Discursively constructed realities: exploring and extending the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse


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reflexivity, collaboration and exploration: the reader would need a hands-on experience of their Entity Mapper tool to properly appreciate its potential.

**Positioning SKAD in the sociological tradition of discourse analysis**

Keller’s central claim for SKAD is that it ‘establishes a research programme which is interested in the social relations of knowledge and the social politics of knowledge as they are manifest in the discursive construction, transformation, stabilisation and destruction of realities. It therefore supplies research with a theory of its object (discourses) and the conditions for existence of such an object. It further provides a reflexive methodology of interpretation which accounts for its basic condition of producing a discourse about discourses. And it offers various methods or strategies for sampling and analysing data and telling a story about an object of inquiry.’ (p. 74-75)

In addition to Keller’s own claim, it is useful for the newcomer to note some of the advantages identified by the other contributors as they reflect on their own SKAD applications and developments: ‘for the analysis of politics [...] bring the actors back into focus [...] sensitive to the actor or speaker positions in a given discursive formation’ (Schünemann, p. 94); it helps ‘render transparent strategic manoeuvrings and shifts in [...] policy’ (Hornidge and Nadav Feuer, p. 146); ‘by distinguishing between actors and speakers [SKAD] may identify silent or silenced voices’ (Zhang and McGhee, p. 164); it favours ‘a more differentiated perspective on human self-relations' with recourse to ‘discursively constructed storylines and subject positions’ (Bosančić, p. 198); its ‘self-reflexivity’ works against processes of reification of social realities, making it a suitable method to support an emancipatory research agenda informed by queer or post-colonial theory (Küppers, p. 217).

The point that is repeatedly stressed is that SKAD is less about knowledge than about processes of knowing and their social relations and politics, understood in line with Foucault’s concept regimes of power/knowledge. Anchored in a pragmatic and social constructivist sociology, it nevertheless shifts our analytical attention (partially) from the social construction to the discursive construction of reality, where discourse is, among other things, 'a heuristic device for ordering and analysing data, a necessary hypothetical assumption in order to start research.' (p. 19) Discourse is carried by dispositifs, understood with Foucault once again, meaning that it has a materiality (‘a material manifestation and circulation of knowledge’ in Schünemann’s words (p. 94)) and a dual infrastructure of discursive production (the means of discoursing as a social practice) and intervention (the effects and products of discourse). But we are also invited to re-read Gusfield and understand discourses as processes frozen in time and (Keller adds) ‘thawed, from time to time’ (p. 89), and hence to appreciate the trajectory of discourses towards a (projected, but often never attained, and sometimes reversible) ‘climax’ (Hornidge and Nadav Feuer, p. 143) – the dynamics of fixing and unfixing discourses as social facts.

Keller’s chapter 2 is where we find the most complete enumeration of SKAD’s conceptual and methodological toolbox, bearing in mind, however, that SKAD provides not so much a firm set of research procedures as a broad frame that suggests certain types of research question (p. 28-29). It furnishes an ‘interpretive analytics’ based on the principle of co-constructing answers to these questions ‘with the help of data’ (p. 30) in a process of
continual interpretation. Keller proceeds to describe an array of conceptual tools that help organise this interpretive work - utterances/statements, social actors, speakers and their positions, subject positions and subjectification, discursive fields and coalitions, practices, and the above-mentioned dispositifs of production and intervention. The inclination towards discourse as practice opens out onto an interpretive repertoire ‘by which a discourse performs its symbolic structuring of the world’ (p. 32) through what are called interpretive schemes, argumentation clusters, classifications, phenomenal structures and narrative structures or plots. Elements of this repertoire are taken up selectively in the book’s empirical chapters.

Different applications and ways of working with SKAD

One of the features of the book is a diversity of approach. A typical weakness of multi-author volumes here becomes a potential strength, since diversity promises to subject SKAD to a useful test of applicability and to demonstrate to potential users a broad range of fields in which it can be applied. There are at least four main axes of variation: firstly, some chapters – e.g. 4, 7, 8 and 9 – are written as ‘guided tours’ of SKAD or ‘methodological reflections’ on fieldwork and analysis, retrospective stories of historical research processes/programmes showing how they were conceived and carried out; others – e.g. 5, 6, 11, 12 and 13 – are more like research papers, where the data and results are foregrounded and the methods and theory become instrumental to the investigation of a topic/issue. SKAD, one could say, is the main protagonist of the former chapters and the helper in the latter. As a reader unfamiliar with SKAD (although doing discourse analysis which shares many of the same principles) I found the methodological reflections more helpful: in most of the other chapters the authors’ presentation of SKAD was too brief or too opaque to fully appreciate how (much) it had informed their research. We can see the kinds of interpretations SKAD enables and the type of discursive practices people working in the SKAD tradition themselves perform, but too little of the actual working.

Secondly, some chapters are ‘SKAD projects’ (von Unger, Scott and Odukoya, p. 180), others explore the compatibility of projects conceived independently with the principles of SKAD, re-examining data from a SKAD perspective, while Bosančić, as already mentioned, frames his chapter as ‘grounded’ in SKAD while trying to ‘extend’ it, always within an interpretive paradigm. A third line of variation is between studies that used SKAD to explore discursive conflict over matters of concern (e.g. chapters 4, 5, 11 and 13) and studies interested in reconstructing the historical emergence of a (dominant) discourse (e.g. chapters 6, 7, 9 and 12). The former kind of study demonstrates SKAD’s use value to scholars concerned with the construction of public problems and controversies: focusing on the definitional struggles between actors/speakers, it treats discursive practice as fundamentally performative and is interested in the use of discourse for various strategic ends in the context of collective/conflictual ‘meaning making’. Hornidge and Nadav Feuer exemplify the latter approach with their use the biological/biographical metaphor ‘climax’ to describe the phase of discursive production when discourses have become (provisionally) social and institutional facts. This permits an interesting reflection on the related methodological problem of project scoping (delimiting the field to be investigated) in response to the range of different discourse trajectories one can encounter.
Finally, in the different chapters we meet discourses that are more or less public and more or less specialised. Keller touches on this distinction with the observation that public discourses are held together not ‘by a discipline or religious world view’ but ‘by the performance of particular definitions of a situation’ (p. 23). There is an affinity here with pragma-dialectics\(^3\) insofar as SKAD treats public situations as capable of imposing an exigency to convince an audience (every argument implies and often anticipates a counter-argument) and recognises how a precondition for successful argumentation is usually the acceptance of certain unexpressed premises inherent in the situation as a specific type of discursive event. Hence one of SKAD’s central tenets is that discourses perform interpellation of some kind. Different contributors, however, deal with this in different ways: while Küppers ‘forces the analysis to remain on the level of interpellation or allocation’ by studying the allocation of subject positions to discourse protagonists (sex workers) in media discourse (p. 205), Bosančić, interested in how living individuals actually respond to interpellations contained in subject positions, proposes a (natural) extension of the SKAD framework in his study of the self-positioning of semi-skilled workers – an extension he describes as a move from the meso-level of institutions to the micro-level of individual actors’ self-relations (p. 189-190). It could equally be seen as a reduction in the publicness of discursive practice. One of questions left hanging is how different degrees of publicness affect the applicability of SKAD or the design of a SKAD project.

**From discursive to narrative and communicative construction**

The range of heuristic, methodological and theoretical implications raised in and by the different chapters of this book is too broad to cover in the space of this commentary, so I focus on two that resonate with my own research interests: SKAD’s forays into narrative analysis and its insistence on combining discourse analysis with ethnography in ways that foreground the communicative and translational processes implicated in discourse.

**Narrative structures in the SKAD repertoire: a script-story dialectic**

One of the most intriguing, if rather open-ended affordances of SKAD is its consideration of narrative structures in discourse: it is an approach that recognises how reality is not just discursively but narratively constructed\(^4\). This is notable because narrative analysis is too often hived off from sociological applications of discourse analysis or relegated to a secondary effect. The exact place of narrativity in SKAD analyses would nonetheless benefit from more precise specification – here it could take a lead from post-structural narratology\(^5\).

When Keller talks about narrative structures, he is concerned with discursive structures that privilege certain dimensions of narrativity while extending their applicability to forms of temporalisation that it is arguably more appropriate to treat as non-narrative. SKAD focuses on composition and intrigue rather than on linguistic instrumentation (on what I have called narration rather than narrativisation\(^6\)); likewise it focuses on the dialogical or conversational dimension inherent in the interactive situation of storytelling\(^7\) (and so important to Labov\(^8\)) rather than on the internal dimension of
events. Narrative structures are structures which form a sort of shell that encompasses the other elements of an interpretive repertoire and sequence them in a more or less coherent arrangement so that ‘the discourse can address an audience’ (p. 34). But with this encompassing shell, SKAD is, I think, concerned with a broader phenomenon - with how syntagmatic configurations can envelop paradigmatic and pragmatic ones, and with various ways of modelling or integrating temporal sequences in discursive practice for purposes of meaning making and argumentation/persuasion. These temporal sequences can, as Baroni has shown, be narrative (a ‘mise en intrigue’ as Keller puts it, citing Ricoeur) or non-narrative: scripts, schemas, scenarios, routines or procedural descriptions – various designations for stereotypical sequences of actions that carry discursive power and permit interpretive hypotheses because they are accepted as authoritative accounts of how things are done or should be done. Conceptualising subjectification, for example – how actors accept or resist ‘the interpellation processes that discourses perform’ (p. 36) – is aided if a distinction is maintained between scripts and stories, the tension between which is often integral to meaning making because it furnishes openings for various shapes and shades of discursive transgression. We should talk about narrative structures, Bres proposes, only in those cases when meaning making proceeds polemically from situations where human actors are in conflict with each other or the world, which includes being in conflict with scripts.

In fact, Zhang and McGhee’s study (chapter 8) of the discursive (mis)interpretation of policy texts by Communist Party officials charged with their implementation in China is a good illustration of how SKAD already works, effectively, with such a script-story dialectic. Contrary to the assumption that state socialism relies particularly strongly on conformity to texts as scripts, they find that local officials actually enjoy considerable scope for discretion. Seeking a tool to keep the focus on the ‘dispositifs used to tackle problems’, and focusing a great deal on how researchers ‘constructed the scene’ (p. 161) to enable participants to tell their stories (or their truths), they used SKAD to reconstruct a chain of discursive reinterpretations in a multi-level governance system, exploiting its dialectical conception (positioning and being positioned) of the relationship between discursive production and social roles (p. 152). It became a tool for ‘paradigmatic exposition’ of the relationship between official state policy and local problematisations as captured in research situations, where discursive practices were treated successively as confirmatory, subjectifying and translational. The scripts themselves constitute temporally-configured discursive structures; narrative structures – if we accept Bres’s proposition – appear at the point where speakers enter into conflict with the scripts.

**Dispositif ethnography: a double translation between texts and conversations**

As for the ethnographic imperative, the combination of textual analysis with ethnographic inquiry is regarded as ideal if not essential in order to fully understand the functioning of infrastructures of discursive production and discursive intervention. The case is made most directly and forcefully by Elliker in chapter 14, who claims that discourses should be studied a/ in relation to ‘other relevant processes that co-structure the environment in which discourses operate’ (p. 270) and b/ ‘in sites which are not the main sites of serious speech acts and discursive meaning making’ (p. 259). Elliker takes Keller’s to-and-fro between utterances and texts, combines it with Knoblauch’s focused
ethnography, and sets up a methodological but also ontological dialectic in which the focus is on the making of contributions to discourses, on the one hand, and the (always locally mediated) intervention of institutionalised discourses in concrete fields of practice, on the other. There is a strong affinity here with communicative constitution of organisation (CCO) theory since these SKAD iterations are reminiscent of the ‘text-conversation cycle’ through which, in CCO theory, social structuring occurs in organisational forms of life: ‘As people collectively produce an interpretation they leave their actions open to interpretation... The interpretive activities constitute, in our language, a conversation, while the subject matter and goal of its interpretations are text... Each modality enfolds the other. It is in this dialectic of conversation and text that the organizing occurs.’

When operationalised in the form of a ‘dispositif ethnography’ (p. 258) paying heed to ‘the interplay between situated contexts and practices with discourses [and the] constitution of contexts through discourses’, a similar double translation between texts and conversations is precisely what the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse sets out to investigate. In this sense it is not only a discursive construction of reality but also a communicative constitution of reality that SKAD operationalises: ‘Advocating a communicative constitution of reality does not amount to falling into some degenerate form of constructivism (or even solipsism). It means, on the contrary, that, for instance, preoccupations, realities, and situations get expressed and translated in what we say or write. And these expressions, animations or translations can, of course, always be questioned and negotiated on the terra firma of interaction’. SKAD could interest researchers working in this tradition as a means of illuminating these animations and translations, while some of the techniques used by organisational sociologists – e.g. the use of video cameras as ‘a way to record an interaction as exhaustively and richly as possible’ and hence ‘unfold the folded voices’ (the ideologies, norms, concerns, statuses, etc.) in a text – could inspire SKAD researchers in their contextual explorations of discourse worlds.

If one of this book’s aims was to stimulate further developments and extensions of SKAD, I suggest that dialogues with postclassical narratology and communication-based organisation theory would prove especially fertile.

NOTES

1. It is a pity the book lacks an index, since it would be useful for the reader to be able to go back and compare how different authors mobilise individual concepts.

2. It is symptomatic that Keller has for several years collaborated with Francis Chateauraynaud, with whose argumentative sociology of controversies SKAD shares many commonalities. Chateauraynaud Francis, Debaz Josquin, ‘Prospero over the ocean #1. The challenges of a semantic and argumentative approach of corpus in the era of “big data”’, Socio-informatique et argumentation, 2018: https://socioargu.hypotheses.org/5469.

Lectures, Les notes critiques
7. Narrativity (as illustrated in Keller’s own empirically-focused chapter on public discourses on waste) is also about the story the researcher comes to tell about their object of inquiry.

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