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# Deconstructing Political Discourse. An Approach Influenced by the Theories of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida

## Dekonstrukcja dyskursu politycznego. Podejście pod wpływem teorii Michela Foucaulta i Jacquesa Derridy

**Abstract**

Discourses and texts used in political speeches or in everyday conversations consist of a compilation of sentences that lack inherent significance and hence acquire meaning by their association with other phrases. These expressions are crucial in shaping both political identity and social consciousness. For instance, Foucault concurred with Derrida on this matter, characterizing discourses as utterances generated by humans to attain meaning. Despite their conflicting perspectives, both individuals agreed that the interpretations of conversation and texts are subject to change, and that a definitive meaning is unattainable. While Derrida and Foucault may not be explicitly discussed together or within the same context, this essay aims to highlight the complementary nature of their perspectives on language and meaning.

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**Streszczenie**

Dyskursy i teksty używane w przemówieniach politycznych lub w codziennych rozmowach składają się z kompilacji zdań, które pozbawione są wrodzonego znaczenia i dlatego nabierają znaczenia poprzez skojarzenie z innymi wyrażeniami. Wyrażenia te mają kluczowe znaczenie w kształtowaniu zarówno tożsamości politycznej, jak i świadomości społecznej. Na przykład Foucault zgodził się w tej kwestii z Derridą, charakteryzując dyskursy jako wypowiedzi generowane przez ludzi w celu osiągnięcia znaczenia. Pomimo sprzecznych perspektyw obie osoby zgodziły się, że interpretacje rozmów i tekstów mogą się zmieniać i że ostateczne znaczenie jest nieosiągalne. Pomimo że Derrida i Foucault różnią się od siebie, celem tego eseju jest podkreślenie komplementarnego charakteru ich perspektyw na język i znaczenie.

# Introduction

Both proponents of linguistic structuralism and advocates of anthropological structuralism agree on the fundamental conclusion that meaning is holistic. Saussure's theory of meaning revolved around the concept of binary oppositions between signifier and signified. Conversely, Claude Lévi-Strauss contended that all cultures had binary oppositions. Essentially, the notion of "good" only has significance when juxtaposed with the concept of "evil." Derrida's deconstruction model acknowledges the existence of binary oppositions but asserts that the meanings they convey are not fixed and that both the writer and the reader have the ability to generate meaning. Based on Derrida's methodologies, contemporary linguistic research strongly posits that the distinct language patterns seen in individuals vary from those that occur in interpersonal interactions. Consequently, the discipline–including philosophy, politics, and culture–has begun to investigate and elucidate its findings through the use of linguistic frameworks influenced by the concept of linguistic shift. Due to its significance, language is seen as both a tangible being and a dynamic occurrence. Derrida's wide adoption of the deconstruction technique is the most prominent expression of this phenomenon. The shift shown here serves as a perfect example of how language enables us to perceive and examine certain political or ideological discourses or texts. Moreover, this demonstrates the diverse range of terms used to describe identical political or philosophical issues across different languages. This study investigates the linguistic technique of deconstruction and its ability to create multiple meanings and narratives. Moreover, it discusses the possible impact of these explanations on cultural viewpoints and their political consequences. Hence,

the primary aim of this work is to provide unambiguous and exact explanations of the terminologies. Moreover, I want to demonstrate the reasoning and methodology that form the foundation of distinct social concepts by using language patterns that are not frequently recognized.

## Discourse as a Tool for Power–Knowledge Dilemma

To commence, I shall cite *Discourse in Context: Contemporary Applied Linguistics* by John Flowerdew as the preeminent source for the elucidation of discourse in this particular segment. In Flowerdew, discourse might mean two different things: a lower case *d* to denote discourse, which stands for language outside of the context of individual sentences and Discourse with an upper case *D*, which is as a structure that encompasses a wide range of things, encompassing thoughts, interpersonal interactions, and knowledge[1]. First, according to Flowerdew's arguments, discourse–an organized system of ideas, information, or speech that affects our experience of the outside world–is necessary for the development of our social position via understanding, knowledge of the truth, and identity. Due to its integration into many areas of the humanities and its function as a linguistic element in a wide sense, discourse has been the focus of research by several other researchers. For instance, in sociology, discourse is defined as any practice (found in a wide range of forms) by which individuals imbue reality with meaning[2]. Since discourse goes beyond words, it has been the subject of substantial investigation in many branches of social science, including philosophy, literature, and politics. These fields use language as a prism through which to assess and understand the various difficulties. Scholars of politics, for instance, have shown that speech is inseparably related to policymaking and politics. Various narratives emerge when someone or some group is called a terrorist compared to a freedom fighter. Furthermore, philosophers from both modern and post-modern schools have endeavored to formulate unique perspectives on matters like metaphysics or culture by considering discourse, which encompasses language and its inherent patterns.

Modernist thinkers aimed to enrich culture while maintaining their belief in universal and foundational principles that might be universally embraced to

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[1] J. Flowerdew, *Discourse in Context: Contemporary Applied Linguistics*, Bloomsbury 2014, p. 1.

[2] J. Ruiz, *Sociological Discourse Analysis: Methods and logic*, "Forum Qualitative Social Research" 2009, p. 2.

advance knowledge and enhance one's comprehension of reality. Modernist philosophers were deeply committed to the exploration of truth and reality, and they diligently endeavoured to formulate conceptions that were clear and consistent. Consequently, modernist intellectuals acknowledged language as a practical means of communication. Linguistic development is driven by two key factors: the creation of novel concepts and the need for an exact lexicon to express distinct thoughts and viewpoints. Within the context of modernist ideology, language and discourse are deemed intrinsic outcomes of development or reasonable usage, differentiating them from authority and dogma. Jacques Lacan and Ferdinand de Saussure, for example, maintained that speech is the basis of all human interactions and that the basic ideas that define society are interrelated. This implies that structures are independent and adaptive entities, and that the importance of an entity's components is best understood within the context of the whole structure.

The origin of postmodern philosophy may be attributed to its reaction to the inherent limitations of modernism. The postmodern philosophers actively debated and challenged the theories put out by modernist researchers, who held the belief that one set of ideas could comprehensively account for all aspects of existence. In contrast, postmodernist theorists placed more importance on diversity rather than common traits and experiences that existed among individuals. They emphasized on the diverse range of interactions that are available to individuals and groups. This variety of contacts demonstrates a higher degree of flexibility in comparison to modernist philosophy. This is because it recognizes the individuality of people while simultaneously questioning the norms that are generally accepted in society. Postmodernists argue that language goes beyond simply reflecting its underlying structure. It is argued that knowledge and truth are not objective entities, but rather products of dynamic systems that encompass various perspectives and are subjectively perceived. As a result, scholars in the postmodern era have initiated an analysis of the various discourses present in literature, phrases, laws, and practices.

Language, according to postmodernists, is self-referential because it has conceptual sovereignty. The work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure was influential in developing this concept. According to this perspective, the meanings of words are not rigid concepts residing solely in one's mind or in the physical realm[3]. Instead, they are fluid and can be understood through various compari-

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[3] S. Best, D. Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*, Macmillan 1991, p. 21.

sons and contrasts with other words. The meanings are not fully available to either the speaker or the listener, but rather they are deferential, meaning they are inter-related and reliant on each other. Self-description is present in all languages, including natural languages[4]. Nevertheless, some groups or traditions possess distinctive discourses that are firmly embedded in societal norms and reflect the concepts, principles, and beliefs of that particular group. Jacques Derrida, a French philosopher and literary theorist, who is widely recognized as the pioneer and leading figure in the field of deconstruction and Michael Foucault, whose theories mainly deal with the relationships between power and knowledge, and how language is utilized for the purpose of social control, have significantly contributed to the postmodern comprehension of language and discourse[5].

In analysing discourse, Foucault, the philosopher who simultaneously challenged modernist thinking and popularized postmodern philosophy, employs the following terms: an entity of sequences, of signs, in that they are enounce-ments (énoncés)[6]. The statement, or l'énoncé in Foucaultian terminology, is a linguistic construct that enables the writer and speaker to give phrases meaning and to convey recurrent semantic links to, among, and between the assertions, objects, or topics of the discourse[7]. The propositions or themes of the conversation exhibit latent interconnections via the use of signals, or semantic patterns. Discourse tend to be formed by both spoken and written expressions that have semantic interactions, which are recognized and explained by the concept of discursive formation. Foucault meticulously examined enormous quantities of information through the use of linguistic constructions and emphasizes that discourse serves as a method for society to establish and maintain current facts, while also revealing the power dynamics between these built truths.

In accordance with Foucault's standpoint, every interpersonal interaction represents a manifestation of power, since power necessarily arises and both produces and limits the reality. Discourse, also known as mechanisms of marginalization, serve to uphold power by determining the topics and methods of communication that individuals are allowed to discuss, as well as who is included or excluded from participating. Foucault used the phrase *power-knowledge* to illustrate how

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[4] P. Brooker, *A Glossary of Cultural Theory*, Arnold 2003, p. 205.

[5] J. Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern. A History*, London 1995, p. 7–75.

[6] M. Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, New York 1972, p. 49, 135–140; see also: M. Foucault, *The Order of Discourse*, in: *Untying the Text. A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. R. Young, Boston 1981.

[7] Idem, *Archaeology*, p. 134–145.

an experience might serve as a central point inside a structure of concepts, demonstrating that knowledge serves as the basis and the generation of power[8]. In the critique of *power-knowledge*, Foucault, for example, identified Neo-liberalism as an idealistic discourse on capitalism that has theoretical similarities with the nature of governance, or the organized practices that submit individuals to authority.

As discourse represents a linguistic interaction consisting of phrases and the interpretations we attribute to them, then texts, as per the perspective of structuralisms, do not possess fixed meanings. Words and writings, whether pertaining to culture or history, remain subject to constant fluctuations in interpretation. Contextual interpretation prompted by structuralism assumed that the meaning of the text resided inside it. Opponents attacked this approach on the grounds that texts are unable to dictate the interpretations that the audience and listeners form. Texts are considered polymorphic when they have the potential to be interpreted in several ways. The processes involved in readers comprehending the significance of a book are of more significance for the cultural understanding of books than the text itself[9].

Derrida is a staunch believer in the need of comprehending language for context or in the belief that semantics are rarely indicative of the true nature of things. Cultural studies have borrowed Derrida's core ideas, such as *contextualization*, *uncertainty*, *deconstruction*, *differance*, and, *trace*, which all highlight the precariousness of meanings and how it may be delayed via the interplay of texts, writing, and traces. In this context, words are not intended to refer to concepts with inherent characteristics or universal purposes.

The goal of Derrida's criticisms of *phonocentrism* and *logocentrism* is to disprove the idea that there can be any dependence on universal meanings, ideas, or logic that pre-exist other types of thought in human reason. Derrida challenges the notion that speech–which appears to have existed before writing–represents an all-encompassing transcendental truth that allows people to base oneself as their own authentic. Speech is prioritized because it is based on the implausible

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[8] E. Segev, *Volume and Control. The Transition from Information to Power*, "Journal of Multicultural Discourses" 2019, No. 14 (3), p. 240–257.

[9] Texts are said to be polymorphic when they have the capacity to be understood in a number of different ways. When it comes to the cultural comprehension of literature, the processes that readers go through in order to perceive the value of something are far more significant than the text itself. To read more: C. Barker, D. Galasiński, *Cultural Studies and Discourse Analysis. A Dialogue on Language and Identity*, New York 2001, p. 5.

notion that absolute and consistent meaning may be reached directly. This notion is false since one must be re-representing the truth in order to represent it, as it is maintained that truth exists outside of representation. In other words, truth and meaning cannot exist apart from representation. From the moment says Derrida, there is meaning there are nothing but signs. We think only in signs[10]. Since signs are a type of graphic representation, there is no initial meaning outside of them, meaning originates with writing. Without signs, or writing, we are unable to conceive of truth, knowledge, or the modern world. Writing is inherently a part of texts' outsides, and texts themselves are composed of their outsides. This is referred to by Derrida as *arche-writing*.

Since meaning is constructed via the interplay of signifiers rather than by reference to a definite existence, according to Derrida, it cannot be fixed. Some words, especially those that are similar to others but have different contexts of usage, might have more than one meaning. Meaning is ever-evaporating since language is not representational and is inherently unstable. Thus, by *differance*, a sense of difference and deferral is suggested. The generation of significance in the act of signifying is constantly postponed and enhanced via the interplay of several elements. The ongoing addition of significance, the continuous replacement and inclusion of meanings via the interplay of signifiers, undermines the notion that sounds and symbols possess permanent meanings. The signifiers' meaning can never be completely identical to a fixed item that a term refers to, since a supplement both adds to and replaces meanings.

Derrida is often associated with the deconstructionist movement. Deconstructing is the systematic disassembly and reversal of a text in order to identify and expose its underlying core assumptions. This entails deconstructing hierarchical dichotomies that are believed to create truth by eliminating and discounting the lesser portion of the binary, such as speech/writing, reality/appearance, nature/culture, and reason/madness. Derrida exploits the same theoretical vocabulary of Western philosophy to deconstruct and challenge the concept of a permanent and readily understood meaning, often known as the metaphysics of presence, in order to destroy Western philosophical dichotomies. Derrida highlighted this inherent contradiction via the use of the phrase *sous rature*, often

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[10] What Derrida wants to emphasizes is that signs become ubiquitous the instant meaning emerges. All we can think of is signs. This corresponds to dismantling the concept of the sign just as the fundamental right to its recognition as an urgent need is acknowledged, as in Nietzsche's work. To read more: C.E. Winquist, V.E. Taylor, *Postmodernism. Foundational essays*, London 1998, p. 340–343.

translated as *under erasure*. This refers to the practice of eliminating a word from a text while ensuring that its readability and place remain unaffected[11]. This contradiction may be shown by presenting it in a contrasting manner (writing before speech, surface before substance, etc.), but it cannot be removed or rebuilt. Suppressing a phrase is as simple as writing it down and then crossing it out, keeping both the original and crossed-out versions of the word. By portraying it as legitimate and incorrect, important and useful, the goal of using the notion of *under erasure* is to undermine conventional thinking. Derrida's goal is, thus, to reveal how meaning itself and metaphysical dichotomies are inherently ambiguous.

## Deconstructing Social and Political Discourses

The underlying tenet of deconstruction, then, is that no discourse, and thus no set of words or text carries a singular interpretation. This statement is first supported by the fact that no word is meaningful in and of itself. As there is no connection between the presence of a concept in the mind and the existence of a comparable thing in the physical world, there is no more connection between a sound and a specific notion or feeling. If words, pictures, ideas, and signs lack inherent meaning, the question naturally arises: from whence do they get their meaning? The response is derived from the relative association of words, concepts, or signals, or more broadly, from the surrounding context. Derrida identifies three distinct types of context: linguistic context, historical context related to the author and reader, and logical context based on the typical cognitive differences made by the human mind[12]. A word, then, must be seen or used in a phrase in order for its meaning to be understood. Derrida asserts that the meaning of a term is intricately tied to its linguistic and cultural environment, just as the interpretation of a discourse is contingent upon its cultural and political milieu. The present governor of Israel, for instance, may try using political discourse to portray a universal contention by stating that "Hamas is a terrorist group". The president's rhetoric remains essentially instructive to individuals who embrace comparable political ideologies. The sentence's significance transcends the limitations of grammatical rules. In other words, the explicit interpretation of a discourse is intricately linked to the linguistic choices, the characteristics of the

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[11] M. Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*, Georgia 1993, p. 32–34.

[12] C. Zuckert, *The Politics of Derridean Deconstruction*, Chicago 1991, p. 3.

audience and author, the cultural and historical context of the text's development, and the message itself. The Cold War confrontation between the United States and the Soviet authorities in Afghanistan is the most prominent example of this. The Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA), the Soviet Union, and associated paramilitary factions were involved in intense warfare against the Afghan the Taliban, and their foreign supporters, resulting in one of the most consequential wars of the Cold War. The mujahedeen militants in Afghanistan were somewhat being characterized as freedom warriors in Europe and America at that period. The Soviet Union was often depicted as an aggressor and a terrorist entity in textual materials, visual media, and political discussions. After four decades, the Soviets, namely Russia, have become a highly regarded and renowned country worldwide, while the mujahedeen have evolved into a terrorist organization. The readers will assess the message in relation to an additional context, perhaps further complicating their understanding of the text. The text is written in a language that existed before and independently. Hence, there is a continuously changing connection between text and context, where the meaning of neither entity stays fixed. Currently, Derrida's argument revolves around a historical interpretation that is widely accepted by other modern intellectuals. However, the post-modern philosopher's emphasizes one of its more radical implications, which is that the writer lacks complete control over or authority to determine the meaning of their texts.

Similar to Derrida, Foucault held a contrasting view to Structuralist approaches to language, which posit language as an independent system. Foucault's main focus is in delineating and evaluating the limits of discourse, together with the consequential impact of these limits within certain contexts and historical periods. Foucault argues that speech has the capacity to both generate and establish objects of knowledge, while also rendering alternative lines of reasoning unintelligible. In order to define and ensure distinct domains of knowledge or entities that need a certain framework of ideas, as well as to determine what he terms as a specific system of truth, he examines the conditions and standards that govern the combination and control of propositions. According to this concept, power determines the control over meaning, including the authority to speak, the timing and location of speech, and the permissible content within certain social and cultural contexts. Meaning does not propagate indefinitely in a state of perpetual postponement. Foucault's work extensively explores the historical examination of discipline and the formation of individuals via its authoritative power. For Foucault, the subject is not a stable universal entity but an effect of

discourse that constructs an *I* in grammar. Subjectivity is held to be a discursive production and the speaking subject is dependent on the prior existence of discursive subject positions, that is, empty spaces or functions in discourse from which to comprehend the world[13]. The contribution that Foucault makes is that the philosopher is able to shed light on the process by which power discourse gives birth to individuals who assimilate into, construct, and maintain the structure of society. His primary emphasis is on the difficulties that are associated with the allocation of power across society. The idea of the nature of government, which refers to the exercise of control over communities as well as the imposition of governmental regimes and disciplinary measures on people, is the most significant contribution that Foucault has made. This encompasses social reform, education, health, demography, criminology, and other regulatory processes that facilitate the categorization of a population into manageable segments. The theses of both Derrida and Foucault have provided an opportunity to reconsider certain controversial topics in the fields of political science and philosophy, especially those related to feminist politics and philosophy.

## The Discourse of being a Woman: Deconstructing Gender Identity

As previously mentioned, the basis of deconstruction is on the idea that no specific phrase, and hence no arrangement of letters or text can be accurately read in a singular manner. The idea is this: since the word is in accurate, or, rather, in adequate it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible[14]. The primary justification for this claim is that there is no one phrase that signifies anything independently. There is no necessary connection between a sound and a particular thought or sensation, just as there is no inherent link between the presence of a concept in the mind and the reality of a corresponding object in the real world. This is due to the fact that the two sets of concepts are not inherently interconnected. The obvious issue that follows is: where do words, pictures, concepts, and signs derive their meaning if they do not have any inherent significance? In relation to other words, ideas, or signs (or, more broadly, from a context), the correct response is context. Derrida, thus, distinguished between three types of context: linguistic, historical, and the logical differences often used by the human mind.

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[13] C. Barker, D. Galasiński, op.cit., p. 13.
[14] M. Sarup, op.cit., p. 32–34.

The significance of a term is best grasped when observed or applied inside a phrase, rather than when considered alone. Hence, to comprehend the significance of a sound, one must possess not only a general understanding of the term's meaning but also a basic grasp of grammar's fundamental laws, which govern the functioning of language as a whole. Consequently, the function of phrases is largely determined by the overall framework of the language, which itself is susceptible to change over the course of history or time. Thus, the semantic context serves as an indicator of the historical background, which is essentially composed of several sub contexts: the significance of a phrase varies somewhat with each use, depending upon the context in which it is employed.

A moral and an ethical obligation for those who identify as feminists, then, is to objectively assess and critique various types of political speech. For example, to make an effort to resolve the inconsistencies that we face in our institutions and in our interpersonal relationships by removing the vital element from almost every facet of our lives and by removing the grammatical structure of moral discourse. Because these competencies are vitally created by an established, daily vocabulary that is loaded with moral norms, if this were to occur, both sexes would be robbed of the capacity to analyze, evaluate, debate, and act. This is because these traits are produced by a language that is often used. For instance, there evidently has been significant scholarly attention given to the gender-neutral usage of terms such as *he* and *man*, which has raised considerable feminist concerns. It is widely acknowledged that these terms possess meanings that are specific to gender. Concerns of a feminist nature, on the other hand, extend beyond simple categorization. It has also been asserted by feminists that phrases such as *he* and *man* contribute to a context in which women are rendered invisible, which means that they obscure the significance of women and divert attention away from their very presence. The battle against the invisibility of women is an essential feminist effort in many different domains, and language that makes one less inclined to think about women is certainly a contributor to this invisibility. When people come across phrases that include the words *he* and *man*, there is strong evidence from the field of psycholinguistics that suggests they are more likely to think of men than they are of girls. Taking this into consideration, it is possible that the usage of these terms is one of the factors that contribute to the invisibility of women. Consequently, this provides feminists with a valid basis to oppose the usage of these terms in a gender-neutral manner.

To look at things from a broader perspective, feminists today easily recognize the significance of the attention given to detail and context in deconstruction

theory and technique, and thus, places an emphasis on specifics, particularly classes, ethnicities, sexualities, and other aspects. It focuses on the creation of gender identity in terms of social categories, carefully contextualizing the construction of gender identity. Therefore, it is possible to argue that both the theory and practice of deconstruction are advantageous to the feminist movement.

Deconstruction also highlights the historical connection between the contemporary goal of knowledge and the drive for control, that represents an essential aspect for feminism. This is where Foucault's impact has been most felt. As I have said before, Foucault's writings highlight the inseparable relationship between power and knowledge in contemporary society. It is risky and inadequate to see knowledge as only an unbiased mirror of reality since the growth of truth also means the growth of power. The primary significance of the Foucauldian power-knowledge problem is in its promotion of the perception of knowledge as possessing great authority. The concept that knowledge in and of itself has great power is a multifaceted sword. Power is crucial to the feminist purpose since it seeks to alter the societal status of women.

In this piece, I have argued that, from the point of view taken, language does not exist independently of the social context in which its speakers find themselves. Language does neither occur in a vacuum nor does it just reflect an existent reality; yet, it is an essential component of social existence. In this paper, I have attempted to demonstrate the interconnectedness of linguistics and social cognition by examining the ways in which speakers' discourse transmit social inequalities, both within and between languages.

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