

Chapter VIII

Discourse analysis and history. Meeting and forgetting

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Like everyone, I have had less occasion to read books on linguistics,
much less, if the truth were told, than I have detective novels.

P. Vidal-Naquet, *Histoire et linguistique*, introductory statement

The relationship between discourse analysis and history has been one in which each has progressively become more distant from the other: the situation in France between the 1960s and the 1980s, when there was a close connection between them, subsequently gave way to mutual indifference, with the exception of a research group claiming to be discourse historians.

This state of affairs can be explained by several factors, and the examination of these will serve as a framework for what follows. First of all, there is the question of disciplinary identity, since history as seen by historians is not necessarily the same as that envisaged by linguists¹. Then there is the status, place and scientific purpose possessed by each methodology in the associated discipline. Finally, there is the evolution of the two disciplines themselves, each of them having taken routes which distance it from the other.

1 I am using the term *linguistic* almost synonymously with discourse analysis, since it is essentially “French” discourse analysis, based on sometimes very formal linguistic methods, which has maintained a relationship with history.

History for linguists and history for historians

I would like to question the nature of the history evoked by the two disciplines, since it is far from certain that the history of linguists tallies exactly with the history of historians.

What is known as “French” discourse analysis appeared in France in the late 1960s and was based on the analysis of historical corpora, that is to say sets of texts in which were concealed matters relating to French history: *Cahiers de doléances* (D. Slakta); texts of the Congrès de Tours (J.-B. Marcellesi); Hébert’s *Père Duchesne* (J. Guilhaumou); and the media vocabulary surrounding the Algerian war (D. Maldidier)². From this point of view, discourse analysis is seen as an integral part of historical practice, since the linguistic perspective should allow the opacity of words, the ambiguity of enunciation and the constructed nature of discourse to be explored, thus enabling historical archives to be interpreted effectively. *Archives* is an historian’s word, whereas the linguist is more involved with constructing *corpora*. And it is probably over this question of the object of the discipline that the two “histories”, that of the linguist and that of the historian, diverge.

Indeed, linguists are permanently reflecting on their object of study, which has led them to criticise this early pattern of relations between discourse analysis and history. Analyses were based on choosing pivotal words (words chosen for studying the contexts in which they appeared) and identifying discursive groups which corresponded in an overly mechanical fashion to social class and political movements. Hence, in this pattern, there is a “triple pitfall” for “*discourse analysis as historical object*” according to J. Guilhaumou:

In the first place, this pattern introduced a clear split between the chosen corpus, which was really very limited in terms of the analysis procedure, and the non-

2 The precise references of these works are available in the bibliographies of Robin (1973) and Charaudeau, Maingueneau (2002).

corpus defined in a referential and ideological way by the notion of conditions of production. Secondly, the choice of pivotal words was based on a judgment made in light of the historian's knowledge, and was itself made in the field of historiographical debate rather than in terms of the current moment. Finally, the pattern represented separate discursive entities based on ideology and historiography – entities such as noble discourse, bourgeois discourse, Jacobin discourse, sans-culotte discourse and so on [Guilhaumou, 2002: on line].

The examples mentioned above correspond to this early pattern since the “chosen” corpora are *de facto* isolated from their original milieu, in other words from their “conditions of production”; we might also mention G. Provost's 1969 study of the words *socialisme* and *socialiste* in Jaurès, which well illustrates the “pitfall” of pivotal words, and the work of J.-J. Courtine on “communist discourse addressed to Christians” [1981] which constitutes an example of “separate discursive entity”.

The “judgment in light of the historian's knowledge” is in fact where the problem lies in the relationship between discourse analysis and history, since the conception of the field of investigation (archives or corpus) is not the same in both disciplines. Historians assemble their documents from actual available archives, researched thanks to their knowledge of the event, period or cultural/social phenomenon under consideration; for the linguist, on the other hand, the construction of the corpus is part of a scientific practice, as J. Guilhaumou explains:

However, it is no longer a question of constructing a corpus immediately, on the basis of a judgment made in the light of knowledge, as a preliminary description of conditions of production. It is advisable to first describe configurations of archives indicative of a theme, a subject, a concept and, when all's said and done, of an event. There is then always time to isolate a “moment of corpus” within them, that is to say a group of utterances based on lexical, syntactic or enunciative criteria and thus build up a sub-corpus which is open to a subtle linguistic approach [Guilhaumou 2002: on line].

The study conducted by J. Guilhaumou and D. Maldidier of the phrase *prise de la Bastille [storming of the Bastille]* [1994] allows us to gain a clear understanding of this process (F. Mazière, who analyses it at

length, considers it to be “emblematic” of this second period of discourse analysis (2005: 89)). Here, the set of discourses within which the syntagm *prise de la Bastille* was to be formed, through repetitions, reformulations and modifications, constitutes this “configuration of significant archives” in which the linguist builds up a “sub-corpus”. As P. Achard points out, we can expect to gain nothing from interdisciplinarity if it is thought of as “falling between two stools, a mish-mash or a merging” (1983: 28). On the other hand, if “each discipline, at the very point of constructing its object of study, makes room for the object of the other(s), and not merely for its discourse” (*ibid.*), then history and discourse analysis can develop shared and effective research strategies. This essentially means that linguistics would fully embrace the historical dimension (in other words, according to the linguistic viewpoint, extra-linguistic data which no longer relate only to the historian’s expertise), and history in turn would embrace the linguistic dimension of historical events, which are then no longer limited to their factual or even cultural aspects.

As a final comment on this subject, we should mention an ideological element which is important for the relationship between discourse analysis and history: the initial joining of the two disciplines, in the 1960s, took place in the context of historical materialism. In other words, history for linguists was defined in the context of Marxist philosophy, as a scientific study of the relationships of power and domination (contradictions) in actual social formations. With the gradual disappearance of Marxism and Marxists from the French academic scene, history was probably taken less into account in linguistics³.

3 “[...] to understand the disappearance of certain ways of working in French linguistics, one needs to analyse the political and intellectual conditions of the *demarxisation* of research in linguistics and, more generally, in the human sciences.”

History discourse, an epistemological issue

What use is history to linguists and linguistics to historians? A contributory discipline always has a function in the life of the source discipline, and the longevity, effectiveness and harmony of the association depend partly on the nature of this function.

Discourse as an object of history

The explicit wish of the linguists centred around the historian R. Robin, who are developing links between history and linguistics, is to open up a new field of research in the discipline of history:

We are seeking to establish the discursive level as a new object of study in the field of history; and at the same time, in contrast to a certain positivism in linguistics, to postulate the impasses and deficiencies of an internal analysis from which the interpretation of discourse is removed, including its function, effectiveness and processes of insertion into social formation [Robin, 1973: 22].

The purpose of the relationship cannot be better expressed: to open up and revive the field of linguistics, based on the desire for a different episteme from the Saussurian doctrine of the primacy of language. J-J. Courtine speaks of “theoretical urgency, epistemological dramatisation” [1991: 157] in relation to this. “Wanting to analyse discourse”, he says,

[...] was therefore wanting to do far more than simply the work of a linguist. It was also, in a way, to think of occupying a heroic position in a theoretical and political struggle – to reintegrate through a liberating act what had been excluded by an arbitrary decision [1991: 157].

This means promoting the word (*parole*) and the conditions of its production.

Without this being the sole motivation of researchers wishing to introduce a historical dimension into linguistics, it can be said to be

all-encompassing, serving as an epistemological and theoretical backdrop to the proposals being made.

Indeed, the work that was carried out in the political lexicometry laboratory at Saint-Cloud from 1968 under the influence of M. Tournier was driven by the same preoccupation. Basing his thinking on the premise that words are charged with the values conferred by usage (words are “inhabited”, according to M. Bakhtine, whose work was translated into French from 1977 onwards), M. Tournier progressively developed a conception of words as instruments of ideology: ‘ideology’ because “words do not have a history in themselves” but are coded by history “for the needs of its dominances and in order to preserve them” [Tournier, 1992: 9]; ‘instruments’ because “social dominances are, more than any rival power, the owners of the reference code, knowledge which is imposed, dictated, and subject to the grammars of acceptability, dictionaries of definitions and officially recognised values [...]” [1992: 9]. From this perspective, the past is always falsified by power and M. Tournier speaks of the “consensus about history”:

The characteristic of officially-diffused language is to be based on “a” past which is taken for “the” past and set up as a model; its game [this time] is to have its lexicalised affirmations taken for a common inheritance, which is classless, national, humanist even: an illusion of diachrony [Tournier, 1992: 11].

The historical (in lexicometric terms, *chronological*) dimension is central to some of the work emerging from this laboratory, such S. Bonnafous’ thesis on the denomination of immigrants in the French press at the turn of the 1980s. Partly based on the notion of “lexical time” put forward by A. Salem, the investigation reveals the way designations have evolved (from the “lexicon of work and social conflict” between 1974–1977 to a lexicon “of the political, the municipal, and integration” from 1980–81)⁴. What is stressed here is evolution and lexical difference, and the expression *witnesses of history*, coined by M. Tournier in 1997 to describe the role of words, is representative of the lexicologist-historian’s position (or that of the historian of the lexicon).

4 Bonnafous, 1991: 226.

The implications of the “linguistic turn”

For historians, the appeal to linguistics takes two forms which correspond to two phases in the history of the discipline.

The first political lexicology conference held at Saint-Cloud in 1968 welcomed historians, like A. Prost [1998], who practised lexical analysis in order to enrich their activity as historians; also because, at the time, the linguistic paradigm served as a model for all the human sciences. However, R. Robin explains that attentiveness to words is a longstanding tradition in history. She mentions the work of G. Duby and R. Mandrou (1973: 66–67), but more particularly A. Dupront’s “passionate quest” to found a new discipline of historical semantics (1973: 68). She observes, however, that for a number of historians, from the early 1970s, linguistics was a “recipe” used more for organising raw data than engaging in a real process of discovery. So discourse analysis was quickly overtaken for historians, in line with an “anti-positivist”⁵ development of the discipline, a point to which we will return.

Another type of appeal to linguistics, identified by the slogan *linguistic turn*, emerged in the American field after 1979, the date when L. Stone’s article, “The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on an Old new History” was published in the journal *Past and Present*. As G. Noiriel explains, historians who adopt the *linguistic turn* point of view (Q. Skinner, G.S. Jones and H. White, among others), are opposed to history as social science, inspired by the arguments of Barthes and H.G. Gadamer. The trend is not consistent, but it is possible to state, along with G. Noiriel, that “as its name would seem to indicate, the ‘linguistic turn’ encompasses all historical work which accords a certain importance to the question of language” [1996: 126]. It particularly includes work which puts narrative (the famous “retour du récit” analysed in detail in [Noiriel, 2003]) at the heart of historical

5 The term *positivism* is often used in human sciences to criticise research procedures that are blamed for copying the quantitative, even mathematical methods, of the so-called “hard” sciences, in order to establish objectively true, or “positive” knowledge.

practice, from the most subtle positions (narrative as a privileged genre in the writing of history) to the most radical claims: historical narrative is in effect considered to be fictional narrative, and this position finds unexpected but epistemologically interesting reinforcement... from a linguist, defending the idea, within a robust anti-referentialism, that language cannot speak about the world [Harris, 2004]. In any event, the linguistic-narrative claim serves as a weapon for an anti-positivism, an anti-quantitativism, in short a contesting of the “presuppositions of science-history” [Noiriel, 2003: 104].

It was probably the eruption of this debate (violent, with important political and generational dimensions) which contributed to history progressively forgetting the apparatus of early discourse analysis, which doubtless took away with it all linguistic procedures, considered to be too formal and positive. We have here the paradox of a *linguistic turn* which throws out the tools of linguistics... With the exception of “discourse historians”, who are referred to at the end of this article, “traditional” historians now attach little importance to the forms of language contained in their archives.

But we shall see that discourse analysis, for its part, has developed something that resembles its own forgetting, by bringing about what J.-J. Courtine calls its “grammaticalisation”.

Two views of scientificity

Discourse analysis: rediscovering history

J.-J. Courtine thought in 1991 that discourse analysis had become “grammaticalised”, that is to say divorced from history, and weakened theoretically. Indeed, notions like interdiscourse or discursive formation saw themselves reduced and mechanised, with the first more or less assimilated to intertext and the second to a homogeneous set of discourses emanating from speakers of the same group

(regarding these questions see, for example (Malldier, 1991), introductory text). At the same time, linguistic modelling asserted itself, giving priority to the functioning of language and communication, no doubt to the detriment of the socio-historic dimension of discourse (the enunciative model of J. Authier, E. Roulet's pragmatic model, J.-P. Bronckart's interactionist model, and so on).

Corpora have evolved, gradually eclipsing the historical dimension: media discourse, favoured by the development of forms of communication and information (and, at the same time, of the academic field of information and communication sciences) entered *en masse* into what should now be called, in the plural, discourse *analyses*. With the exception of A. Krieg's work on the phrase *purification ethnique* (see her contribution to this book), it is rare to find work on the press which fully incorporates the historic dimension into linguistic analyses. Under the influence of communication ethnography, ethnomethodology and DAI (a term suggested by C. Kerbrat-Orecchioni to describe discourse analysis in interaction), other corpora have emerged, which might be called "community" or "everyday relational" corpora (family or business interactions, the discourse of assemblies or meetings, verbal negotiations of all kinds).

But the historical dimension is perhaps not completely absent from contemporary discourse analyses. Indeed, it would appear that a shift has occurred from the notion of history to that of memory (a shift, moreover, which is a cause of much debate for historians). This sprang from J.-J. Courtine's proposal in 1981, in which he "invented" the notion of discursive memory, reformulating it as follows in a later work:

How do societies remember? If we accept the idea [...] that language is the fabric of memory, that is to say *its essential historical means of existence* – who can fail to see that such a question is directly addressed to the language sciences? And that it calls for an analysis of the material, linguistic modes of existence of collective memory in categories of discourse? [Courtine, 1994: 10]

The term and the notion of *discursive memory* have been developed from the work of historians (in particular the work of P. Nora on places of memory), as an enrichment of Foucault's ideas on discursive

formations. In the discourse analysis inherited from the theorisations of M. Pêcheux, it means thinking about “language reality” in relation to “historical reality” and so explaining the “historical existence of the utterance” [Courtine, 1981: 52]. J.-J. Courtine insists on the non-psychological dimension of this concept, and its links with the discipline of history. Discursive memory is thus defined in conjunction with the notion of “domain of memory”, which allows discourses to be situated within the “long period of discursivities” and, conceptually, allows the reintroduction of history into discourse analysis.

What we mean by the term “discursive memory” is distinct from any psychological memorisation of the type for which psycholinguists like to produce chronometrical measurements [...] The notion of discursive memory concerns the *historical existence of the utterance* within discursive practices governed by ideological apparatuses; it alludes to what Foucault [...] notes in relation to religious, legal, literary and scientific texts,

[...] discourses which lie at the root of a certain number of new acts, of words which recapture them, transform them, or speak about them – in short, discourses which, over and again, beyond their formulation, are said, remain said and are still to be said [Courtine, 1981: 52–53].

This proposal found an immediate echo with discourse analysts of the 1980s, since P. Achard and M. Pêcheux offer definitions and theoretical functions of it in the collection *Histoire et linguistique* published in 1984. “[...] discursive memory”, explains M. Pêcheux,

[...] would be that which, faced with a text appearing suddenly as an event to be read, comes and reestablishes the “implicits” (more technically speaking, preconstructions, elements quoted and reported, transversal discourses, etc.) which are required to read it. It is the condition of the readable in relation to the readable itself [1984: 263].

But it was only from the late 1990s that the notion was reworked, in particular by S. Moirand, who was keen to put forward the idea of a “memory of words”, joining the legacy of French discourse analysis to the older and more philosophical legacy of M. Bakhtine. The latter

thinks of this memory as a sort of semantic chain endowed with two essential features: it is infinite (it has no beginning or end); and it is dynamic (meanings evolve along the chain). S. Moirand refines the distinction by also proposing the notion of “memory of statements” (*mémoire des dires*), leading her to the concept of interdiscursive memory, which is particularly at work in media discourses on science. Certainly, memory is not history, but taking account of “the long period of discursivities”, tracking discursive journeys (*contaminé* moving from plasma to transgenic maize) and analogical reprises (*barbares* being used to describe those who tear up GMO crops) is to take account, within discourse, of a transmissive dimension which is the historical one.

The workplace of memory, the “condition of what is readable”, but also of what is describable and sayable, is probably one of the most promising perspectives of present discourse analysis – and who knows, it may well enable discourse analysis to rediscover history.

The discourse of discourse historians: upholding linguistics

Let us finish by referring to the work of discourse historians or “discourse archivists” according to the description recently proposed by S. Bonnafous [2006], in the tradition opened up by the work of R. Robin [1973]. For them, it is a question of “upholding linguistics”, for the reasons set out above in relation to the “*linguistic turn*”. As pointed out by D. Mayaffre in a defence accompanied by a rather polemical illustration of lexicometric tools and, more broadly, of scientific rigour in history, “we are living in a period where subjectivity and historical impressionism shamelessly hold sway” [2001: 1].

Discourse historians (one thinks of J. Guilhaumou and D. Mayaffre, but also, to a certain extent, of A. Steuckardt, M. Deleplace, F. Mazière, S. Branca and A. Collinot) are indeed concerned to rigorously describe the way in which language shapes history: they work with notions like “archive”, inherited from Foucault, as well as with “linguistic event” and “thematic journey”, these last two having been defined by J. Guilhaumou.

The notion of the archive is designed to show how history is constructed discursively:

Archive does not simply refer here to all the texts which a society leaves behind it. It is the raw material explored jointly by traditional historians and discourse historians, but on the basis of which discourse historians do not give priority to researching hidden social structures: this means that an archive is mainly a system of utterances which are not regulated at the outset and which constitute distinct figures, objects and concepts. Thus each archival system establishes its own order (Guilhaumou, 2003: 13).

Of course, the term *system* echoes the terms used by Foucault in defining an archive: *specific rules, practices and systems of utterances*.

In this respect it is remarkable that J. Guilhaumou now pleads for an “ethno-method” in discourse analysis, explaining that “‘ethno’ refers here both to culture, the local beliefs of members of society beyond membership of a particular group, and the knowledge these members have of that culture, in which they are the actors, protagonists, authors and spectators all at the same time” [2002: on line]. The underlying principle of this “ethno-method” is a form of inter-subjectivity, which refers to the co-construction of a discourse-corpus by the researcher and the subject being researched. The “new corpora” developed in this way are based on a conception of discourse which combines an “ethical approach” with the principle of the subject’s autonomy, taking account of the other in a way which is, in the end, very phenomenological.

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