

From Analysis to Accountability: Normativity, Interpretation, and the Limits of Method in Discourse Studies

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ABSTRACT

The current epistemic state of discourse study is marked by a high degree of methodological expertise and theoretical diversity. However, there is a constant challenge associated with the lack of a normative account. The invocation of concepts such as context, power, ideology, and practice are widely invoked in contemporary research and analysis. The principles for the assessment of an interpretation are nevertheless still implicit to a great degree and often remain under-theorized in methodological discussions. This article presents a normatively informed framework of interpretive accountability that reconsiders discourse analysis as a reason-giving activity instead of a method-centered procedure. It argues that a prioritization of methodological refinement has caused a form of epistemological lag, where claims are being made without sufficient normative definition or justification. Drawing on philosophy of language, pragmatics, and social theory, the article demonstrates that discourse analysis cannot coherently operate as a scholarly practice if reduced to a unity of expert techniques divorced from an explicit account of normativity. In this respect, the article does not propose a technologically driven innovation but rather reconceptualizes discourse analysis itself qua practice by examining linguistic description, practical inference, and critical political evaluation highlighting the limitations of methodologically driven approaches to interpretation.

KEYWORDS: discourse studies, discourse analysis, normativity, interpretation, epistemology, philosophy of language

1. INTRODUCTION

The last four decades have witnessed the growth of discourse studies into a methods-friendly and seriously ambitious area of intellectual work. The toolkit of discourse researchers has dramatically expanded to include corpus-assisted discourse analysis, multimodal discourse analysis, ethnographic discourse analysis, critical discourse studies (CDS), discourse analysis employing interactional pragmatics, and computational analysis. No doubt, this inflation of methodology has greatly improved the level of detail of analysis of discourse research and enabled researchers to conduct more specific and precise discourse analysis of language use (van Dijk, 2011; Wodak and Meyer, 2016). Indeed, this richness has deepened a fundamental epistemological issue in discourse analysis: a lack of understanding of how interpretations are warranted.

Even with constant emphasis on context, power, and social practice, discourse analysis tends to operate on the assumption that interpretive assertions are self-evident and ensured by method alone. Analysts tend to refer to textual features, deduce meanings, detect ideological work, and expose power relations with little need to articulate the normative

presuppositions framing all these interpretive tasks (Fairclough, 1995; Widdowson, 2000). This creates a curious deadlock. While methodological stringency corresponds to technicality: the use of powerful concepts and approaches insures sound results. Without normative articulation, the task becomes susceptible to relativism, and meanings become potentially infinitely negotiable. This dialectic between formalism and relativism has starved the area from developing theory and defending interpretive assertions to communicate across disciplinary divides.

Current scholarship has noted the need to balance methodological innovation and the challenge of interpretive accountability, yet the concern has generally been to advance tools rather than to explain the basis of the normative mandate under which analysis takes place (Luke, 2002; Pennycook, 2018). Although work by Fairclough (1995) and van Dijk (2011) underscores the social and ideological importance of discourse, scholarship on how this aims for systematic justification for interpretation is limited. Other scholarship, again, by Wodak and Meyer (2016), illustrates the worthiness of a juxtaposition understood through the lenses of linguistics, history, and a sociopolitical tradition, with minimal attention devoted to epistemological statements with which procedures are imbued. In this way, scholarship has witnessed methodological saturation without addressing the methodological underpinnings of the pressing question: how is any interpretation legitimate and justifiable?

This absence has major implications for both scholarship and application. First, a lack of statement of norms might create splits within the scholarship community itself. On one hand, a pluralism of methodology is welcomed, yet it might become a hindrance if different approaches become considered autonomous or incommensurate with each other. Secondly, the absence of statement of interpretive norms might affect the level of application of discourse studies in interdisciplinary research. Other disciplines like sociology, political sciences, education, and information systems are recognizing the relevance of discourse, and their participation depends upon the epistemological clarification of claims, which are methodologically correct. Thirdly, in applications related to policy studies and media research, this autonomy of interpretation might come across as reinforcing the ideology instead of clearing the fog around power relations.

Rather than proposing a new analytical method, this paper offers a meta-theoretical reframing of discourse analysis as a normatively accountable interpretive practice. The approach for which this paper argues is a reconceptualization of discourse analysis as a normative form of interpretation. This view argues that interpretation is not a problem of methodology, but rather the essential condition of a field of study. Norms are explicitly formulated, reflexively situated, and transparently justified, and guide the appropriateness of statements about interpretation. In this way, a focus on the norms themselves provides a way to balance methodological rigor with the reflexivity of interpretation, where a statement is contestable, meaningful, and accounts for its own analytical claims (Pennycook, 2022).

Thus, framing discourse analysis in this fashion entails both theoretical and practical implications. On a theoretical level, it reshapes the sub-field by positing that arguments between a descriptive paradigm, a critical paradigm, and a poststructural paradigm can now be seen as a question of norms rather than methodology. On a practical level, it allows a meta-level of thinking that promotes methodological pluralism without falling into relativism by enabling ethnographic methods to remain alongside corpus-based methods and multimodal methods and computational methods.

In light of the above considerations, in general, the purpose of this paper is to argue that in the future, the challenge in discourse study is not a refinement of methods but rather the formulation of norms of interpretation. Methodological refinement is indeed a necessary condition but definitely not a sufficient one. In the absence of a normative structure for

accountability, discourse analysis may become a purely methodological issue, in no way related to its real-life implications. By thinking about interpretation as a normatively organized process, researchers may promote methodological pluralism combined with the requirement for justification of analytical assertions in terms of their validity and significance. This proposal paves the way for the remaining parts of the paper.

2. THE PROBLEM OF INTERPRETATION WITHOUT NORMS

Interpretation is the essence of discourse analysis, and paradoxically, one area that is most loosely regulated within discourse analysis as a practice. Across structuralism, corpus studies, interactionism, and critical approaches, interpreters consistently make journeys from identifiable linguistic properties to conclusions about meaning, intent, ideology, or effect. Though such journeys are inevitable, the principles under which these are undertaken are seldom specified. Consequently, the field of discourse studies is faced with a decidedly field-level problem in that interpretations are posited as theoretically grounded conclusions, even as the epistemic foundations on which such interpretations should rather than might be challenged often lie obscured.

In empirically grounded approaches such as corpus linguistics and statistical discourse analysis, the process of interpretation often becomes secondary to the detection of patterns. Statistical patterns, collocations, or distributions are often treated as if they self-evidently “disclosed” meaning. However, patterns do not interpret themselves. The transition from statistical distributions to semantic, pragmatic, ideological interpretation necessarily involves inferential thought. When this thought process is left implicit, then the process of interpretation itself becomes implicit, rather than being made moot. What may seem to be a sound approach to methodology may well be based upon undisclosed beliefs about relevance, salience, or explanatory sufficiency. This is achieved while creating the illusion of objectivity, and this is accomplished through methodologically under-theorized decisions for interpretations (Widdowson, 1995; Ryan et al., 1997).

By contrast, the interactionist and critical schools position interpretation more prominently in the foreground. Through the use of context, participant role, the relationship of power, or sociohistorical embedding, meaning is reconstructed. Yet, the analyst’s theoretical affinity remains the principal justification for the specific interpretation itself. Theoretical affinity is the rationale for the interpretations, which seem to find justification within the realms of critical theory, social critique, or a macrolevel explanation, rather than within a set of clearly articulated grounds for distinguishing among interpretations that might conflict with one another. As Sarangi (2007) pointed out, in these readings, the reader is presented with what the interpretations are, but not why they are preferable. This might underpin the aspect of “interpretive opacity”: the internal logic of the analysis is visible, though the epistemological foundation is not.

The trouble is definitely not a lack of sophistication or reflexivity. On the contrary, discourse analysis is full of self-critical debates about issues of power, ideology, and positioning research. The trouble is that there is no publicly acknowledged set of norms for the validity of interpretation here. Slembrouck (2001) refers to this problem specifically within critical discourse analysis (CDA), which seeks to combine the goals of interpreting a text, expounding an explanation for that text based on social theories of discourse, and criticizing that discourse from a normative perspective. Under such conditions, the task of interpretation becomes necessarily circular: theories inform interpretations, interpretations validate theories, and critiques follow from there necessarily.

Such circularity has been a constant focus for criticism. Ryan et al. (1997) suggest that CDA frequently fails to offer systematic comparison and test it against the possible consequences that would have been discovered through alternative interpretation. When interpretations cannot be called into question on the basis of alternative interpretation regardless of

availability and relevance, it is not longer a matter of scientific inference. Rather it is a rhetorical exercise. The commitment is not political; it is methodological.

The question of how one should deal with this question has frequently rested on the question of ‘hermeneutics.’ Bell (2011), citing the argumentation of ‘Ricoeur’ (1981), proposes that ‘the interpretive arc: from estrangement to ownership’ offers a systematic way to inquire interpretive ‘process,’ which forms a critical point in recognizing ‘processes of interpretation,’ where ‘validity becomes a methodological concern.’ At the same time, this systematic inquiry also poses a number of unanswered ‘questions.’ Arguing following ‘Wodak’ (2011), this ‘systematic inquiry of interpretation might reconstruct meanings but neglect ‘the limits of the material world.’

Moreover, the application of discourse-historical and interdiscipline approaches has emphasized the need to combine linguistics, history, culture, and philology on an equal footing. The normative problem in its entirety is not remedied through an approach which in itself is committed to finding an interpretation on all conceivable context paradigms (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016). The researcher has to decide for him/herself which paradigms have to be regarded as context paradigms, and in which way definitions of a historical context must be understood when coming up with a way to treat conflicting paradigms. The norms have been expanded rather than formalized.

Such methodological introspection from outside the realm of linguistics only substantiates the aforementioned diagnosis. Weldes and Laffey (2004), for instance, suggest that "discourse should be conceptualized not simply as language, but rather as a set of productive practices that constitute subjects and objects." Although such an approach expands the focus of research, the role of interpretation becomes even more difficult and problematic. Discourse is everywhere, interpretation risks becoming everything.

What is clear within these traditions is not that there is disagreement over the importance of interpretation, but rather over its regulation. The importance of interpretation is acknowledged as universal and necessary, yet its status is not clear. This swings between views that see it as a matter of discovery, intuition, critique, or application. This ambivalence makes discourse analysis extremely adaptable and innovative; however, it also destroys its credibility as a body of knowledge. The reader is left to believe in the hindsight of interpretation provided by the analyst rather than offering a way for it to be assessed.

The fact that such a problem has endured implies that the lack of interpretive clarity is no mere mistake of discourse analysis but a structural consequence of the discipline as a whole. Though discourse analysis has developed powerful instruments for talking about language, context, and power relations effectively, its efforts at codifying norms for the pursuit of interpretive accountability have failed. The consequence has been that interpretation has become at once central to analysis and insecure about itself.

Diagnosis of this condition is imperative to enable a philosophical shift in discourse analysis. A philosophical shift in discourse analysis would not entail a lack of empiricism. Instead, it entails a need to clarify mechanisms of interpretation formation, limitation, and assessment. Otherwise, discourse analysis will be guilty of repeating the same lack of clarity it attempts to uncover in social practice—that is, it uncovers meanings but fails to interrogate the bases for such uncovering.

3. NORMATIVITY AND MEANING: PHILOSOPHICAL BEARINGS

antecedent question in philosophy, namely, “what meaning is” and hence “is meaning”? Without a principled answer to it, talk of interpretation would face a swing between descriptive reporting and prescriptive imposition. The relevance of philosophy of language, especially with its post-representational turn, cannot be overstressed in bringing some clarity to it. Wittgenstein’s later philosophy (1953) completed an irreversible transition in

meaning, whereby meaning is neither an act of connection between expressions and actual things nor a mental thing and an abstract relationship; rather, “the meaning of a word is its use in a language.”

Use, however, is not arbitrary conduct; it is embedded in forms of life-practices, which are shaped by implicit norms of correctness, aptness, and responding. To comprehend meaning is not only to note the patterns of use but to know how one should proceed in a given practice. This ‘should’ is practical and normative in a constitutive manner, and language users are held responsible to norms with no direct regularity to them. In this way, interpretation becomes a rule-governed process, which has significant implications for understanding how interpretation is justified, limited, and assessed within discourse analysis.

This observation immediately unsettles any strictly descriptive understanding of interpretation. This critique does not deny the importance of methodological rigor; rather, it argues that rigor and normativity are mutually constitutive rather than oppositional. If meaning equals use in accordance with norms, then interpretation requires more than a decoding procedure. Interpretation entails placing a statement within a field of feasible and infeasible actions. Interpretation is thereby immanently tied to normativity, even where investigators seek to maintain a level of ‘objectivity.’ The problem no longer pertains to whether or not normativity plays a role but to which normativity to invoke, on which grounds, or whether it should be made manifest.

Speech act theory further underscores this criterion. Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) illustrates how a speaking act itself is an action that is felicitous, depending upon normative standards for accomplishment. The acts of promising, warning, accusing, or announcing are not descriptive acts alone. They are successful or unsuccessful on the basis of prespecifically defined social standards. It is possible to issue an infelicitous utterance that is grammatically correct and true. The meaning of an utterance, therefore, entails standards of authority, uptake, and consequence. To understand the utterance is to understand the action, which is itself evaluable on normative grounds. Its implication for discourse analysis, therefore, is that every interpretation entails a judgment of force, validity, or consequence that is independent of form.

Inferentialist pragmatics, most systematically developed by Brandom, radicalizes this normative conception of meaning. In *Making It Explicit* (1994) and subsequent works (2000, 2020), Brandom argues that meanings are constituted by their role in networks of inference. To grasp a concept is to know what follows from its use and what would count as incompatible with it. On this view, understanding an utterance involves recognizing the commitments it incurs and the entitlements it licenses. Meaning is thus embedded in a social practice of giving and asking for reasons. Normativity is not an external constraint on meaning; it is its internal structure.

This is an inferentialist framework that is particularly significant for discourse studies, since it links interpretation directly to accountability. When analysts attribute meaning, they attribute commitments and consequences. An interpretation is not simply a point of view; it’s a claim about what an utterance commits its speaker to within a normative space. In this sense, interpretation is inherently contestable-but also evaluable. Competing interpretations can, in principle, be evaluated according to their inferential coherence, their responsiveness to challenge, and their alignment with recognized practices of justification. Normativity here does not promise consensus, but it furnishes criteria of disagreement.

Ricoeur’s (1981) hermeneutics fills out this explanation by dealing with the temporal as well as textual character of normativity. In his work “Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences,” Ricoeur (1981) stresses that all texts have a certain autonomy with regard to their authors, as they are taken up into a new world of interpretation. Yet meaning is not

determined by the author's intention or, at the other extreme, left indefinitely flexible. The process of interpretation proceeds within a "conflict of interpretations," as Ricoeur (1981) formulates it, which is subject to the constraint of text structure, of historical context, as well as to practical appropriateness. In any case, interpretation culminates not with explanation but with appropriation; the interpreter asserts responsibility for an interpretation as well as its entailments. That responsibility has a normative character. Interpretation is an act of ownership, not of observation.

Discourse analysis: This only serves to underscore that the analyst is not a spectator. Through their engagement with discourse, they reinscribe the discourse itself into horizon(s) of normalcy. The opacity of interpretation discrepancies occurs at the point at which there is a disavowal of normalcy. As illustrated in Ricoeur's (1981) work, the process of interpretation is immanently reflexive, meaning that it is essential.

Recent literature in social ontologies presses the concern even further. Haslager (2022) emphasizes that meaning and concepts are more than norm-regulated; they are world-constituting. The social meaning impacts the formation of social categories, orders, and possibilities. The embedded norms in language are non-neutral. They can function to perpetuate injustice or facilitate critique. As a result, interpretive responsibilities are inescapable. It is not a question of whether politics is embedded in interpretation, but rather whether its commitments are subject to critical scrutiny.

A corrective for overly abstract forms of normativism, then, is clearly supplied by anthropological approaches. As Hanks points out (1995), norms are not merely posited in practice but instead enacted in practice, and their salience is inferred in interaction, in which participants may formally observe, reproduce, or challenge those norms. By implication, the point is that normativity cannot be said to be fixed or unitary. Rather, it is sedimented in history and yet still open to negotiation. The force of all of this for discourse analysts, then, is that when they cite interpretation, those cited norms should be empirically, and not practically.

Faerna's (2015) pragmatist reconstruction of meaning emphasizes, more clearly, the fallible and revisable nature of norms. Normativity does not imply fixed rules; it implies standards that are subject to challenge and revision within practice. This would fall in line with a non-dogmatic conception of interpretation: it is the interpretations which are answerable to norms, while norms are themselves open to critical scrutiny.

These philosophical perspectives provide a fundamental insight: interpretation is necessarily normative because meaning itself is normative. There can be no standpoint of neutrality from which discourse may be interpreted without appealing to standards of rightness or wrongness, relevance, coherence, or implication. The analysts necessarily take part in the normative space they describe. What has gone wrong for so much discourse analysis is not that it is normative, but that it is not sufficiently explicit about through which ways it is normative.

This diagnosis has two immediate implications. Firstly, there is no method, quantitative rigor, or conceptual sophistication on which interpretive validity may rely. Philosophy of language has no immediate answers or solutions for interpretive opaque situations, but it has a conceptual framework where interpretability can become opaque-free or rather, clear. Secondly, interpretive opaque situations do not demand a governance of interpretation from happening or from being made, but rather how its governance may or may not impede interpretation.

In giving discourse analysis a norm-sensitive conception of meaning, the problem of objectivism versus relativism can be transcended. Interpretation is not arbitrary or determined by a set of rules. It is a procedure that is itself subject to norms that are social,

historical, and contentious. The visibility of these norms is a necessary condition for solving the problem of interpretation without norms.

4. DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AS A NORMATIVE PRACTICE

Any interpretation that is norm-governed must make interpretation within discourse analysis itself norm-governed in character. In particular, this applies, not only to critical approaches to discourse analysis, but to all approaches within the spectrum of approaches to discourse analysis. The description of linguistics is informed by a norm of relevance; interpretation operates on assumptions about intentionality and appropriateness; and critical analysis is informed by a norm of justice and accountability to the relevant publics. The form in which it is informed differs from approach to approach.

A normative approach to discourse analysis relocates attention from individual analyst subjectivity to the institutional contexts in which analyses occur. Rather than considering normativity as a quality or attribute within philosophical discourse, normativity consists in social facts that analysts operate within specific academic discourses and theoretical and political contexts that render certain kinds of questions and evaluations invisible or secondary. This is also in line with Bourdieu's (1991) conception of language as symbolic power. Linguistic interactions are never simply equal or symmetrical; rather, they exist within structured relations of power that mark whose voice is authoritative and whose interpretations matter. Academic discourse practices like discourse analysis engage with these symbolic economies through producing authoritative interpretations.

In this light, discourse analysis is not only describing power; it also exercises it. In this endeavor, analysts choose what and whom they want to analyze. Moreover, they formulate problems and offer possible explanations that are disseminated through knowledge-making institutions. In this context, it is pertinent to understand that Foucault's (1972) archaeology of discourse highlights this aspect in a stringent way. In this light, discourses operate on certain rules that formulate what is to be said and whose say matters. These rules exist in certain discursive formations that depend on historical contexts.

The institutional aspect of normativity is clear in particular in critical discourse analysis (CDA). Fairclough's approach is overtly descriptive, interpretative, and explanatory, within a framework that is clearly grounded in social theories and focuses on ideology and power (Fairclough, 1995). The normative character of CDA is not hidden; rather, it tries to deconstruct naturalized dominant discourses in order to show how and to what extent those discourses maintain and reproduce social injustices and inequalities. However, it is precisely the transparency in demonstrating its own normative stand that has made CDA prone to charges of ideological impropriety (Poole, 2010).

However, this weakness arises less out of normativity than out of under-specification with regard to normative justification. Indeed, as Fairclough has noted in one of his early works, discourse analysis is necessarily characterized by both descriptive and critical aims (Fairclough, 1985). It is in the process of passing from description to critique that such aims may fail to be adequately normatively or methodologically justified.

Recently, some trends emerging in CDA scholarship aim to resolve this problem by conceptualizing critique as immanent rather than transcendent form. Herzog (2016) states, "Discourse analysis can itself become a form of immanent critique if it seeks to reconstruct those normative principles which are implicitly embedded in practices, rather than attempting to apply them transcendentally from outside... Moreover, this form of critique is relevant where discourse is related to human-made suffering with its attendant problems... When critique is applied in this manner, it is, therefore, from within social reality rather than upon it because social reality contains principles and values outside those contained in its practices." Similarly, Luke (2002) highlights that CDA should go beyond the dualism of science and ideology critique. In a world where globalization and

media-zation mean that discourse increasingly has a productively rather than repressive role, critique of the norm should take into consideration the ambivalent practices of power exercised through discourse. For this aim, there should be methodological reflexivity rather than the pursuit of an essentialistic neutrality.

Fairclough and Scholz (2020) press this argument further with a further explication of CDA in relation to “dialectical reasoning.” As a dialectical reasoning approach to CDA, analysis is seen as involving a process of movement between normative assessment and explanatory analysis. Norms and values are not taken as prior to description in some way for CDA, but assessed in relation to practices and their consequences. The dialectical approach to CDA in this way further supports my contention that discourse analysis is a normative activity because it involves a space of description, explanation, and assessment in relation to its findings.

Another form of the normative character of institutions is observable in the discourse school of thought that conceives the paradigm of discourse in the realm of social practice and goes beyond linguistics. Weldes and Laffey (2004) argue that discourse analysts are faced with the imperative of analyzing not only the linguistic practices but also the non-linguistic practices through which the constitution of the social is organized. Discourses are not merely reflective of reality but are the performative act that enables and enjoins action through the construction of subjects, objects, and fields of possibility, and these are the processes for which the analyst has to make assessments of relevance, causation, and significance that are themselves normatively fraught even when non-critical in purpose and intent.

The importance of taking a critical stance is emphasized by Bloomaert & Bulcaen (2000) by placing CDA in a critical paradigm with a mix of linguistic analysis, social theory, and politics. The concern, as always, is not with the existence of a critical stance but with its disciplinary rigor.

Later research in discourse studies has extended the remit of normativity even wider, in work focusing on security, legitimacy, or identity in political discourse. In Cap’s (2019) study of strategic legitimization in politics, for example, the normative preconditions for threat, responsibility, or authority in language use are pragmatically realized in textual choices. Researchers employing these strategies are thereby using counter-norms, concerning, say, democratic accountability, reason, or ethical communication. These are not subjective norms, but rather institutional norms, which are informed by democratic ideals or academic convention.

Likewise, Kramersch (2020) contends that discourse analysis in a globalized world is forced to contend with alternative norms for meaning, affiliation, and legitimacy. Language is de-linked from its moorings in a national or cultural system; it is global and thus contains alternative norms for affiliation. Those that analyze discourse necessarily position themselves within these norms.

A normative reading of discourse analysis does not weaken its claim to be a science or critical theory; on the contrary, it enhances these qualities by bringing the normative standards against which discourses are judged into prominence. A normative stance on discourse analysis enables its propositions to be challenged and developed; as assertions rather than ideology, they are more likely social and political.

The inability to express normativity does not make discourse analysis irrelevant, but it makes it precarious, especially in those political spheres where interpretation is monitored for potential bias. Discourse analysis can regain its critical edge by positing normativity as institutionally based, not just abstract or subjective. Thus, discourse analysis will no longer

be considered a disengaged reflection of social reality or an uncoupled critical exercise but a reflective practice that is imbedded in, or responsive to, social reality.

5. THE LIMITS OF METHOD-CENTERED APPROACHES

Recent decades have seen a proliferation of methodological developments within discourse analysis. Corpus analysis, genre analysis, multi-modal analysis, mixed methodology studies, as well as computational methods, have greatly improved the descriptive as well as explanatory powers of the methodology. Landmark studies such as Biber et al. (1998) and Coffin et al. (2009) can thus be cited as outstanding examples of the methodological development within discourse analysis, allowing for the identification of patterns of language use with great precision across various genres, registers, or other levels of sociolinguistic context. Recent contributions to the methodology include multi-modal frameworks by O'Halloran (2008) and O'Halloran et al. (2011), as well as syntheses within applied linguistics methodology by McKinley & Rose (2020) and Riazi (2016).

This has, without a doubt, furthered the position of discourse analysis as a more empirically driven form of research. However, a lack of methodological sophistication is, in itself, no remedy for a deep, and currently under-theorized, problem: the problem of interpretation. A method, however sophisticated, is never able to specify, on its own terms, the content, or more importantly the implications, of a certain linguistic regularity. Methods provide data; interpretation is what provides significance. It is dangerous to equate the two.

Crucially, this weakness should not be considered a problem of method. On the contrary, it constitutes a condition of inquiry in general. Hence, Glynos et al. (2009) show, through the comparative study of six prominent discourse-analytic methods, that methodological pluralism corresponds to different ontological visions, research agendas, or conceptions of critique. The implication here is not that methods are somehow defective, but that there is no methodological unity that can exhaustively set the boundaries of inquiry. Meaning is not produced through procedure but through problem-solving articulation of theoretical, social, or normative inquiries.

This observation is consistent with other reflections concerning methodology in discourse studies in general. Hammersley (2002) argues that discourse analysis may embrace a range of approaches, some of which are quite close to being value-neutral, as in conversation analysis, while others are more directly evaluative, as in critical discourse analysis. Such differences are not differences in methodology but rather in differences between goals of inquiry: descriptive, explanatory, critical, or interventional. Methodological approaches tend to blur this distinction and assume adequacy with respect to interpretive validity.

Such reservations are also present in corpus-assisted discourse analysis. Although the complementarity between corpus analysis and discourse analysis has yielded many notable studies, there are reservations about the emphasis on quantification and identification at the cost of interpretive explanation. A pertinent critique in this respect, which emphasizes that the use of corpus analysis may, in fact, involve concealing rather than unveiling, has been made by Lin (2018). In other words, rather than being a problem with the use of the corpus, there might be problems with claims that what is statistically visible is also socially visible.

Such considerations echo broader discussions within the humanities and social sciences on critique. Talk of "the limits of critique" within literary studies, as carried out by Felski in 2015, although not immediately relevant to discourse analysis per se, offers insight. Rather than dismissing critique altogether, this thinking problematizes "the hegemony of methodological suspicion" as a substitute for critical rigor. The imperative for discourse analysis here is that critical power cannot be derived through analytical method alone but requires that discursive problem, injustice, or meaning be explicitly stated.

In terms of discourse analysis proper, a very relevant example is the work of Herzog (2016). In his integration of immanent critique with sociological discourse analysis, Herzog illustrates that a concern for methodological specificity is by no means incompatible with normative transparency. In his view, the objection is not that discourse analysis is lacking in methods, but rather that methodological strategies fail to adequately theorize normativity. Interpretation, in his view, is always indexed by evaluative horizons, whether make explicit or not.

In this way, current demands for expanding or developing methods, for example, the proposals in Shi-xu (2012) and Luke (2002), need to also, and more importantly, signal a questioning of the relationship between methods, theory, and critique, as demands for expanding methods without this questioning would lack a purposeful and normative understanding of the need for methodological expansion in the first place and would instead rest upon a holism, as described above, regarding methodological pluralism.

In conclusion, it should be acknowledged that methodological approaches have been, and in many respects will remain, vital to the evolution of discourse study. Nonetheless, it becomes evident that there are demarcations concerning methodical approaches conceptualized as self-authorized or interpretative substitutes. The confluence of this inquiry becomes not the rejection of methodical rigor within investigation but, instead, finding it within a bigger construct that comprehends normative, theoretical, or problem-oriented aspects of meaning.

To better illustrate the possible interpretation of interpretive accountability under a normatively justified understanding of discourse analysis, let us embark upon a hypothetical example related to the discourse of policy related to immigration. An academic might come upon a set of interpretations regarding 'management of migration flows,' 'regulation of influxes,' and 'relief of systemic pressure.' A procedural approach to this kind of investigation could definitively point out a pattern of word lexicals, metaphors, and syntax, thus conclusively arguing that immigration is constructed as a thing to be technically dealt with.

From this viewpoint, interpretation is not only the identification of texts as regularities, but it is also a discursive commitment that is open to assessment. To interpret migrants as objects of "management" is thus to locate these objects within a web of inference that delimit their agency, moral standing, and eligibility for practical concern. On an inferentialist account, meaning attribution is inseparable from the commitments one incurs and the entitlements one claims in making such an interpretation. The analyst is, accordingly, forced to articulate the reasons justifying the interpretation of these linguistic decisions as dehumanizing or depersonalizing and to acknowledge alternative lines of inference, for example, administrative efficiency, which could be used to argue against the interpretive decision.

Interpretive accountability, in this case, comprises the openness of the analyst to the space of reasons by way of his/her explicit formulation of normative presuppositions that ground interpretive judgments. Interpretation, instead of being seen as a neutral outcome of methodological application, becomes, within this approach, a form of reason-giving that can be subjected to criticism, revision, and demands for reasons. That which is specifically normatively accountable within an interpretation is thus not its compliance with an assigned method but its sensitive engagement with the inferential as well as ethical implications it enables within a discursive practice shared with others. Discourse analysis, within this perspective, appears as a form of socially embedded rational practice, wherein the authoritative status of an interpretation is anchored within the reason-giving transparencies instead of their methodological reiterations.

6. TOWARD INTERPRETIVE ACCOUNTABILITY

If discourse analysis must necessarily be normative in its approaches and if analytical methods are inadequate to guarantee the validity of an interpretation, then the focus of the methodological question would necessarily shift from the level of technique to that of responsibility. What is called for is a shift within the practice of knowledge from methodological verification to the matter of interpretive responsibility. The focus here would be on the conditions under which an interpretation can be considered reasoned, reversible, and publicly verifiable, rather than technically validated.

This movement directly addresses a long-standing dilemma within interpretive research. On one hand, interpretive paradigms correctly challenge the idea of a validation process via replication and prediction, as in a positivist paradigm. Yet, if a set of specified norms of accountability is not established, a slide into either relativism or preference-projection might be occurring within interpretivism. This interpretive accountability provides a means to address this dilemma by placing emphasis on the normative foundations already presupposed in interpretivism. Fundamentally, the three interconnected commitments upon which interpretive accountability is based are the expression of explicit norms, positioning, and transparency of justification.

6.1 Explicit norm articulation

Interpretation is itself never norm-neutral. “To interpret a discourse is to assess what is salient, coherent, relevant, misleading, or consequential.” These acts of assessment contain implicit norms that may be epistemic, pragmatic, ethical, or political. It is only by making these norms explicit that one avoids imposing norms upon discourse analysis from outside; instead, one discloses the norms that are at work.

It is argued that a philosophy of language offers a strong basis for this position. Inferentialism about meaning has highlighted the importance of recognizing the commitments and entitlements expressed and licensed in understanding a statement (Brandom, 2000). In terms of discourse analysis, it follows that interpretations are answerable insofar as they express the normative consequences derived from acts of discourse. Analysts would then need to specify the norms in terms of which certain discourses are to be considered legitimate, problematic, exclusionary, or emancipatory.

Indeed, hermeneutic philosophy supports this view. According to Ricoeur (1981), interpretation is not merely the retrieval of meaning but is rather a reasoned act of appropriation that is guided by the normative principles of plausibility, coherence, and explanatory power. These normative principles are discursive principles that can, and should, be contested. This is how norm articulation changes interpretation from an act of authority into an invitation to critical engagement.

6.2 Reflexive positioning

Additionally, accountability entails reflexive awareness of the analyst’s own location within the process of interpretation. In this regard, interpretations are carried out from a certain location that influences the kinds of questions asked and the forms of legitimate critiques used within the process of interpretation.

On the other hand, reflexivity should not be confined to autobiographical reflection. According to Mauthner and Doucet (2003), for instance, reflexivity implies that choices of analysis rest on assumptions of knowledge and being that shape the research procedure itself. Techniques contain hidden assumptions concerning language, subjectivity, and social order. They are not objective instruments. These assumptions of interpretive accountability, therefore, need to locate their interpretations.

This call reflects a need that is attuned to current research in applied linguistics and critical social thought. According to Pennycook (2018), interpretations are necessarily enmeshed in histories of knowledge production and power differentials, especially in a world marked

by colonialism and inequality. Likewise, Haslanger (2022) insists that good research must take into consideration how social position shapes possibilities of knowledge and what interpretations become authoritative. Thus, reflexive positioning not only does not undermine interpretations but verifies and verifies them to be stronger.

6.3 Justificatory transparency

The third pillar for interpretive accountability is that of justificatory transparency. Interpretive statements require reasons that can be assessed, contested, and improved. The locus of authority for interpretation should not be methodological branding or institutional allegiance to theory, but rather the quality of reasons.

There is every reason why this requirement should resonate with pragmatic or dialogic approaches to meaning. Through his work, Elder (2021) has demonstrated that the meaning intended by the communicator is necessarily entwined with the commitments undertaken in the communication process. By implication, making commitments through interpretation is entwined with commitments to justify those commitments over possible commitments in alternative interpretations.

What this transparency means is not the detailing of methodological specifics but rather the visualization of the reasoning process that links the data and the interpretation itself. As suggested by Verschueren in 2021, the interpretation process remains under the direction of pragmatic assessments of relevance and context. Such interpretation assessments can then be judged from substantive perspectives and not accepted *prima facie*.

6.4 Consequences for discourse analysis

To embrace interpretive accountability is to have substantial implications for the discipline of discourse analysis. In the first instance, methodological pluralism is no longer seen as a concern but rather as an advantage. This is primarily based on the notion that various approaches to analysis can co-harmonize, provided that the normative presuppositions are clearly stated. In the second instance, being accountable offers protection against claims that the discipline is arbitrary or bears ideological overtones.

Thirdly, interpretive accountability reinstates the ethical character of discourse analysis. The act of interpretation is not only an intellectual process; it has a bearing on the evaluation of social actors and practices. The accountability of the consequences of interpretation is important, especially when discourse analysis operates in politically loaded areas.

In this regard, interpretive accountability does not deprive critique of constraint but frees and facilitates critique. Through clarification of norms and contextualization of the analysts, discourse analysis can maintain its critical foundations without having to claim methodological supremacy or recourse to relativism. Thus, there is no new method but a common perspective—a perspective that considers interpretation as a responsible and reason-giving act imbedded in social contexts.

7. IMPLICATIONS FOR DISCOURSE STUDIES

Framing discourse analysis from a normative perspective yields very important implications to the discipline, especially with regard to the intersection between descriptive and critical approaches, the use of theory, and its validity in interdisciplinary studies. By examining discourse analysis under the normative framework, the debate and tension between the descriptive and critical approaches may be framed not in terms of their methods, but in the manner through which they interpret the said norms that regulate the practice of analysis (Hyland, 2009; Hyland & Bondi, 2006). The normative framework emphasizes the interpretive assumptions in analysis, and it enables the researcher to clarify and spell out the principles on which the practices in discourse are judged.

Normative framing helps explain the relationship of theory to discourse analysis. Rather than merely an embellishing step exercised following data collection, theory becomes an underpinning for interpretation. Theoretical concepts form a set of principles allowing for

navigation regarding what is salient in discourse, defining something's social importance, or enabling comparisons between discourse occurrences (Hyland & Tse, 2004; Martin, 2002). Through an alignment of theoretical commitments with the principles of interpretation, discourse analysis may therefore offset arbitrary or ideology-driven interpretations, thereby improving its epistemological foundations.

The implications for interdisciplinarity are also very important. The tension between assumptions, approaches, and goals in critical and descriptive approaches to discourse studies, which involve several disciplines like sociology, linguistics, psychology, and communication studies, can create problematic discrepancies and inconsistencies. The approach to normatively rooted discourse analysis enables interdisciplinarity to communicate more easily on epistemological foundations since assumptions on knowledge acquisition and interpretation can now be clarified and made explicit (van Dijk, 2011; Bhatia et al., 2008; Unger, 2016).

This normative turn also changes how methodological innovation interfaces. Descriptive advancements in corpus linguistics, multi-modal analysis, or computational techniques expand descriptive resources. However, these improvements do not generate interpretations but develop interpretations following social standards (Matthiessen, 2012). Interpretation involves no results that methods generate automatically. There must be a balance in using sophisticated methods in discourse analysis. There should be critical assessment of social standards that support interpretations.

The essential concept within discourse analysis becomes strengthened within this approach. The awareness that is normative enables one to point out flaws within the construction of social injustice that is embedded in discourse within a way that has to be communicated, debated, or justified. The discourse historical approach, for instance, emphasizes the construction of identity, ideological functions, as well as historical discrimination patterns as emphasized by Wodak (2015). The approach enables one to point out flaws within the discourse by applying a normative concept that does not end up within ideological partisanship.

In conclusion, the application of discourse analysis across various disciplines is raised to higher status by pointing out the coming together of the functionalist, cognitive, and poststructuralist approaches. The aspect of normative orientation is used to show how various discourses, for instance, van Dijk's Discourse-Cognitive-Social framework approach, Fairclough's approach via the practice of social discourse, or early structuralist or Birmingham School discourse analysis of interaction within the classroom, all contribute to the pursuit of common analytic ends (Matthiessen, 2012; van Dijk, 2011).

In sum, reframing discourse analysis as a normative practice has the following three interrelated consequences: repositioning debates between descriptive and critical approaches as normative rather than methodological; elevating theory to a position of interpretive justification; and strengthening interdisciplinary legitimacy by clarification of epistemological commitments. Thus, the field gains more coherence in its frameworks for analysis, critique, and collaboration and reinforces both explanatory power and practical relevance for addressing social, institutional, and cultural phenomena.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that the central issue facing contemporary discourse studies is not the problem of the lack of methods, or the problem of a lack of technical complexity, but the problem of the under-articulation of epistemological norms that serve to guide interpretations. Discourse analysis, whether it is descriptive, critical, or trans-disciplinary, has all too frequently fallen back on methodological procedures to guarantee the rigor of

the work, while actually treating the normative commitments that inform the work as if they were irrelevant. Discourse analysis, treated from a normative perspective, asserts that the constitutive role of the work, the central issue, is the process of interpretation itself—not a passive, problematic aftermath, to methodological procedures, but the defining moment of the work itself. Methods produce data, interpretations produce meaning, relevance, accountability (McKinley & Rose, 2020).

The implications of this approach are far-reaching. First, debates between descriptive and critical approaches become a matter of different norms for interpretation, rather than questions of methodological prestige and superiority. A dispute over what is considered ‘good’ or ‘rigorous’ or ‘socially responsible’ interpretation is impossible to resolve, or even intelligible, except for a deliberate statement and specification of its guiding norms for interpretation. Second, this approach is a boost to the legitimacy of discourse analysis in inter-disciplinary work and collaboration. This is achieved through a specification of its epistemologic commitments, enabling the discipline to work constructively and productively with the fields of linguistics, sociology, policy research, cognitive science, and more, without lapsing into relativism or methodological dogma (Pennycook, 2022). Third, this kind of specification of this norm improves its level of ability as a tool for social critique. For instance, a discourse-historical approach or a critical discourse analysis is more than ‘simply’ a set of analytical tools, but ‘a means to identify inequalities, to map ideology, and to intervene, in a principled and justifiable, and therefore ‘accountable’ way (Wodak, 2020). Turning to the future, there are several trajectories for discourse studies as a field. The first is to continue to combine methodological innovation with normative reflection in a more consistent and explicit way than we see in much of present-day corpus-based and multimodal analysis. The descriptive power of corpus analysis and multimodal analysis is unprecedented, and its utility is realized only when investigators make clear the underlying normative assumptions that guide interpretation in particular investigations. Second, normative accountability must be made more practical and concrete in different contexts and domains. Whether in classroom analysis or in policy analysis, investigators must learn to think reflectively and normatively about the underlying ideologies and institutional locations that shape and guide interpretation in particular domains of investigation. Third, it is necessary to promote epistemological pluralism without becoming incoherent and lost in its own multiplications and proliferations.

In conclusion, the contribution of this paper is both conceptual as well as practical. Firstly, conceptually, this paper contends that the strength of discourse studies is to be found not in its methods but its interpretive approach. Secondly, practically, this paper proposes that the future of discourse analysis is not to be found along the lines of perfecting its methods but through principled interpretation that is accountable. Lastly, rather than shrinking, the discipline of discourse analysis can undoubtedly stretch because of its interpretive approach to accountability that can make its endeavors not only significant but also ethical. The future of discourse analysis, therefore, is not about perfection but about principled interpretation that can offer more insights into meaning than any method can possibly offer.

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