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Discourse According to Foucault

French philosopher and social theorist, Michel Foucault, wrote “The Order of Discourse” to express the value of discourse and how it is organized. He divides his piece into sections of his main ideas about discourse. His moves throughout his piece outline the ideas that discourse may follow, which include procedures of exclusion, both external and internal, then finishes with the imposing rules and restricting access of discourse. So what is discourse? Discourse is a language of expertise expressed by the language of a community. It is meant to keep communities together. Communities support the discourse, funding power to it, which keeps non-communities members out.

Discourse has an order that can influence our behavior. Sometimes discourse can be created in order to form a sense of disorder. The external procedures of exclusion include key terms such as prohibition, reason and madness, and the concept of true and false. Prohibition is when discourse uses a forbidden topic or language that may not be accepted by the community. This can be commonly seen in the media. Recently, when the United States and Great Britain sent airstrikes onto Libya, the news refused to call this attack a “war” on Libya. This may have been done to avoid chaos or peoples’ fears that are experienced when this language is used.

Reason and madness is another form of external exclusion that Foucault explains in his piece. In society, we tend to label people on whether they are crazy or reasonable, and based on that, we choose how we understand the information presented by that individual. Foucault examines this concept by using a metaphor of a madman during the Middle Ages.

Foucault states, “It was through his words that his madness was recognized; they were the place where the division between reason and madness were exercised, but they were never recorded or listened to” (1461). During this time period, when someone categorized as a madman would speak, his words were ignored, and considered “null and void” (1461). Society tends to value reason rather than madness. Though many times, it is the madman who has beneficial information to offer.

The order of discourse recognizes that people have a strong will to truth. Foucault supports his idea by noting, “This will to truth, like the other system of exclusion, rests on an institutional support; it is both reinforced and renewed by whole strata of practices...[it] tends to exert a sort of pressure and something like a power of constraint on other discourses (1463). Foucault would agree that truth is believed due to power of a discourse community. This institution has specific values it believes, and bases their arguments on these “truths”. There is evidence that is presented in discourse that may falsify an idea, forming the realities. Ani DiFranco does this in her poem “Self-Evident.” She simply states what she sees as imperfections and misconceptions in our nation, and replaces these with her version of the truth when she argues, “#1 george w. bush is not president, #2 america is not a true democracy, #3 the media is not fooling me” (445). DiFranco does this with opposition to the governmental and media actions taken during 2001.

Foucault then moves to explain the internal procedures of exclusion. He develops this idea by explaining that discourse may utilize commentary, the significance of an author, and the organization of discipline of the specific discourse. Commentary is the way in which we decide to make a remark on discourse. This is a principle of discourse that keeps it stable and supported. The discourse community is able to justify it using commentary.

Referring back to the idea of truthfulness in discourse, who the author is can help influence to this. They are the person who lends and supplies the ideas of truth. Though

sometimes it does not have to be a specific person, as Foucault states, the author could be derived from “everyday remarks”, “decrees or contracts”, or “technical institutions” (1465).

The last idea of internal procedures is the organization of disciplines of discourse.

Departments and specialties help to divide and organize the knowledge. This organization helps to better classify how the discourse community is represented.

The final part of the order of discourse that Foucault references is imposing rules and restricting access. This includes speech rituals, societies of discourse, doctrinal groups, and social appropriations. Speech rituals can cause disorder or order. These are the actions that surround the discourse. This may include “gestures, behavior, circumstances, and whole set signs which accompany discourse” (1468). The doctrinal groups include the people interested in the “doctrine” of the discourse. As Foucault states, “Doctrine binds individuals to certain types of enunciation to bind individuals amongst themselves, and to differentiate them by that very fact from all others (1469). Individuals find similarities within the doctrine, forming a unity within that discourse’s community. A social appropriation is when someone “steals” the knowledge of discourse groups for their own use. This knowledge can be used as an opposing group, forming counter hegemonic discourse. This is when discourse is used in an unintended way.

Foucault recommends that we “have to only think of the whole framework of knowledge through which we decipher...and the whole network of institutions which permit someone...to listen to it” (1462). It is useful to recognize when prohibition is used in discourse, so that one may be able to be an outsider observing a discourse, rather than someone easily trapped into the community.

Language is a way in which people express their thoughts, beliefs, and values. Power is not embodied, but rather is displayed by discourse. The whole discourse community maintains that power. Discourse is dynamic. It is based upon a community of users that are

supporting the expertise of others. Foucault's "Order of Discourse" is his way of expressing the different aspects of discourse. These aspects may be used in order to dissect a discourse from an outside perspective in order to understand its purpose in the discourse community.

Works Cited