divides discursive constructivist type of studies into two categories: thin constructivism and thick constructivism. The former believes in the possibility of the objective existence of international facts regardless of the existence of a subject that conceptualizes them. The latter is based on the discursive and linguistic concept of the actual international facts, whose existence results exclusively from their own inter-subjectivity.

The second typology, proposed by Anna Holzscheiter, organizes discursive constructivist studies according to the dimension of the adopted analysis perspective: macro-structural studies that view speech as a linguistic structure that determines the relationship between international actors, and micro-interactional studies, which are pragmatic approaches centred on real-time communication processes, in which the agents actively and inter-subjectively build, renegotiate, and transform shared interpretations of reality" (Holzscheiter, 2013: 6).



Image 2 – The discursive-constructivist approach in International Relations

| Approach criteria               | Possibility of objectification of international facts | <i>Thin constructivism</i>  |
|---------------------------------|---|-----------------------------|
|                                 |   | <i>Thick constructivism</i> |
|                                 | Dimension of the analysis perspective                 | Macro-structural            |
|                                 |   | Micro-interactional         |
| Type of methodological approach | Identity of the power of discourse                    | Intersubjective power       |
|                                 |   | Deliberative power          |
|                                 | Descriptive   | Grammar                     |
|                                 |   | Stylistic                   |
|                                 |   | Cognitive                   |
|                                 |   | Non-verbal                  |
|                                 |   | Argumentation               |
|                                 | Functionalist   | Text in context             |
|                                 | Autonomous approaches                                 | Hermeneutics                |
|                                 |   | Ideological analysis        |
|                                 |   | Content analysis            |
|                                 |   | Experimental analysis       |

Source: author's own.

The third typology, identified by the same author, examines the relationship between power and discourse, a binomial whose modern parenthood belongs to Michel Foucault and Jurgen Habermas and which is still a reference among social scientists interested in understanding the role of language in the process of social construction. Each of these authors, however, is at the base of the two main lines of approach that can be identified in constructivist studies in International Relations: a first approach which, following the legacy of Foucault, perceives international events as discursive actions built intersubjectively and impossible to be objectified, the actors becoming hostages of their own subjectivity; and a second approach, based on Habermas, that believes in the possibility of a deliberative emancipation of the actors, guaranteed by the rational public debate. Studies inspired on Foucault's work are pessimistic, focusing on discourse as a form of structural and totalitarian power; those inspired by Habermas are idealistic and approach discourse as the international actors' power of liberation.

## 2. Types of discourse analysis in International Relations

From a methodological point of view, discourse analysis in International Relations has a set of approaches common to other social sciences and language at its disposal. Strictly speaking, due to the fact it is a recent analysis field, discourse does not yet have a specific and solid theoretical body, relying on techniques and concepts borrowed from linguistics, semantics, psychology, sociology, and any other discipline deemed useful to understand language in society. It is precisely in this interdisciplinary that its analytical richness lies.

The discursive approaches available today in the study of International Relations are considerable in number and variety, and are divided into three groups: descriptive

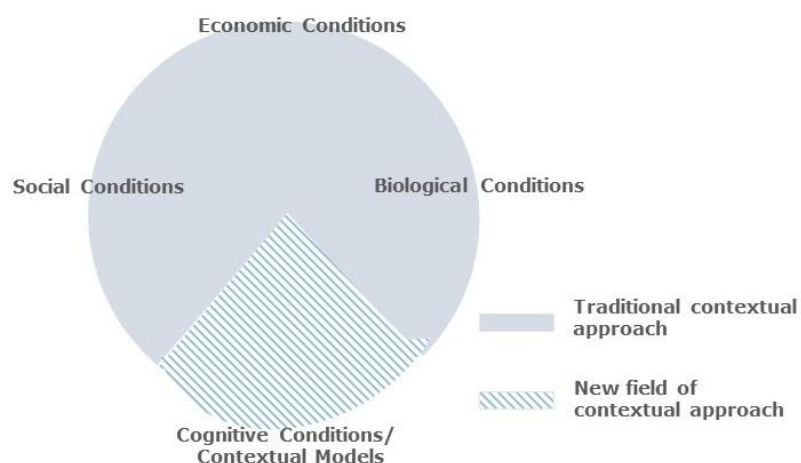


approaches, functionalist approaches and a number of other autonomous approaches that have no direct relationship with each other but offer important contributions to the study of discourse. The descriptive analyses are a set of interpretation perspectives grounded on language, an approach whose relevance stems from the fact that discourse is, first of all, a form of language. This group includes the grammar approach, concerned with understanding the formation of words and sentences, and subdivided into "structural, generative and functional" grammar and into sub-disciplines such as "phonology, morphology and syntax" (Van Dijk, 1985, 2); the stylistic approach, traditionally used in poetry, sociolinguistics, and ethnography, assists discourse analysis by indicating the "appropriateness of a particular discourse to a certain social situation" (Van Dijk, 1985: 2); the cognitive approach perceives discourse as a result of social interaction and, accordingly, the researcher should take into account the conditions under which this interaction occurs, including the psychological dimension of both parties; the study of nonverbal activity that accompanies the production of discourse, such as "intonation, gestures, facial expressions or body position" (Van Dijk, 1985: 3) and determines much of its interpretation; analysis of the existing narrative structure; the analysis of the arguments between both parties, in particular the *strategic argumentative movements* (Van Eemeren, 1999) they make.

While the descriptive approaches focus on the text, almost ignoring the semantic dimension that is beyond the word, the functionalist approach emphasises the relationship between text and its context, proposing, in Van Dijk's opinion, a "fuller characterization of discourse" (Van Dijk, 1985: 5).

The relationship between text and context is the central pillar of discourse analysis, which encouraged, moreover, abundant academic production in recent years. The study of context, in particular, attracted the attention of a large number of researchers interested in further defining the concept and in developing theories able to relate it to the linguistic dimension of discourse.

Image 3 – Transformation of the contextual approach to discourse study in International Relations



Source: author's own.





The traditional concept of *context* in discourse analysis was to see this concept as an objective social variable, such as gender, ethnicity or social class. According to this concept, all discourse is determined by the set of social, economic and biological conditions of the interlocutors and it was in this light that disciplines such as anthropology, sociology and psychology were worked upon, the first in the context of ethnography of communication, the second focusing mainly on conversation analysis and the third through discursive psychology, an area of social psychology (Van Dijk, 2008: 6-7) (see image 3).

Recently, however, a new perspective emerged from the work of Teun Van Dijk (Van Dijk, 2008) (see image 3). Rooted in what the author calls *cognitive theory of context*, this approach was the first multidisciplinary attempt to address a topic as central as this one. For the author, it is not the historical or social situation of the subject that *per se* determines the discourse, but rather how it perceives the communicative situation in question, the understanding it has of dimensions such as the relative position of the parties, the motives and purposes of the communication, the language negotiation involved.

In this cognitive process, the *subjective mental constructs* that make up true *contextual models* intervene decisively. They are responsible for how each participant understands the communicative situation and adapts his production of language to the situational environment that is presented to him. This adaptation process, in turn, involves selecting and using the language resources that each person has at his disposal during the dialogue and using them at the time each considers to be more appropriate. In this sense, *contextual models* are the key link that unites discourse, communicative situation and society.

Parallel to the descriptive and functionalist approaches, there are also various other autonomous approaches of great value to the study of discourse (image 2), such as hermeneutics, concerned with the subjective dimension of interpretation; ideological analysis, with Marxist roots, which sees discourse as an indicator of social conflicts; content analysis, focused on a highly quantitative approach to the text and used mainly in the study of very large works; and the so-called experimental analysis, widely used in psychology, focused on the procedural dimension of discourse, and interested in aspects such as discourse activation processes, the measurement of reaction and interpretation times or transition networks.

Despite the diversity of analytical perspectives examined in the preceding paragraphs, there are some common points in them, which Van Dijk summarized well: "First, they demonstrate an interest in the explicit content (and sometimes implicit or absent) of discourse" (Van Dijk, 1985: 12-13). Second, these analysis perspectives have always had an instrumental nature for the social sciences, allowing access to the meaning and the making of sociological inferences. Contrary to semantics and linguistics, whose ultimate goal is to capture the meaning of the text, for the social sciences the meaning interests in that it allows understanding the social phenomena under study.

In the same fashion, the interest of International Relations in discourse lies in the reflective nature it has, perceived as a sample of the social fabric that allows us to understand the international reality. In recent years, however, this instrumental perspective of discourse has been abandoned in favour of an autonomous understanding,



an understanding that rejects the study of the word as an expression of something else, preferring to see it as an autonomous form of action and interaction between people.

### 3. Conclusion

In recent years, the discursive approach to international phenomena has experienced a remarkable transformation that resulted in significant scientific broadening and deepening.

Traditionally, discourse analysis was based on a descriptive concept of the role of the word in life in society but since Austin's pragmatic approach, the text came to be perceived as a producer of reality, allowing a substantial change in the understanding of International Relations. This profound epistemological transformation enabled the development of a new discursive perspective of international phenomena, although recurrent appeals in the scientific literature denounce the need for greater methodological clarification in the studies carried out.

This article intends to contribute to filling this gap. Here we reconstituted the intellectual heritage of the study of discourse, examined the three research strands that can be identified in discourse-constructivist studies in International Relations and presented the main methodological approaches followed.

From different perspectives, all of these approaches acknowledge the importance of the text-context binomial to understand international phenomena. As we have seen, the latter can be understood distinctly according to the research interests and has recently seen its field extended.

In this article, three steps are fundamental in the search for greater methodological clarification in discourse-constructivist studies in International Relations. First, the explanation of the chosen analysis criteria – regarding the objectification of international facts, the dimension of the analysis perspective and the identity of the discursive power; second, the identification of the type of the chosen approach – descriptive, functionalist or autonomous; third, the position regarding what is meant by context, clearly identifying the chosen concept – economic, biological, social and/or cognitive. Adopting this methodological triad in discourse research in International Relations is a very important clarification factor that not only will give greater rigor and transparency to studies but also facilitate the replication exercise, which is a determining condition of what is called scientificity.

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