

## Discourse and Cognition in Society

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### **Introduction**

This essay analyses some of the relationships between discourse and society. Its major thesis is that such relationships are not direct, but should be framed within a theory of the role of *social cognition* in processes of social, political and cultural reproduction. Thus social representations in our minds (such as socially shared knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and ideologies) are assumed to act as the necessary 'interface' between micro-level interactions and individual text and talk, on the one hand, and societal macro-structures, on the other hand. This assumption goes beyond the classical 'correlational' approaches to the relationships between language and society, for instance in sociolinguistics. At the same time, it provides a necessary extension of work in critical linguistics and discourse analysis about the ways language use or discourse contribute to the reproduction or legitimation of social power. By way of illustration, I shall summarize results of research into the properties of news discourse and its role in the reproduction of racism.

It is generally agreed that an adequate study of the relations between discourse and society presupposes that discourse should be located in society, as a form of social practice or as an interaction of social group members (or institutions). This overall inclusion relation, however, remains rather vague and is in need of further specification in order to explain which properties of text and talk typically condition which properties of social, political or cultural structures, and vice versa. The same is true for other relations between discourse and society, for instance if we study discourse as presupposing, embodying, enacting, reflecting or legitimating social and institutional arrangements.

The social nature of these relations is traditionally accounted for in terms of speakers and recipients as social actors playing specific social roles in social contexts. The micro-sociology of interaction, and ethnomethodological approaches in particular, have emphasized the role of interpretation and implicit, socially shared 'methods' for making sense of interaction and the social world.<sup>1</sup> Although this seems to address the importance of social cognition in the production of text and talk, micro-sociology usually limits itself to the 'observable' properties of knowledge and understanding, that is, to the ways that cognitions are 'displayed' for recipients as social members. The further conceptual analysis of the precise mental representations and processes involved are generally left to psychology, if found relevant at all.<sup>2</sup>

In our interdisciplinary framework we take the interface of social cognition seriously, as socially shared mental strategies and representations that monitor the production and interpretation of discourse.<sup>3</sup> Thus, if specific knowledge or other beliefs are said to be presupposed and shared by speech participants, we need to make such knowledge and beliefs explicit in order to be able to specify how such presuppositions affect the structures of discourse. Conversely, the crucial concept of 'understanding' text and talk is not adequately explained by merely examining the observable manifestations of such mental processes. This does not mean that cognitive analysis should be limited to individual or universal psychological processes of understanding. On the contrary, in the same way as discursive activities are viewed as social (and historical), many dimensions of cognition should also be studied in this double social perspective, at the level of interaction and at the level of groups, institutions or other social structures. In this sense, my approach points beyond much of current psycholinguistics.

*Societal analysis: power, dominance and access*

Within this broader framework of critical and multidisciplinary discourse analysis, I will first focus on some crucial properties of societal structures, such as power and access, and then relate these to both discourse and social cognition. The point of this analysis is to show how, through socially shared mental representations, social power is reproduced by its discursive enactment and legitimation.

Ignoring many theoretical complexities, *social power* here is simply defined as a property of intergroup relations in terms of the control exercised by (the members of) one group or institution over the actions of (the members of) another group.<sup>4</sup> Such power is based on access to socially valued resources, such as force, wealth, income, status or knowledge. Besides forms of force or coercive power, such control is

usually persuasive: acts of others are indirectly controlled through influencing such mental conditions of action as intentions, plans, knowledge or beliefs. It is at this point where power relates to both discourse and social cognition.<sup>5</sup> For specific groups, social power may be limited to special domains or situations (for example, those of politics, the media or education). Also, power is seldom absolute, as long as other groups retain some measure of freedom of action and mind. Indeed, many forms of power breed resistance, in the form of attempts to exercise counter-power.

Critical discourse analysis is interested in *dominance*, defined here as an abuse of social power abuse, that is, as a deviation from accepted standards or norms of (inter)action, in the interest of the more powerful group, resulting in various forms of social inequality. Racism is a form of dominance exercised by whites (Europeans) over ethnic or racial minority groups, or over non-Europeans generally. Dominance is reproduced by enforcing privileged access to social resources by discrimination. It is also reproduced by legitimating such access through forms of 'mind control' such as manipulation and other methods for seeking acceptance or compliance among the dominated group. More generally, this can be viewed as manufacturing consent and consensus. Again, text and talk play a crucial role in the cognitive processes involved in this reproduction process. Their analysis may provide explicit insight into commonly used but vague notions of 'manipulation'. It is the task of this essay to spell out some of the relationships between the structures and strategies of discourse and the cognitive processes and representations underlying the enactment or legitimation of dominance.

Dominance also involves special *access* to various forms of discourse or communicative events.<sup>6</sup> Dominant groups, or elites can be defined by their special access to a wider variety of public or otherwise influential discourses than less powerful groups. That is, elites have more active and better controlled access to the discourses of politics, the media, scholarship, education or the judiciary. They may determine the time, place, circumstances, presence and role of participants, topics, style and audience of such discourses. Also, as a form of 'topical access', elites are the preferred actors represented in public discourse, for instance in news reports. This means that elites also have more chances to have access to the minds of others, and hence to exercise persuasive power. Less powerful groups have active access only to everyday conversations with family members, friends or colleagues, less controlled access to institutional dialogues (for example, in their interaction with doctors, teachers or civil servants), and largely passive access to public discourses, such as those of the mass media. The *reproduction* of dominance in contemporary society is largely managed by maintaining and legitimating such unequal

access patterns to discourse and communication, and thus to the public mind: who is allowed (or obliged) to speak or listen to whom, how, about what, when and where and with what consequences.

Power, dominance, access and reproduction, as well as their enactment or legitimation by text and talk, need analysis both at the *macro* level of overall intergroup relations and institutional control, as well as at the *micro* level of everyday, situated (inter)actions by individuals who, as group members, enact and reproduce group power. This is also true for social cognitions, which may be studied as socially and culturally shared knowledge and beliefs of groups, as well as at the level of their individually variable 'applications' or 'uses' by members in specific situations. Indeed, I hope to show that social cognition and discourse precisely allow us to link these micro- and macro-structures of society.<sup>7</sup>

### *Social Cognition*

Processes of reproduction and relations of dominance not only involve text and talk, but also shared representations of the 'social mind' of group members. Unlike much other work on discourse and society, my approach assumes that there are crucial theoretical reasons why such *social cognition* should be analysed as the interface between discourse and society and between individual speech participants and the social groups of which they are members: (1) discourse is actually produced/interpreted by individuals, but they are able to do so only on the basis of socially shared knowledge and beliefs; (2) discourse can only 'affect' social structures through the social minds of discourse participants, and conversely (3) social structures can only 'affect' discourse structures through social cognition. Social cognition entails the system of mental strategies and structures shared by group members, and in particular those involved in the understanding, production or representation of social 'objects', such as situations, interactions, groups and institutions.<sup>8</sup>

Although I cannot discuss in detail the complexities of a theory of the social mind, I can summarize the main concepts of such a theory as it connects to both discourse and society. We generally distinguish between more personal and ad hoc cognitions of specific events (models), and more abstract, socially shared or group-based social representations (knowledge, attitudes, ideologies), both represented in what is usually called Long Term Memory. The strategic operations based on these models, such as perception, discourse production and understanding, take place in Short Term (working) Memory. Without going into detail on these (highly complex) mental strategies, we can identify some basic types of memory representation and then proceed to the role of discourse in their formation and change.<sup>9</sup>

*Models.* All social perception and action, and hence also the production and interpretation of discourse, are based on mental representations of particular episodes. These event or situation *models*<sup>10</sup> are subjective and unique; they represent the current knowledge and opinions of social actors or individual language users about an episode. Planning an action (or discourse) entails building a model of future activities. During discourse understanding old models about the same episode may be activated and updated (as when we read the news); or new models may be formed (for example, about a particular 'race riot' or about an employer who discriminates against minorities). Besides personal experiences and opinions, models also embody instantiations of social knowledge and attitudes, which precisely allow mutual understanding and communication. Hence models are the crucial cognitive interface between the personal and the social dimensions of discourse.

*Context models.* A special and very influential type of model is the model discourse participants form, and continuously update, of the present communicative situation. Such context models feature representations of the participants themselves, their ongoing actions and speech acts, their goals, plans, the setting (time, place, circumstances) or other relative properties of the context. Context models monitor discourse, telling language users what relevant information in their event models should be expressed in their discourse, and how such discourse should be tailored to the properties of the communicative context (for example, through the use of deictic expressions, presuppositions about the knowledge and roles of participants, etc.).

*Social knowledge.* Besides the personal and ad hoc knowledge represented in their models of specific events, social members also share more general and abstract knowledge about the world. Knowledge about language, discourse and communication is obviously a crucial precondition for verbal interaction, and may be 'applied' in the context model of a communicative event. Similarly, social members share social knowledge, represented in scripts, about stereotypical social episodes, such as shopping or travelling.<sup>11</sup> Such social scripts are formed through inferences from repeatedly shared models. Conversely, they are used to understand new episodes through (partial) instantiations in models of such episodes. For instance, in the understanding of news reports, scripts are continuously activated and applied, in order to understand stories about ethnic events such as the disturbances in Los Angeles in the spring of 1992.

*Social attitudes.* Our personal opinions, as represented in models about specific events, may be contextually specific, individual instantiations of

social opinions. These general opinions may further be organized in structured opinion complexes, which can be denoted with the traditional notion of 'attitude'.<sup>12</sup> The notion of persuasion and its role in the enactment and legitimation of dominance, as discussed above, involves the (trans)formation of these social attitude schemata.<sup>13</sup> Most white people in Europe and North America have attitudes about foreigners, refugees, blacks, immigration and affirmative action, and these will be activated, applied and possibly changed during discourse production or understanding about such other group members and ethnic issues.

*Ideologies.* Finally, attitudes may in turn be grounded on and organized by ideological frameworks. These provide for coherence and function as the general building blocks and inference mechanisms of attitudes. General norms, values and goals of groups and cultures form the elements from which such ideological frameworks are built. Thus ideologies are the more or less permanent, interest-bound, fundamental social cognitions of a group. Their relationship to discourse and language use is indirect. According to our theory of ideology, they operate through attitudes and models before they become manifest in action or discourse. The complex system of ethnic attitudes that underlie ethnic discrimination is organized by such an ideological framework. Unfortunately, we have as yet no explicit theory that details the internal structures and the strategic uses of such ideological frameworks in the (trans)formation of beliefs.<sup>14</sup>

*Strategies.* Models, knowledge, attitudes and ideologies are permanently formed, updated and changed by various types of mental operations, such as the basic processes of memory search, retrieval, (de)activation, as well as the more complex mental 'work' involved in interpretation, inference, categorization and evaluation. Unlike the 'fixed' rules of grammar, we assume that these operations are 'strategic'. That is to say, they are on-line and tentative - but also fast, goal-oriented, context-dependent, parallel (operating at several levels) and using different kinds of (often incomplete) information at the same time.<sup>15</sup> Strategic understanding of a news report involves the fast activation of relevant scripts or attitudes. It also entails making (and correcting) guesses about the meaning (or the functions) of a whole text or a whole sentence even when we have only read part of it (for example, the headline or the first words). Other strategic processes include the formation or updating of a mental model related to the meaning of a news report; or the formation of scripts or attitudes from models. All mental operations that define the relations between discourse, cognition and society discussed below have such a strategic nature.

### The Discourse-Cognition-Society Link

This brief review of the architecture of the social mind implies that all links between discourse and society are mediated by social cognition. Social structures of dominance can only be reproduced by specific acts on the part of dominant group members, and such acts are themselves controlled by social cognition. Thus elite discourses such as news reports about ethnic affairs influence societal structures of ethnic dominance through socially shared representations of dominant group members about ethnic minority groups and ethnic relations. Along both directions of influence, social cognitions provide the crucial interface. And discourse is in turn essential for the acquisition and change of social cognition.

Knowledge and beliefs about society in general, and about majority-minority group relations in particular, may also be acquired through social perception and the experiences of interaction.<sup>16</sup> Majority group members may directly observe the appearance and 'behaviour' of minority group members, and such experiences may also contribute to more or less biased social representations about minority groups.<sup>17</sup> But appearances and behaviour can only be understood on the basis of social cognitions. It is well known, for instance, that 'racial' differences are social constructions or representations, and not objective, observable facts. This *a fortiori* is also the case for the perceived cultural differences that underlie much modern racism-ethnicism. The same is true for the evaluative, biased interpretation of minority behaviour in terms of stereotypes and prejudices.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, prejudice and discrimination by majority group members do not presuppose direct contacts with or observations of minorities. Indeed, much modern racism can be understood as 'symbolic'.<sup>19</sup> Much of what most majorities know and believe about minorities is acquired through discourse and communication. <sup>20</sup> In sum, any approach to the study of how racism is reproduced must account for shared social representations, but it must also account for discourse as a major means whereby social representations are acquired, shared and confirmed.

In present-day Western societies most of what white people know or believe about ethnic relations is derived from the media - from news, TV programmes, movies, advertising and literature - that is, from discourse being produced by the symbolic elites.<sup>21</sup> These elites in turn acquire much of their ethnic information and beliefs from other media discourse and from political, scholarly and other elite discourses. Their views are acquired only marginally from independent 'observations' or from non-elite sources, such as interviews or eyewitness reports of 'ordinary' white people.<sup>22</sup> Elite discourses are therefore the major source of information

and opinions about ethnic affairs. This is also true, indirectly, for the sources of everyday conversation on ethnic affairs, which are also largely based on information from the mass media. It follows that since discriminatory (inter)actions are based on models shaped by social cognitions, and since such models and social cognitions about ethnic affairs are partly derived from (elite) discourse, then elites play a prominent if not 'exemplary' role in the reproduction of racism.

#### Consequences of Social Representations

If ethnic dominance presupposes socially shared cognition, and if the acquisition of social representations on ethnic affairs largely depends on discourse, then the next question is: how exactly does discourse influence such representations? Instead of talking about vague 'influences' or about unspecified processes of persuasion, we need to spell out the various cognitive strategies that underlie discourse comprehension, processes of inference, and the formation and change of social representations as a result of these processes. Such an account presupposes an analysis of the various structures of discourse that may be specifically effective in the (trans)formation of social representations. Since, conversely, discourse may also express or otherwise 'code for' underlying social representations, such an analysis partly answers the complementary question of how social representations are most effectively expressed in text and talk about ethnic affairs.

There are a vast number of properties of discourse that may have a potential effect on the formation, change or confirmation of social representations. Instead of examining all of these discourse properties, I shall reason 'backwards', highlighting some of the processes involved in social cognition, and then try to predict theoretically which discourse structures are particularly relevant in affecting these processes.<sup>23</sup>

We have seen above that social representations, such as knowledge scripts, attitudes and ideologies, may be derived from event and context models. This happens through processes of abstraction, generalization and decontextualization. Individual knowledge and opinions about particular events are transformed into socially shared scripts about stereotypical episodes and thus into white group attitudes about ethnic minority groups or their prototypical members. Without further discussion of the precise cognitive processes involved, we can assume that the formation of social representations is facilitated by one or more of the following conditions, among others:

1. The resulting social representations can be subsumed by an ideological framework that reflects the interests of the group.



2. There are social representations that have similar contents and structures.
3. The structures of the models are similar to those of the social representations.
4. Members are repeatedly confronted with similar models.
5. The models are consistent with other knowledge and beliefs, that is, they are plausible and hence acceptable.
6. The authors of the discourse (as represented in the context model) are thought to be reliable and credible.

Let us examine these conditions in somewhat more detail by applying them to news reports and models on ethnic events.<sup>24</sup> If it is in the interest of the dominant group that minority group members should have less access to valued social resources, then the attitudes controlled by such a self-serving ideology should feature specific opinions that are consistent with or even conducive to the realization of such a goal. For instance, if competition for scarce resources is represented as being inconsistent with such interests, then competition needs to be avoided, and such an opinion may in turn require the development of the social opinion that large-scale immigration generally enhances competition. Similarly, if unemployment is assumed to be inconsistent with one's interests, and if unemployment is seen to result from immigration, then immigration may be evaluated negatively. If foreigners have already immigrated, then the same valued resource (to get the best possible job) may be 'protected' by finding 'good reasons' why minorities should have less access to such jobs. Such reasons may for instance consist of the ethnic prejudices that minorities are less qualified, that they are lazy, that they do not have the right job mentality, have a different culture and hence are less comfortable to work with, and so on.<sup>25</sup>

In sum, given a specific ideological framework, for instance that of nationalism or ethnocentrism, attitudes are favoured whose opinions support the interests (goals, values) embodied in such a framework. This means that special attention is paid to those models that allow 'self-fulfilling' generalization towards such attitudes. For example, events might be subjectively interpreted to show that, indeed, a specific minority worker was unqualified, did not cooperate, or did not have the required work ethic.<sup>26</sup> Similar relations between models and attitudes may be assumed for many other social domains, such as housing, education, welfare and safety. In other words, prejudiced ethnic attitudes will tend to feature those opinions about ethnic minorities that pertain to the conditions of their equal access to social resources and models are selected or constructed in such a way that such opinions are supported.

When such an attitude has already been developed for groups such as

Turks, Moroccans or Mexicans, it is relatively easy to develop similar ones for other immigrant groups. With the exception of the identity of the main actors, structures and abstract contents of the new attitude can simply be 'copied', whether or not relevant models support such attitudes. This is precisely the characteristic property of prejudices; they are negative attitudes about ethnic minorities that are not supported by models; or, as we shall see below, they are based on biased or insufficient models.

We may also assume that the internal structures and contents of attitudes are easier to derive from models that rather closely resemble them, for instance if the model itself features general opinions (such as 'Minorities are less qualified') or event representations that allow such an opinion as an obvious inference. Indeed, the very inference relations between more general and more specific social opinions that define ethnic attitudes may be expressed in discourse itself as generic statements ('Minorities are less qualified', 'Minorities do not speak our language well', 'Minorities have less education'). Such is typically the case in argumentative discourse. Similarly, specific opinions about minorities, for instance about their assumed lack of competence, are facilitated if they are found to be consistent with other, already present social opinions or knowledge (for example, 'Minorities generally have less education').

Whereas attitude formation is facilitated by specific models, these models themselves also need to meet certain conditions. First of all, they must be found to be subjectively credible. That is, they should in principle not be blatantly inconsistent with other known facts, that is with other models. In cases of inconsistency, special operations of discounting must be applied to make this comparison less compelling. This is indeed what happens in prejudiced understanding of discourse. Credibility may thus be superseded by the 'fit' of a model with respect to a more general attitude. If young black males are assumed to be specifically violent or criminal, then stories that illustrate such attributed properties will be more easily believed than stories that are inconsistent with such an attitude. We may assume that those models are most effective that are both consistent with general attitudes, and feature facts or arguments that experientially buttress the negative opinion about a particular event. The same is true for the credibility of the writer (journalist, newspaper). A liberal quality newspaper reporting negative 'facts' about minorities will be more credible, at least for liberal readers, than an explicitly xenophobic right-wing tabloid.

For similar reasons of generalizability, models must feature actors that have prototypical properties. Thus, in models about crime, drugs, mugging or violence, a young black male is more prototypical than an elderly woman from India, who may in turn be more prototypical for a story about poverty. The same is true for majority actors, who need to be

represented in such a way that many whites can identify or sympathize with them. Generally, then, credible ethnic models should clearly mark the difference between (positive) US, and (negative) THEM, feature prototypical actors, and stereotypical episodes in familiar settings. This facilitates their comprehensibility, and also enhances their plausibility, acceptability and generalizability. But stereotypical episodes may be so common that they are less remarkable and hence less memorable. For models to serve as the basis for storytelling in processes of informal, conversational sharing, it is necessary that the events are interesting, relevant and remarkable. Besides conditions on mental models, we may also have conditions on stories and more generally conditions on 'effective' discourse.

#### *Discourse structures*

From these preferred structures of models and social representations, we can speculate about the properties discourses, such as news reports, should have in order to facilitate credibility, acceptability and the formation of social representations that are consistent with ideologies underlying the reproduction of racism in society. Theoretically and methodologically, however, it should be emphasized that the very complexity of these relationships and conditions does not allow determinacy. News reports that have such preferred structures do not always have such socio-cognitive 'effects'. Rather, such consequences are general and structural. In many communicative contexts they facilitate specific cognitive processing and hence social functions. Equally crucial are the existing attitudes and ideologies of the readers. The same stereotypical news stories may be read 'oppositionally' by some groups of readers, such as minorities themselves, whose ideologies do not favour the development of negative prejudices about minorities. On the contrary, their judgement may reflect back on the journalist or the newspaper as indicative of prejudiced reporting.

With this caveat in mind, let us examine some examples of news structures that facilitate the formation of 'preferred' ethnic situation models as specified above.

*Topics.* The meaning of discourse can be described at two levels: the local (micro) level of word and sentence meanings; and the global (macro) level of topics. Topics, theoretically represented as the propositions that form its semantic macro-structure, embody the most important information of a discourse, and play a vital cognitive role in production and comprehension. They define the overall (global) coherence that assigns the necessary 'unity' to a text. Topics are sometimes directly expressed in

discourse, as is the case with headlines and leads (defining the summary) of news reports. Topics express the most important (highest-level) information of mental models, and are also used by the readers to build such models. In a sense, topics may be seen as subjectively 'defining the situation'; what is topical information in a news report influences the most important information in the readers' model of a news event.

In news about ethnic affairs topics define the ethnic situation and may also manipulate the ways the readers interpret the news event. Thus urban disturbances by young blacks may be defined as a 'race riot' in the main topic (as expressed, for example, in the headline) and focus on irrational violence, instead of defining it as an act of protest, or as a form of resistance. Since deviance and violence of young blacks are stereotypical elements of racist prejudices, such models are relatively easy to generalize or may confirm existing prejudices. Similarly, other important topics in the text may be downgraded (for example, poverty, discrimination, police harassment) while relatively unimportant ones are upgraded - via strategies that are controlled by the ethnic representations of the journalist. Depending upon the social representations of the reader, of course, suggested topics of news reports may well be transformed into different topics: minority readers or white anti-racists may find quite different information important in a given news report and may disregard the persuasive topical structure of the news report.

Models are more easily generalized as social representations when they are repeatedly used, as may be the case for models about minority crime. This does not mean, however, that majority group members do not form prejudiced attitudes on the basis of only one or two experiences. Research on news about ethnic minority news shows that crime is indeed one of the most frequent topics.<sup>27</sup> The same is true for news about immigration, cultural differences and race relations, which are also major topics in everyday conversations and reflect the frequency and the prominence of these topics in the media. Less stereotypical topics, such as the contributions of minorities to the economy, the arts or political organization, are relatively rare. This leads to less well-established and less complete models, which in turn may impair more neutral knowledge and belief formation about minorities.

In sum, special topics may indirectly play a role in the formation of social beliefs about minorities: by their influence in the formation of the (easily retrievable) higher levels of models, as well as by their frequency. Socially speaking, special topics do not merely express the individual models of a reporter, but also the generalized, shared models and social representations of journalists and newspapers as institutions, as well as of their elite sources. This is why frequent ethnic topics often reflect the major interests and concerns of white elites.

*Schemata.* The global meaning of a discourse, as represented in topics, is usually organized by fixed, conventional categories that form an over-all text schema or superstructure. Just like stories or arguments, news reports in the press also have such a schema, featuring such conventional categories as Summary (Headline + Lead), Main Event, Backgrounds (History + Context), Verbal Reactions and Comments (Evaluation + Expectations).<sup>2g</sup> Such a schema also defines the canonical order of the topics and their corresponding text fragments in the news report, although topics in news may be discontinuous: the information organized by a topic may be delivered in various 'instalments', by placing the most important information first and the details last.

Although formal text schemata do not carry meaning as such, the presence, absence or order of specific categories may well be significant and influence the structures of models and hence social representations. We have already seen above that it matters which topics are expressed in the Headline category and which topics are not expressed. Similarly, information in the Background category usually facilitates interpretation of a current news event (expressed in the Main Event category) by providing information about causes or the socio-political context. If a report on minority unemployment does not specify in a Background category that unemployment may also be due to discrimination, then readers may build partial, if not biased, models of minority unemployment events, which in turn may affect their social representations of this issue. This is indeed often the case: news about minorities often lacks a Background category, or only focuses on negative characteristics attributed to minorities, thereby often blaming the victim. Similarly, 'Verbal Reactions' may tend to feature quotes by white officials.

*Local Meaning.* Whereas topics and news schemata define the global level of news reports, we also need to pay attention to the local meanings of actually expressed words and sentences (propositions) and their immediate relations. One important notion at this level is (local) *coherence*. Subsequent sentences (or rather the propositions they express) are coherent under two conditions: (1) extensionally, when they denote facts whose mental representations are related in the mental model of the text (for example, by relations of cause, condition or time); and (2) intentionally, when a proposition has a specific function relative to another, usually previous, proposition (for example, a specification, generalization, example, contrast). Hence coherence relations as they are expressed in the text tell us something about the structure of news events as represented in the model of the journalist. Coherence relations in news reports may also suggest relations between the facts that do not actually exist. In news about ethnic affairs we may expect, for instance, biased coherence markers that

suggest preferred explanations for ethnic issues, such as unemployment. For instance, the use of a clause like 'because of their lower education levels' may suggest that lacking education is the (only or main) cause of unemployment. Thus a news report in a British tabloid emphasized that a white club owner, convicted of discrimination against a black singer, had several times been mugged by black men. Mentioning such a 'psychological cause' may be interpreted as an excuse in this case. As we have seen earlier for the schematic category of Background, such local forms of biased, subjective coherence strategies may influence the structure of models, and hence that of social representations of minorities.<sup>29</sup>

Another prominent property of local meaning is *implicitness*. Models usually embody much more information about an event than speakers or writers would usually express. This is because such information is assumed to be already known by the recipients, or because the information is contextually irrelevant or uninteresting, or because the recipients can infer such information from the information that is expressed. Semantically speaking, discourses are tips of the icebergs of information represented in their underlying models, of which most information remains implicit in the text. For news about ethnic affairs we may predict that precisely that information remains implicit that will reflect positively on minorities and negatively on the majority. The same is true for the *presuppositions* signalled by a news report, which may suggest that some fact is generally known, even if such a fact does not exist. If newspapers, following conservative politicians, claim that 'This tolerant country cannot admit more refugees', then such a statement presupposes that 'our country is tolerant', an opinion that is controversial at best. Suggested implications are a powerful while indirect way of influencing the structures of models.

Events may be described with more or less *details* and at more or less general or specific *levels of representation*. In the news, important, relevant or otherwise newsworthy information is described with more detail and at lower levels of specificity. In line with the predictions formulated above, we may expect more detail and more specifics for those topics that are consistent with stereotypes and prejudices, such as crime, violence, deviance or cultural differences, and less for white prejudice, discrimination and racism, as is indeed the case.

Finally, the functional relations between propositions in discourse may also have a more strategic nature. That is, they may be moves, or local 'steps', in a global discourse and interaction strategy. Characteristic moves in discourse about ethnic affairs are disclaimers, such as Apparent Denial ('We have nothing against the black community, but . . .'), or Apparent Concession ('The Turks have a very rich culture, but . . .'). Such semantic moves on the one hand contribute to the overall strategy of positive self-presentation of the white group and its members, while at the same time

preparing a move that has a function in the strategy of negative other-presentation. Such strategic moves may have a strong influence on readers' models of ethnic events, because they allow readers to develop negative opinions about minorities without feeling guilty of racism. The model, thus structured, does not violate the social norms of tolerance.

*Style.* At the level of word choice, we may also observe *stylistic* uses that have an impact on the formation of opinions in mental models. In the press, the choice of lexical items to describe people, actions or events depends on the opinions, attitudes and ideology of the journalist, as in the familiar pair 'freedom fighter' vs. 'terrorist', for which Reagan's discourses about Nicaragua were a well-known example. Similarly, we may expect, and do indeed find, that although overt abuse of minorities is no longer common in contemporary news reports, at least in the quality press, minority groups, and especially young black males and their actions tend to be described by more negative words (such as 'mobs'). Similarly, minority 'disturbances' will usually be described as a 'riot' in the right-wing press. For anti-racists in Britain, the right-wing tabloid press has an impressive list of terms of abuse, routinely featuring 'mobs of activists', 'snoopers' and the like, but also concoctions such as 'unscrupulous or feather-brained observers', 'rent-a-mob agitators', 'blinker tyants', or 'left-wing crazies', among others. The opinions that such lexical items code for are obvious, as are those preferred in the models of the readers. The reverse is true for the news coverage of the police and for (white) 'law-abiding citizens', who tend to be praised or described neutrally, if not as victims of black violence or crime. Again, frequent repetition of such terms may soon confirm the negative opinions they express, and such models may be easily generalized to very negative attitudes about the 'intolerance' of the anti-racist 'brigade'. Conversely, words such as 'racism' will either be totally avoided or at least be put between quotation marks, or will be down-toned to weaker terms such as 'discrimination', 'bigotry', 'xenophobia' or simply 'resentment'.

*Syntax.* The formal structures of sentences may also be used to express and persuasively convey a biased model of ethnic events. Prominence of news actors or their actions, as well as the perspective of their account in the news, may be coded by word order. For instance, it has often been shown that minority actors tend to be placed in early sentence-topical positions, i.e. as syntactic subject and as semantic agent, if they are engaged in negative actions (for example, 'Black youth involved in tape case'). The converse is true for majority actors. Their negative agency may be played down by leaving it implicit, say in a passive sentence (for example, 'Black youths beaten up by police', or 'Blacks beaten up'), or by nominalizations

(‘Blacks victims of aggression’).<sup>30</sup> Typically, syntax codes for semantic relations as well as for the perspective or the prominence of specific relations as represented in underlying journalistic models. Syntactic structures may thus also subtly influence the representations of ethnic events in the models of the readers, for instance by emphasizing or de-emphasizing agency and responsibility for positive or negative actions.

*Rhetoric.* Of the many other properties of news discourse, we should also mention those of rhetoric, such as alliteration, metaphor or hyperbole. As is the case for all formal structures, these do not have direct semantic interpretations. However, rhetorical structures are used to attract attention, to highlight, to emphasize, or to de-emphasize specific meanings of discourse. Thus propositions about negative properties of minorities may be highlighted (and hence be better processed and better recalled) by rhyme, alliteration, repetition, or hyperbole, as is the case in the British tabloid press. On the other hand, negative propositions about majority actors will typically be understated and played down in many rhetorical ways. Such formal structures invite specific semantic interpretations, focusing on specific properties of models and stressing the relevance of specific ethnic opinions represented in such models.

### Conclusions

Discourse structures express structures of mental models, which are related to more permanent social representations such as knowledge, attitudes and ideologies, which in turn are the shared ways groups and cultures represent their goals, interests, concerns, structures or institutions. An analysis of the position of discourse ‘in’ society needs a cognitive interface. Institutions, social structures, group relations, group membership, power, dominance, at the macro level, as well as structures of situations and interactions at the micro level of society, can only be expressed, marked, described, enacted or legitimated in discourse through their representations in attitudes, scripts and mental models of events. The same is true for the way discourse affects the social situation, speech participants, as well as broader social structures.

Analysis, therefore, must always be that of discourse-cognition-society. In such a triangle of relations, both discourse and cognition are not merely linguistic or psychological objects, but also inherently social. Social cognition is acquired, used and changed in social situations, and discourse is one of the major sources of its development and change. No social actions or practices, and hence no group relations of power or dominance, are conceivable without social cognition and discourse.



Although virtually all of the humanities and the social sciences have paid attention to some of the links involved, these have either been studied too superficially or have neglected vital relationships.

In my examples of how racism is reproduced through news discourse, I have highlighted some of the relations between discourse, social cognition and society. Discourse plays a prominent role in the reproduction of racism defined as ethnic group dominance. Ethnic dominance, especially of white elites, may be enacted by limiting and controlling active or passive access to discourse, genres or communicative events. Minority journalists and writers thus have much less access to the media, and hence to news reports, than comparable white groups, elites or institutions. They also have less access to such resources as press offices and press conferences. They tend to be seen as less competent, less reliable and (hence) as less newsworthy. As a consequence, their activities and opinions are less covered, and they are less quoted, which in turn influences the readers' models for ethnic events. These models, then, are necessarily partial, imbalanced and organized by a white group perspective. Thus structures of dominance, as enacted in the routines of news-gathering and news-writing, are represented in the mental models of journalists, which in turn influence the structures and the meanings of news reports.

Detailed discussion of some of the structures of these news reports shows that such structures may in turn lead to preferred mental models of ethnic events. On the whole, such models tend to represent minorities negatively, and the dominant group as positive or neutral. If these models meet a number of other conditions, such as *structural resemblance*, *plausibility* or *prototypicality*, they may be generalizable to socially shared prejudices, which in turn represent the ideological level of racism. Thus, through these social cognitions, discourses may contribute to the reproduction of racism in society. Structures and strategies of news manipulate model-building of the readers and indirectly manufacture the ethnic consensus. Discourse topics (such as crime, deviance, violence or cultural differences of minority groups) define the ethnic situation, and what information should have a prominent position in mental models. News schemata may further organize such topics in ways that make some events more prominent, and others less prominent, such as negative properties of the majority, primarily intolerance, prejudice and racism. At the level of style, rhetoric and local meanings, negative properties of minorities may be emphasized, in such a way that models easily 'fit' or confirm existing stereotypes or prejudices.

While being able to variously code and enact relations of dominance, or other social structures, through the social minds of group members, discourse may in the same way also reproduce such dominance. It does so by affecting the models and social representations of social members, which

in turn monitor social actions and interactions that 'implement' dominance. At the macro level, discourse thus indirectly conditions the group relations, organizations and institutions that define social structure. Research in the near future should focus on the more subtle and complex of these relationships between discourse, cognition and society.

### Notes

1. See e.g. J. M. Atkinson and J. Heritage (eds), *Structures of Social Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); D. Boden and D. H. Zimmerman (eds), *Talk and Social Structure: Studies in Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).
2. See, however, the early pleas for a cognitive sociology by A. V. Cicourel, e.g. in *Cognitive Sociology* (Harmondsworth, Middx.: Penguin, 1973).
3. T. A. van Dijk, 'Social cognition and discourse', in H. Giles and R. P. Robinson (eds), *Handbook of Social Psychology and Language* (Chichester, Sussex: Wiley, 1990), pp. 163--83.
4. For details see e.g. S. Lukes (ed.), *Power* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).
5. T. A. van Dijk, 'Structures of discourse and structures of power', in J. A. Anderson (ed.), *Communication Yearbook 12* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1989), pp. 18-59.
6. T. A. van Dijk, 'Discourse, power and access', in D. R. Caldas-Coulthard (ed.), *Critical Discourse Analysis* (London: Routledge, forthcoming).
7. For background, see the contributions to K. Knorr-Cetina and A. V. Cicourel (eds), *Advances in Social Theory and Methodology: Towards an Integration of Micro- and Macrosociologies* (London: Routledge, 1981).
8. For further details and discussion see R. M. Farr and S. Moscovici (eds), *Social Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); R. S. Wyer and T. K. Srull (eds), *Handbook of Social Cognition* (3 vols; Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum).
9. For detail see T. A. van Dijk and W. Kintsch, *Strategies of Discourse Comprehension* (New York: Academic Press, 1983).
10. See A. Garnham, *Mental Models as Representations of Discourse and Text* (Horwood: E. Halstead Press, 1987); P. N. Johnson-Laird, *Mental Models* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); T. A. van Dijk, 'Cognitive situation models in discourse processing: the expression of ethnic situation models in prejudiced stories', in J. P. Forgas (ed.), *Language and Social Situations* (New York: Springer, 1985), pp. (1-79; T. S. van Dijk, 'Episodic models in discourse processing', in R. Horowitz and S. J. Samuels (eds), *Comprehending Oral and Written Language* (New York: Academic Press, 1987), pp. 161-96.
11. R. C. Schank and R. P. Abelson, *Scripts, Plans, Goals, and Understanding: An Inquiry into Human Knowledge Structures* (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1977).
12. For a recent social psychological discussion of the attitude concept, see e.g. J. R. Eiser and J. van der Pligt, *Attitudes and Decisions* (London: Routledge, 1988).

13. See van Dijk, 'Social cognition and discourse'; J. C. Turner, *Social Influence* (Milton Keynes, Bucks.: Open University Press, 1991).
14. A different social psychological approach to ideologies is the rhetorical theory proposed by Billig and his associates, see e.g. M. Billig, *Ideology and Social Psychology* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982); M. Billig, *Ideology and Opinions* (London: Sage, 1991); M. Billig et al., *Ideological Dilemmas* (London: Sage, 1988).
15. van Dijk and Kintsch, *Strategies of Discourse Comprehension*.
16. L. A. Zebrowitz, *Social Perception* (Milton Keynes, Bucks.: Open University Press, 1990).
17. D. L. Hamilton (ed.), *Cognitive Processes in Stereotyping and Intergroup Behavior* (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1981).
18. D. Bar-Tal, C. F. Graumann, A. W. Kruglanski and W. Stroebe (eds), *Stereotyping and Prejudice* (New York: Springer, 1989).
19. J. F. Dovidio and S. L. Gaertner (eds), *Prejudice, Discrimination, and Racism* (New York: Academic Press 1986).
20. See S. Jäger, Brandsätze, dissertation, Duisburg, 1992; T. A. van Dijk, *Prejudice in Discourse* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1984); T. A. van Dijk, *Communicating Racism* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1987); T. A. van Dijk, *Racism and the Press* (London: Routledge, 1991); R. Wodak, P. Nowak, J. Pelikan, H. Gruber, R. De Cillia and R. Mitten, 'Wir sind unschuldige Täter', in *Studien zum antisemitischen Diskurs im Nachkriegsösterreich* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1990).
21. See e.g. P. Hartmann and C. Husband, *Racism and the Mass Media* (London: Davls-Poynter, 1974); van Dijk, *Racism and the Press*; C. C. Wilson and F. Gutiérrez, *Minorities and the Media* (Beverly Hills, Calif./London: Sage, 1985); Wodak et al., 'Wir sind unschuldige Täter'.
22. T. A. van Dijk, *Elite Discourse and Racism* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1993).
23. There is a vast literature in cognitive and social psychology, as well as in interpersonal and mass communication, about the ways speakers influence or persuade their audiences. See e.g. R. N. Bostrom, *Persuasion* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1983); A. H. Eagly and S. Chaiken, 'Cognitive theories of persuasion', in L. Berkowitz (ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology; Vol 17* (New York: Academic Press, 1984). Our discussion focuses only on a few often neglected aspects of these acts and processes, viz. on the relations between specific structures and specific properties of (social) cognition.
24. For the research results see van Dijk, *Racism and the Press*.
25. For details on such ethnic ideologies and attitudes see e.g. J. P. Fernandez, *Racism and Sexism in Corporate Life* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1981); R. Jenkins, *Racism and Recruitment: Managers, Organizations and Equal Opportunity in the Labour Market* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); van Dijk, *Elite Discourse and Racism*.

26. M. Snyder, 'On the self-perpetuating nature of social stereotypes, in D. L. Hamilton (ed.), *Cognitive Processes in Stereotyping and Intergroup Behavior* (Hillsdale, NJ Erlbaum, 1981), pp. 183-212.
27. van Dijk, *Racism and the Press*.
28. T. A. van Dijk, *News as Discourse* (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1988).
29. For more detailed analysis of examples of similar elite 'explanations' of minority unemployment in the media as well as in political and corporate discourses see: van Dijk, *Elite Discourse and Racism*.
30. See e.g. R. Fowler, B. Hodge, G. Kress and T. Trew, *Language and Control* (London: Routledge, 1979); R. Fowler, *Language in the News: Discourse and Ideology in the Press* (London: Routledge, 1991).

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