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Post-Foundational Ontology

Many of today’s discourse analytical approaches have either been inspired by structuralist social and linguistic theories (e.g. Foucaultian Discourse Analysis, Governmentality Research, SKAD and so forth) or have emerged as reactions to the inconsistencies identified within structuralist theorizing (e.g. Critical Discourse Analysis; Discourse Analysis after Structuralism; PDA and so on). Generally speaking, these different positions toward structuralist thought have given rise to “structuralist” and “post-structuralist” discourse theories. However, this juxtaposition of structuralism and post-structuralism is misleading because most of the so-called post-structural discourse theories also operate within the general epistemic horizon of structuralism. Take for instance PDA, an analytical approach commonly referred to as a paragon of post-structural discourse analysis. As subsequent chapters will illustrate, PDA does not move beyond a relational ontology of meaning, which constitutes the ruling principle of structuralism (cf. Deleuze, 1992; Stäheli, 2000b, p. 16). Instead, PDA is based upon the assumption that an object’s conceived meaningfulness can only originate from the discourse – that is the relational arrangement of meaning-conveying objects – in which the so-called practices of articulation locate this object.

Instead of maintaining the erroneous and misleading distinction between structuralist and post-structuralist (discourse) theories, it may be more appropriate to follow the examples of Culler (1982) and Frank (1984) and distinguish between “strong” and “weak” types of structuralist thought. Strong and weak types of structuralism differ with regard to their assumption of the extent to which socially meaningful reality can solely originate from relations between meaning-conveying objects. According to Culler (1982, p. 48), weak structuralism is characterized by the assumption that it is not relations as such, but the cultural codes,
social norms, rules and the like, which motivate these relations, that are in the last instance responsible for the production of meaning. For Frank (1984) and Said (1983), Foucault’s discourse theory (e.g. 2002; 1981) and Geertz’ theory of culture (e.g. 1973a) are two cases in point of weak structuralism. Foucault regarded discourses *qua* meaning-generating relational arrangements of meaning-conveying objects to reflect their very condition of possibility constituting objectivated and reified discursive rules. Further, Foucault considered the non-discursive material context of the discourse to consist of institutions, infrastructures and relations of power, mechanisms of social control, and so on (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983, pp. 143ff.; Marttila, 2013b, §6; Said, 1983, p. 212). In weak structuralism these contextual circumstances located beyond discourses and discursive practices are conceived of as regulating and sustaining the distinctions between valid and invalid conceptions of the world (Frank, 1984, pp. 225f.; cf. Foucault, 2003, p. 47; 1981, p. 61).

The strong type of structuralism – most tangible in Derrida’s theory of deconstruction (e.g. 1981b [1967]), Lacan’s psychoanalytical theory of social identities (e.g. 1977a, 1977b), Luhmann’s theory of social systems (e.g. 1985) and Laclau’s post-foundational discourse theory (e.g. 1996a, 1996b, 1990a) – rejects the possibility that an object’s social meaningfulness could be the result of anything other than this relational arrangement of meaning-conveying objects, which engenders meaningfulness. In contrast to Foucault and Geertz, Derrida (cf. 1997[1967], p. 158; 1981b[1967], p. 26) postulates that only the text *qua* relational sample of meaning-generating entities can figure as the origin of meaning (cf. Derrida, 1997[1967], p. 158; 1981a[1972], p. 26). While Foucault (e.g. 1981; cf. Marttila, 2013a, pp. 36ff.) set discourse into a derivative relation vis-à-vis the non-discursive realm and Geertz (e.g. 1973a) identified empirically visible cultural formations to reflect underlying cultural codes, Derrida postulated that a text’s conditions of possibility cannot be located outside the text (Said, 1983, p. 212). These distinctions between weak and strong types of structuralism are of crucial relevance for the analysis presented in subsequent chapters because PDA’s theoretical apparatus and the analytical strategies it motivates make sense only in relation to the critique of weak structuralism. Laclau (1999, p. 146) points out that while the weak or “classical” structuralist theory presupposes “the possibility of closure of all social meaning around a matrix which can explain all its partial processes”, the strong structuralist (here: post-structuralist) position typical of PDA underlines “the impossibility of closing any context”. It is this openness and dissolubility of any particular social order derived from the strong structuralist ontology