

CONF 695, Conflict and Discourse Analysis, Spring 2011
Section 2, Wednesday 7:20-10:00
Arlington 647

“It is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits; it is evidently equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician scientific proofs.”

Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics 350 B.C.E

Objectives

The study of discourse, culture, narratives and public interpretations are becoming ever more important to the field of Conflict Analysis and Resolution. In this class we will explore these concepts as they have been used in cutting edge approaches to the analysis and resolution of conflict. *This is not a class in any specific methodology of discourse analysis*, but might instead be thought of as an extended meditation on the broader of methodology of thinking about how to intelligently and systematically characterize observable public debate. It need hardly be said that there is something elusive in the very idea of discourse. In order to pin the concept down, we will look to points of intersection with other theoretical perspectives and concrete approaches to the analysis of discourse relating it to the various cognate concepts like framing, ideology, narrative, civil society, culture, storytelling and others. As a simple point of departure, we might simply define discourse as a *public stream of consciousness* that we are capable of observing in some systematic way.

This brings attention to one of the main problems in the study of discourse is the fluid and ephemeral nature of the subject that makes it feel like something other than hard science. We will not present the subject as if it were a hard science *per se*, but we will present it as a branch of reproducible and socially productive knowledge, i.e. a social science. To this end, it will be central to the class to develop an empirical project that incorporates the theoretical perspectives we will cover together. This focus on concrete projects will keep our discussions bounded and grounded—something essential in this area of investigation. Along the way we will use the class as a way to develop a set of best practices in the field for investigating the language of grievance in its relation to social structure, cynical manipulation and the play of power and interests.

Instructor and Office Hours

This section of the course is taught by Solon Simmons, who can be reached at ssimmon5@gmu.edu. Office hours will be held in the Truland building on Wednesday at 6-7:15 PM.

Graded Exercises and Related Matters

At the heart of our approach will be a concrete empirical analysis. The way that slippery concepts are translated into operational terms is always crucial and we will build on the examples we encounter in class to improve our own work. Students are expected to develop a research paper that uses some empirical data source to make minimal claims about an aspect of the discourse that is relevant for their substantive interests in conflict analysis and resolution. The structure for our development of this project can be characterized with the following alliteration: structure, selection and significance. In any discursive field one must first discover what the **structure** of conversation is. This requires the student to think about who is talking to whom, who has privilege of voice within those conversations and how the conversation takes place in material terms. In order to make valid (true to the subject matter) and reliable (reflective of the actual distribution of accounts) empirical claims must have some means of **selection**. Selection of discursive materials is akin to sampling in statistical analyses and must be developed with due diligence in some plausible way so that the data (snippets and samples of conversation) represent what one would have seen if it were possible to view *all of the communication* of the kind that is of interest to the researcher. In other words our samples should reflect our populations. Finally, we can get to what we intend to study, namely the **significance** of the communications that we have observed. By significance, I mean the meaning of the statements uttered in their proper context that would help a reader not familiar with the discursive setting to understand it. At the same time, the final paper should be written so that it would be helpful in clarifying the abstract principles in play in the setting to a participant in it—one who might rarely think about his or her own practice in those terms.

Attention to these three considerations, **structure**, **selection** and **significance** will help you to develop a sound and compelling discourse analysis. There are three due dates in the class, March 2 and April 20 and May 11. These are when analysis of the discursive structure, method of selection and analysis of significance are due, respectively. The discourse structure is not meant to incorporate much theory, but instead should develop your analysis of how your conversation is structured as described above. The method of selection should describe how materials were selected and also should provide a print out of the materials that will be included for analysis. The final paper on significance should build on at least 5,000 words of actual discursive material, which will serve as the data for the project.

Course Materials

There will be 12 books for the class. These are listed below. Although this represents a tremendous amount of reading, there are many ways to read a book. In some places you might find you need to skim material to get the gist while in others close attention is needed. You are not responsible for knowing every page of every book (although that is not discouraged), but rather for being capable of representing the main arguments presented in the seminar for advanced discussion. Each book will have a discussion leader, who will pay more close attention to the readings that week, but all students are expected to make substantive contributions to our group discussion.

Computing

This is a qualitative analysis class that will demand that you develop some systematic method for analyzing a set of discursive materials. Much like the Gallup poll presented the world with a method for systematically investigating mass public opinion by counting responses to closed form statements, discursive analysis requires its own methods and tools. I will provide minimal instruction in the use of the NVIVO qualitative analysis software program (the version I am using is 8.0) using an ongoing project of mine as a baseline example. My project is not meant to be treated as a model or template of any kind, but it can be interesting as an example of how a large scale project of this kind can be developed. You will not be required to use NVIVO for your projects, nor will you leave the class as an expert in its use, but you will have been exposed to some of the advantages of using a program like this one for your research.

Course Schedule

Session 1: January 26

Introduction to the course

This session will offer an overview of the course and explore why we need to study social discourse and how it might be useful for conflict analysis and resolution. No reading is assigned. We will cover the various ways that discourse has been characterized as represented by the materials in the class and how one might best go about approaching the topic in one's own work.

Session 2: February 2: Interests

Albert Hirschman The Passions and the Interests Princeton University Press

Session 3: February 9: Discourse

Michel Foucault Discipline and Punish Vintage

Session 4: February 16: Propaganda

Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson The Age of Propaganda Freeman Press

Session 5: February 23: Narrative

Jerome Bruner Actual Minds, Possible Worlds Harvard University Press

Session 6: March 2: Framing* (3-5 page analysis of discourse *structure due*)

William A. Gamson Talking Politics Cambridge University Press

Session 7: March 9: Moral Traditions

Robert Bellah et.al. Habits of the Heart

Session 8: March 23: Economic Ideas

Mark Blyth Great Transformations Cambridge University Press

Session 9: March 30: The Civil Sphere Part I

Jeffrey Alexander The Civil Sphere parts 1 and 2

Session 10: April 6: The Civil Sphere Part II

Jeffrey Alexander The Civil Sphere parts 3 and 4

Session 11: April 13: Ideology

John Gerring Party Ideologies in America 1828-1996 Cambridge University Press

Session 12: April 20: Storytelling* (*analysis of discourse method of **selection** due*)

Francesca Polletta It was Like a Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics University of Chicago Press

Session 13: April 27: Genres and War

Phillip Smith Why War? The University of Chicago Press

Session 14: May 4: Reasons and War

Richard E. Rubenstein Reasons to Kill Bloomsbury Press

FINAL PAPER DUE ONE WEEK AFTER THE LAST DAY OF CLASS on May 11th. I would like a hard copy placed in my mailbox by 4:00 PM.