



# 10

## Identifying Values Through Discourse Analysis

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### Introduction

Texts are pervasive and naturally occurring features of everyday and institutional life. Minutes from meetings, interviews, talks, annual and strategic reports, e-mails and Facebook messages are all sources for analysis. However, an analytical approach to discourse analysis is more than simply text analysis (Neumann, 2021). The texts contain representations and intentionality. There can be underlying (and to some extent hidden) prevailing perceptions, opinions and understandings that are baked into the text. The analysis then consists primarily of interpreting these understandings to find shared and possibly hidden values or values in practice. As such, we can say that discourse is the established and obvious narrative of a phenomenon. Discourse is often intuitive and taken for granted, describing why things are the way they are. We therefore understand discourse analysis as 'a system for carrying out a set of statements and

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practices ... appearing to be more or less normal, constitutive of reality for its carriers and with a certain degree of regularity in a set of social relations' (Neumann, 2021, p. 22, translated from Norwegian).

The 'system' is possible to investigate through certain techniques suitable for finding the link between the textual expressions and the more constituent and regulative system. Texts reflect what is socially accepted, desired and valued. Hence, we may claim that values are part of discourses and are thus integrated within texts in everyday life. To understand how values and values work appear in texts, we should look for tools that go beyond text analysis and that aim to analyse, in Sheperd's (2008) words, 'systems of meaning-production rather than simple statements or language, systems that fix meaning, however temporarily, and enable us to make sense of the world' (p. 10). In the following, we present and discuss how students and researchers may perform discourse analysis to investigate values and values work in texts.

In this chapter, we present possible approaches to identify values through discourse analysis. We ask: what are the available approaches for signifying values in texts through discourse analysis? To answer the research question, we draw on theoretical contributions and earlier writings on discourse analysis (e.g. Neumann, 2021; Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). The presentation of the approaches is illustrated through an example text taken from a popular scientific journal on the topic of trust-based leadership within the public sector in Scandinavia.

The aim of this chapter is to give readers a framework in which they can place their own research projects on values using different traditions of discourse analysis. This chapter contributes to the arsenal of research methods on values through examples and illustrations of the value of trust within three discourse analysis approaches. We limit our definition of discourse analysis for identifying values to the construction of meaning concerning values and the distribution of these constructions. We present basic understandings of discourse analysis, values and values work. We then discuss the three discourse approaches—structural-semantic discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis and discursive psychology—illustrating each approach through analysis of the journal text. We also offer some critical reflections on the possibilities and limitations in discourse analysis of values work.

## What Is Discourse Analysis?

Discourses are found everywhere in social practice. We use language to communicate and to categorize our understanding of the world as it appears around us. However, we might give different meanings to specific incidents and phenomena. We give meaning to phenomena through the words we choose to use and in what way we choose to use them. Hence, in analysing discourses, language becomes a central focus for analysis to understand social practice (Potter, 2004). In the context of social sciences, Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) referred to this as the linguistic turn.

Discourse analyses are mainly motivated by the desire to spell out the *sensed* yet not directly accessible structures of power and knowledge within specific talk and texts. Two main lines of approach divide discourse analysis: bottom-up text-focused studies (Potter, 2004) and the Foucauldian line of approach (i.e. paradigm discourse studies) aimed at revealing historically developed ‘regimes of truth’ via text analysis (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011). Both lines are limited and have been criticized for not delivering what they promise. While text-focused studies struggle to link the textual practices to anything above the locally situated practice, paradigm discourse studies lack step-by-step instructions explaining how to find the meta-level ‘regimes of truth’ embedded in texts. For the early scholar, it might be confusing to navigate this landscape. Therefore, this chapter offers some step-by-step guidance for discourse analysis, relying mainly on the text-focused approach while being aware of its limitations.

Discourses can be introduced via three fundamental principles. They might be action oriented, constructed or situated (Potter, 2004). *Action-oriented* discourse analysis assumes the world is in motion, leading to several discourse-analytic questions, such as: What is this discourse doing? How is this discourse constructed to make things happen? What resources are available to perform this activity? In our case, we can also add questions concerning values: How is this discourse identifying specific values and values work? What discourses do the values partake in? As such,

discourse analysis can be used to identify values, what brings forward the values and what is the broader perspective of the values work.

Neumann's (2021) perspectives on discourse analysis broadened the action-oriented approach to discourses. He highlighted that discourses are fusions of text and social materiality. Social materiality points at how the written word is simultaneously a product and producer of social practice. What makes written text especially useful for analysis is that while other social practices produce meaning as a side product, language is constructed to create meaning. Written texts found in media, organisational documents like strategic plans and other types of texts are always meant for communication and, thus, meaning making (Neumann, 2021). The text has a purpose, and the writer has specific intentions for writing the text or saying what they are conveying. The choice of words in a written text may contain traces of both intentional and unintentional world views, power structures and social codes that reveal important understandings of values and actions.

How do we understand discourses as *situated*? The situatedness of discourses can be understood in at least two ways. First, speech and text, as representations of discourses, are embedded in sequences of interaction. Hence, the discourses are situated on a timeline, occurring both after specific actions or incidents and before others. Second, discourses are situated within terms of rhetoric. This means that a discourse analysis might include revealing different rhetorical means used in the text. Discourse analysis is used to identify words, idioms and rhetorical devices or ways in which the discourses stabilize the world. The way the discourses are constructed and stabilized is treated as an analysable feature of the production of the discourse (Potter, 2004).

Finally, the discourse as *constructed* resides in a constructionist world-view in discourse analyses. Construction is the process by which something is built from existing material (Czarniawska, 2008; Hacking, 1999). A paradigm of constructivism can provide an understanding of the world in which we live. The emphasis is on how the participant is engaged in actively constructing their world through forms of social action and by assigning meaning to the world through language-based distinctions (Holstein & Gubrium, 2008; Lincoln et al., 2011). As such, the researcher engaged in discourse analysis is seeking to understand the complexity of

the conceptualized world within a context rather than simplifying it into a few categories and ideas (Creswell, 2014).

The use of language is worth paying attention to (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Our vocabulary, the words we use, proverbs, values, sayings and stories all elicit meaning (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 2004). Language and stories are part of the cultural process and gain their meaning within an organized form of interaction (Wittgenstein, 2009). To tell the truth is not to furnish an accurate picture of what actually happened but to participate in the situation of understanding social conventions. To be objective is to play by the rules of the given tradition. Thus, we can say language and stories do not describe action but are in themselves a form of action (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 2004).

## Discourse Analysis and Other Analytical Techniques

To clarify the concept of discourse, it is helpful to separate discourse analysis from the analysis of social norms and institutions (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011) as well as other strategies for analysing data. While social norms and institutions are established by physical prerequisites, discourses are embedded in socially constructed meanings. Discourses may influence social norms and the constructions of institutions, but they are not totally overlapping.

Discourse analysis shares similarities to conversation analysis and narrative analysis (as described in the next chapter of this book). While conversation analysis is a fine-grained analysis of speech as it occurs in interaction in naturally occurring situations, discourse analysis is an approach to language that can be applied to forms of communication other than conversation. Discourse analysis is more flexible and incorporates analysis on how the text under investigation is constructed and constituted (Bryman, 2016).

Narrative analysis is an approach that is sensitive to the temporal sequence often formed as stories to provide an account of characters or events. These stories might give insight into how events have affected the

persons or have been noticed by the surroundings. It often emphasizes how people make sense of occurrences. While narrative analysis investigates narratives, plot and the voices represented, discourse analysis is more concerned with the language used and what it means. The analysis is aimed at connecting language and text to identify political, social and critical discussions. As such, discourse analysis can be used to identify different discourses at the societal or institutional level as well as the individual level. For instance, they can be part of discourses on the role of love in the society (Øfsti, 2008) or discourses that organisations are engaged in, such as utilizing user participation (Breivik, 2016).

The emergent field of researching institutional logic (see Chap. 14) shares some similarities with discourse analysis. While research on institutional logic focuses on investigating the rationales or the rules of the game to lead to an understanding of the social order (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton et al., 2012), discourse analysis focuses on identifying which discussions the issues or phenomena are participating in. As such, discourse analysis can be a relevant approach for studying cognitive structures, causal relations and the broader picture of events.

In regard to using analytical techniques, discourse analysis often requires an open approach. Numerous analytical techniques can be used for identifying values and values work through discourse analysis. For data gathering, both audio and video recordings can be used during research interviews or observations. When transcribing the data material, the researcher should put emphasis on carefully listening to the material. When listening to the recordings from interviews or reading the notes from observations, it is a good idea to look for words and phrases that might be considered odd, interesting or confusing (Potter, 2004). Often prior expectations are out of line with what is captured in the recordings and notes. This also opens up possibilities for coding the material, allowing for departure from the intrinsic coding often utilized in grounded theory. When choosing discourse analysis, the approach involves sifting through the material for the phenomenon of interest, looking for alternative codes and copying them into the coding list. A thematic analysis as described in Chap. 9 can be used when looking for meaning and recurring themes in written and transcribed oral statements, while the discourse analysis is more flexible and often combine semantic patterns in

the text with critical analysis of sentiments or power-relations that are framing the text. Discourse analysis is more flexible and can be a useful approach when you want your study to engage in a broader debate. The analysis is often a cyclical process that reveals new and different understandings of the research topic and requires going back and forth between the various data texts, theories and potential themes found within the texts.

## Discourse Analysis and Values

Research on values and discourse analysis can be done in several ways. Defining values as that which is ‘worth having, doing and being’ (Selznick, 1992, p. 60) allows for the identification of values through discourses. While we can say that all discourses are value based in some sense, some more explicitly enhance values than others. For instance, when a husband and wife in counselling assemble different descriptions of the state of their marriage (e.g. to assign blame and responsibility for the change to the other), this could be based on a different perception of values and what the marriage is worth to them (e.g. respect for each other’s time, honesty, fidelity and trust). The text and the situation need to be analysed to identify the different discourses they enhance and are part of.

Another example can be found in the study by Gehman et al. (2013), who highlighted circulating values discourses as important for identifying the range and construction of values work. Values work in organisations can be viewed as clarifying which actions are right and wrong as well as circulating values discourses (Espedal, 2020). Gehman et al. (2013) defined *values practices* in organisations as ‘sayings and doings in organizations that articulate and accomplish what is normatively right and wrong, good or bad, for its own sake’ (p. 84). This work might include reflecting on principles, ideas and standards in addition to meanings and value assessments. Gehman et al. (2013) studied the introduction of an honour code at a university to follow a value of integrity. They found that the introduction of the honour code led to a larger value discourse on ethics within teaching settings. As such, the values work of introducing the honour code led to circulating value discourses of ethical

behaviour in the classroom. The introduction of the honour code established a situation that formed both a new values practice and an ethical discourse.

## Three Discourse Analysis Approaches

By analysing texts and discourses, researchers can discover how patterns in texts and argumentations either strengthen or diminish the values in question. When answering the research question ‘How are values identified through discourse analysis?’, there is a need for practical guidance to identify values through written language. Here, we offer a concrete example from a Scandinavian journal dealing with the value of trust in public organisations. Through the examples, the readers can see the strengths of different discourse analysis approaches.

Discourse analysis on texts is sometimes divided into three scholastic traditions with different theoretical and methodological connotations (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). The three approaches are (1) structural-semantic discourse analysis, (2) critical discourse analysis and (3) discursive psychology. The three discourse analysis approaches are described below to give the reader an understanding of the available approaches within discourse analysis. These different theoretical groundings can allow for the identification of values.

### Structural-Semantic Discourse Analysis

The basic idea in Laclau and Mouffe’s structural-semantic approach is that the written or spoken language is filled with *signifiers* (as cited in Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Signifiers or nodal points are abstract or concrete central words, concepts or symbols. Signifiers relate to other concepts and words and make *patterns*, *pathways*, and *structures* that can be analysed (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). The researcher identifies how values are placed in patterns and structures and gains a deeper understanding of how clusters of values are linked to each other in the texts.



## Critical Discourse Analysis

The most popular and widely used approach for analysing discourses in texts is critical discourse analysis. Critical discourse analysis was originally promoted by Fairclough (2003). Through critical discourse, the researcher emphasizes how dominating values are powerfully executed through language and texts. Hence, critical discourse aims at detecting structures of power in language. The analysis is divided into three levels: text, discursive practice and social practice. Fairclough (2001, pp. 30–33) suggested four steps for identifying the discourses. Step 1 is to investigate what the social problem is (rather than the research question) in order to find the knowledge necessary for understanding it. Step 2 is to identify obstacles to problem solving in the way that social life is constituted. Step 3 is to investigate how social life is affected by the problem, and Step 4 is to determine paths to circumvent the obstacles. This approach was described by Aadland (2010) for the detection of values in managerial texts and practices.

## Discursive Psychology

The third discourse analysis approach allows for the exploration of individual values in practice expressed through text and speech. Discursive psychology is the study of psychological issues from a participant's perspective. It investigates how people practically manage and express psychological themes and concepts such as emotion, intent or agency within speech and text. For example, texts on trust show how discussion, negotiation and promotion of trust-based leadership are linked to emotions and individual preferences.

## A Text Example

To illustrate the three traditions of discourse analysis, we chose a text published in the Danish journal *Det Offentlige* (*The Public*; [detoffentlige.dk](http://detoffentlige.dk)) on 30 November 2016 that we manually translated to English. The

text was written by journalist Mia Dalby Larsen and is an interview with the union leader and the municipal director on trust-based leadership.

In Scandinavia, there has been an initiative to develop trust-based leadership in public organisations. The value of trust is explicitly promoted and materialized in management and structures (Kivle, 2020; Nyhan, 2000). In Denmark around 2005, trust-based leadership was introduced as a public governance model, with ‘trust’ as the first keyword, followed by ‘trust model’, ‘trust reform’ and ‘trust delegation’ (Bentzen, 2016; Preisler, 2016). Trust-based leadership is defined as the extent to which a manager risks trusting their staff’s competence and motivation to do a good job (Kuvaas, 2017). Trust-based leadership both challenges existing dominant values and priorities and proposes specific practical solutions. Trust in institutions is distinguished from interpersonal trust. In public organisations, it is associated with interpersonal expectations towards public systems. Trust within public organisations is associated with positive interpersonal expectations of other actors within the institution (Kivle, 2020).

When aiming to reveal the circulation of the value of trust within texts on trust-based management in Scandinavia, the first step is to get an overview of the relevant documentation and texts concerning the discussions of trust-based management in the three Scandinavian countries (Neumann, 2021). It is crucial for the analysis to get an overview of the so-called *monuments*, texts that are cited frequently by others. The discourses/shifts in the discourses are often connected to these monuments because these texts either defend the status quo or take a stand against previous writings on the subject.

The text chosen in this example is not a monument text. Thus, different analytical approaches are used here to reveal whether and how the value of trust is circulated within this text. As you may notice, the three different approaches to discourse analysis give three different emphases and perspectives for understanding the text. Here is the text:

Why do municipalities need to de-bureaucratize?

A major reason is that resources are wasted if we use them incorrectly. De-bureaucratization can free up time and energy that we can use for welfare and services for citizens and companies, says Lau Svendsen-Tune, who

in addition to being a member of Fremfærd's board is the daily municipal director of Vordingborg Municipality.

Thus, every day he faces the challenges and dilemmas associated with getting bureaucracy, documentation and an organization with motivated employees to go hand in hand.

The citizen must get the most out of welfare and the services we provide, and the employees must have the opportunity, time and space to use their professionalism, providing working conditions that allow them to make a difference for the individual citizen, says deputy chairman of Fremfærd's board and chairman of the FOA, Dennis Kristensen. His members are among those who are expected to create welfare for the citizens.

The employees are the central focus when municipalities must determine where they can cut unnecessary rules and documentation. Both representatives agree that employees and managers are the main actors fostering new ideas, and municipal core tasks must continue to be developed.

If bureaucracy stands in the way of our employees using creative solutions, then it will be a big problem in relation to the need for us to rethink public services. One may feel unnecessarily controlled or that what one is doing is not meaningful. If bureaucracy removes their motivation, then we lose an important parameter in what we are fighting for in the public sector now—namely to succeed in our tasks and live up to the expectations that citizens justifiably have for us, says Lau Svendsen-Tune. (Larsen, 2016)

## Discursive Analysis of the Example Text

How can discourse analysis contribute to research on values in organisations? When using a *structural-linguistic approach*, we must focus on keywords that signify the subject. Here, the subject is *de-bureaucratization* of the public sector. The message and valuation of the different signifiers become evident when they are placed and understood in relation to other signifiers in the text. For example, 'de-bureaucratization' is associated with 'free time and energy'. The cherished value of getting the 'most out of welfare', which is a well-known utterance regarding efficient usage of public resources, is combined with signifiers like 'professionalism' and 'working conditions'. Signifiers in texts relate to values work; as the signifiers strengthen each other, they also give one another positive or negative value. In a different text, other choices of words could indicate other

solutions to the same problem of inefficient public bureaucracy. By placing the desired goal of 'get the most out of welfare' together with 'professionalism', and later describing 'employees' as 'main actors' associated with 'creative solutions', there is a pattern of values and anti-values. The undesired values include clustering bureaucracy, unnecessary rules, control and documentation, and the desired values are clustering de-bureaucratization, getting the most out of welfare, professionalism, creative solutions, new ideas and employees as main actors.

When using *critical discourse analysis*, researchers must look for social relationships and power structures within the text. In addition to analysing the words used, linguistic objects (e.g. exclamation points) can also be analysed to draw theories on the discourse. In a critical discourse analysis, it is possible to look for words that weaken or strength the meaning (such as 'like', 'in a way' or 'maybe'). It is also possible to analyse the use of modal auxiliary verbs (must, can or will). In the case of the example text on trust-based leadership, we can also ask: Is it an academic or scientific text, popular science, a newspaper article, a poem or a fable? Additionally, we can ask: What norms govern the tone and content of these different types of text?

Looking at the example text, the text illustrates how trust and trust-based leadership are promoted by the authors within a broader power structure and how power and influence are executed by the authors through their words. When dividing the text into three levels—text, discursive practice and social practice—we find that the *text* is a popular scientific management text of the union leader's and municipal director's assumptions on their approaches to what is needed to de-bureaucratize the municipality. The text presupposes a Western, humanistic and human rights-oriented notion of the world, which presumes interpersonal trust based on equality and accountability. This might also be part of an approach known as 'Scandinavian management', which emphasizes enhancing a flat structure, delegating safety and promoting democracy in the workplace.

The municipal director is partaking in a *discursive practice* by highlighting that municipalities must look at where they can make cuts in unnecessary rules and documentation to establish other practices. This also indicates that the leaders are in the process of rethinking public service.

The *social practices* they forward are to listen to the employees and be conscious of their sources of motivation for rethinking practice. Regarding Fairclough's (2001) four steps, we can say that the social problem is de-bureaucratization and the forwarding of trust as a foundation of management. Step 2 of identifying obstacles to the problem is to look for knowledge that may liberate understanding. The people in control of the situation are the leaders, and their assessment of the situation is that they are in power to act. In identifying Step 3, how social life is part of the problem, the leaders highlight their opinion on the risk of unnecessary control. The road past the obstacles can be found in how de-bureaucratization can be done in a trustful and meaningful way.

When doing a *discursive psychology* analysis, the researcher must look for emotion, intent or agency within the speech and text. In relation to trust, the researcher can look for how emotions are part of the discussion, negotiation and promotion of trust. In the chosen text example, the word 'trust' is not explicitly mentioned, but we spot the connection to emotions in how the relations between employers and employees are emphasized. When rethinking public service, the leaders mention that the situation can lead to people (employees) feeling that they are unnecessarily controlled and that what they are doing is not meaningful. In relation to this situation, there are some reflections indicating that the leaders are placing themselves in the situations of employees. In the leaders' eyes, bureaucracy must aim towards a practice that motivates employees; if not, they will lose important parameters on how to organize bureaucracy. As such, the statements of the union leader and the municipal director forward an understanding of the psychology of trust, as both reflexive and intuitive, which is conceptualized as strategic, relational and institutional (Aadland, 2010). The situations of control and motivation are presented as two opposing methods of dealing with trust-based leadership.

## Critical Remarks on the Method

The gap between textual entities, which can be spotted through the above-mentioned analytical approaches, and the analytical entities of studies of values, values work and discourses must be considered before

and during the discourse analysis. There are a number of pitfalls. Alvesson and Kärremann (2011) helped us understand how researchers tend to fall into circular argumentation when all findings promoting the researchers' assumption of discourse are seen as evidence, while contradictory findings may be interpreted as signs of 'different discourses'. In discourse analysis, as in all empirical research, it is crucial to be one's own devil's advocate, reflecting critically and systematically on what competing interpretations of the presented findings might be.

A difficulty worth mentioning is dealing with text. The process encourages the analyst to treat the text in a decontextualized manner that is attentive to the practice in which it partakes. Working with decontextualized texts can result in a temptation to speculate about abstract relations and structures. A related temptation is to consider texts in terms of their relation to what they describe as if what they describe can be captured by the research. This can generate much confusion (Potter, 2004).

## Conclusion

Just like values, discourses are difficult to spot at first sight. Values hidden in texts and actions can be revealed through discourse analysis, emphasizing semantic structures, connections between texts, power relations, emotions and rationality. Even though the analysis is challenging when it comes to connecting textual evidence to analytical entities as discourses in values research, when done with caution and sensitivity towards so-called cherry picking, discourse analysis can provide valuable insight for your study and be a useful way to analyse discourses at individual, societal and institutional levels.

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