

Discourse. By David Howarth. Buckingham UK: Open University Press. 2000. 166 pages. ISBN: 0-335-20070-2.

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Abstract: This article reviews the book *Discourse*, by David Howarth. It provides some background on the author's knowledge and authority in the field of discourse studies, summarises each chapter and offers a critical commentary based on the content, and compares the text to one of its closest competitors.

Keywords: *Discourse theory, discourse analysis, interdisciplinarity*

Discourse studies continues to entice new followers, yet it can be a convoluted and frustrating field for entry-level students and researchers to navigate. The multiple and often conflicting conceptualisations, traditions, theories, and analytical approaches can leave those new to the field struggling to make sense of the innumerable options. So long as newcomers continue to encounter these difficulties, texts such as *Discourse* will stand the test of time. First published around the time when interest in discourse research went viral in the social and political sciences, the author, David Howarth – a professor in the department of government at the University of Essex – made a timely contribution by providing a theoretical background for would-be discourse analysts. The dual aims of the book are firstly to clarify and put into context the meaning of discourse as a concept, and secondly to outline ways in which discourse theory could be applied to social and political research. Although the intended target audience of the text is stated as researchers and students from all areas of the social sciences, it may also be of use to those doing interdisciplinary research in the broad field of applied linguistics who seek to justify discourse research to non-linguistic audiences.

Howarth brings a wealth of background knowledge and expertise in discourse theory and the application of post-Marxist theories to understanding political issues. He has published widely in these areas and this text offers a theoretical grounding to his co-edited book, *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis: Identities, Hegemonies and Social Change*, which features discourse analytical chapters on a range of political and social problems. In *Discourse*, the author's intimate understanding of discourse theory is demonstrated in the way he surveys the contributions of key thinkers who progressed various conceptions of discourse. His interdisciplinary background in politics and discourse studies means he is well-placed to lead the exploration into the application of discourse theory to social issues and further the cause for discursive investigation.

In the introductory chapter, the author acquaints the reader with various concepts of

discourse and establishes discourse research in its anti-positivist stance. He also distinguishes discourse theory from analysis and lays out the underlying assumptions. Howarth introduces the three main traditions that inform his theoretical model of discourse around which the text is organised: structuralism, hermeneutics and Marxism. At this stage, he also takes time to acknowledge critical realism and other conceptualisations of discourse found in alternative theories and analytical models. His sweeping coverage of critical realism as an objectivist project and prioritisation of post-Marxist theory in the introduction prepares the reader for philosophical arguments later in the book. Dismissing critical realism, which forms the theoretical basis of Fairclough's *Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)*, by claiming it supports a positivist conception of discourse is a controversial feature of this book and somewhat contradicts the author's later argument for a united and flexible theory of discourse.

The first two chapters concentrate on the structuralist traditions of discourse. Chapter one outlines Saussure's contribution to structuralist linguistics by explaining the principle of language as a system of signs. This is followed by an account of the remodelling of the structuralist paradigm by Lévi-Strauss which extended signification to wider sets of social practices and relations. In the second chapter, Howarth explains Derrida's critique of structural linguistics and charts the course to deconstruction and a rejection on fixed meanings between signs and signifiers that allows for a 'play of differences' (42). One important moment highlighted in this significant shift is the issue of subjectivity and its implications for the relationship between agents and structures. Although these chapters provide a useful linguistic background to post-structuralist theories of discourse for social scientists, it cannot be ignored that some of this space could have been allocated to the discursive theories of other influential figures. For instance, the theoretical coverage would have felt more complete had the author included a short chapter on Habermas' theory of discourse which unpacked his theory of communicative action and the concept of argumentation.

Chapters three and four skilfully go about the complex task of explaining Foucault's reaction to deconstruction and divides the development of a post-structuralist theory of discourse into two distinct phases. The third chapter explores the French philosopher's formulation of a functional and autonomous system of discourse by examining his archaeology of discourse in some detail and later evaluates its weaknesses in such areas as the unclear relationship between discursive and non-discursive practice. The second phase of his post-structuralist theory centres on the genealogy of discourse in which Foucault re-conceptualises discourse in terms of power relations and the repression of actors by systems of domination. This deciphering of Foucault's evolutionary thought on discourse and untangling of the confusing path of post-structuralist development serves as a helpful primer before reading his actual texts.

The next couple of chapters concentrate on the development of Marxism in the linguistic turn. Chapter five takes a critical perspective on the Marxist theory of

discourse and expertly elucidates the difficult issue of ideology that challenges discourse analysts. Howarth then covers the contributions of Gramsci, Althusser and Pêcheux to explain their reworkings of Marxism and recounts the emergence of key discursive concepts such as hegemony and interpellation. In the sixth chapter, the author details the way post-structuralist and Marxist theories of discourse were fused in Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist theory. In doing so, the pair's valuable contribution to discourse research is outlined by providing overviews of the concept of articulation and the reworking of ideation, beliefs, and political action as forms of discourse. One of the strengths of this chapter is the way it explains Laclau and Mouffe's contribution to political analysis by describing how agents and structures shape one another. The author also tackles the difficult philosophical issues generated by Laclau and Mouffe's dissolution of discursive and non-discursive practice in their claim that all social objects are objects of discourse. The chapter concludes by defending post-Marxist discourse theory against the ontological arguments of critical realists that make accusations of idealism and relativism.

In the final chapter, Howarth sets about the task of uniting a post-Marxist theory of discourse with hermeneutic traditions to form an alliance against the dominance of positivism and natural science research in the social sciences. Despite shelving Bhaskar's critical realism and offering minimal coverage of Habermas' normative-deliberative theory of discourse, the author supports a research strategy in which the discourse analyst selects the appropriate concepts from the range of theories and applies them to the social or political issues under investigation. In the spirit of inclusivity Howarth argues, 'The theoretical framework must be sufficiently "open" and flexible enough to be "stretched" and restructured in the process of application' (139). Perhaps one weakness of this chapter is that insufficient examples of research are presented. Additional summaries of discourse research showcasing the application of post-Marxist discourse theory to real world social or political issues would have supplemented the chapter well and enabled the book to achieve its secondary goal more effectively.

Overall, the organisation of the text is logical and guides the reader from narrower conceptions of discourse in the structuralist model through to post-structuralist and post-Marxist discourse theories capable of exploring issues in the wider social and political spheres. Compared with competing texts with a similar aim of legitimising discourse research across disciplines by presenting its theoretical background, *Discourse* is a more readable and accessible option to non-experts. Alternatives such as *Discourse and Late Modernity* by Lilie Chouliaraki and Norman Fairclough can prove a challenging read as it is written using the technical terminology of CDA. Hard-going at times as it may be, the text does however cover a wider theoretical framework for discourse research and features the contributions of other key thinkers including Habermas, Giddens, Bourdieu, Bhaskar, and Harvey. That said, the structure, progression, and flow of ideas is not as clear and easy to follow as in Howarth's text.

Despite its age, *Discourse* remains an invaluable resource for those using discursive methods to carry out social or political research. The theoretical models explained in the book provide a useful background on the theories that support and justify the application of discourse as a methodology. The text meets its goal of clarifying and putting into context the meaning of discourse as a concept through its thorough chapters on post-structuralist and post-Marxist discourse theories that help readers understand the foundations of analytical approaches. By briefly offering some strategies, suggestions, and examples of how discourse theory can be applied, the book moderately achieves its aim of outlining the ways in which discourse can be put into practice in social and political research. In summary, *Discourse* is immensely beneficial both as an introductory text and as a reference book to revisit when reviewing theoretical debates connected to discourse. It serves as a useful entry point to in-depth reading of texts by main theorists and relevant philosophers.

References

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