

ARTICLE

Reclaiming discursive practices as an analytic focus: Political implications

Carol Bacchi and Jennifer Bonham, University of Adelaide

ABSTRACT: This paper has its genesis in concerns about the return to “the real” in social and political theory and analysis. This trend is linked to a reaction against the “linguistic turn”, on the grounds that an exclusive focus on language undercuts political analysis by refusing to engage with “material reality”. Foucault and “discourse” are common targets of this critique. Against this interpretation, the authors direct attention to the analytic and political usefulness of Foucault’s concept of “discursive practices”, which, it argues, has been much misunderstood. Discursive practices, as developed by Foucault, refers to the practices (or operations) of discourses, meaning knowledge formations, not to linguistic practices or language use. The focus is on how knowledge is produced through plural and contingent practices across different sites. Such an approach bridges a symbolic-material distinction and signals the always political nature of “the real”.

Keywords: Foucault, practices, knowledge, politics, materiality, ontology

This paper offers a close study of a key concept in Foucault’s analytic framework—discursive practices. The decision to undertake this task was prompted by the near ubiquitous use, in contemporary political and social theory, of discursive practices as a synonym for language use or linguistic practices, illustrated in these examples. The term appears in studies of rhetoric and political communication to focus on language use.¹ Many discourse psychologists use the term discursive practice/s to refer to linguistic usage.² The discourse scholar, Norman Fairclough, well-known for his development of Critical Discourse Analysis, defines “discursive

¹ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 179-180. Frank Fischer, “The Argumentative Turn: Policy Analysis as Discursive Practice”, in *Reframing Public Policy: Discursive Politics and Deliberative Practices*, Frank Fischer (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003), 181-203.

² See for example Jonathon Potter & Margaret Wetherell, *Discourse and social psychology: Beyond attitudes and behaviour* (London: Sage, 1987).

practice” as “the production, distribution and consumption of *texts*”.³ Even the renowned Foucauldian theorist, Michael Shapiro, refers to “linguistic or discursive practices”, as if they are one and the same thing.⁴ We could offer many similar usages.⁵

By way of contrast this paper develops the argument that the term “discursive practice/s” captures Foucault’s central analytic point that discourses are *practices* or, more specifically, sets of practices. In Foucault the term “discourse” refers to knowledge, what is “within the true”,⁶ rather than to language. His early project was to challenge the transcendental status of knowledge. To this end he showed how knowledge is formed in the interaction of plural and contingent practices within different sites, each of which involves the material and the symbolic. The term “discursive practice/s” describes those practices of knowledge formation by focusing on how specific knowledges (“discourses”) operate and the work they do. Hence discursive practices are the practices of discourses—which is why they are called *discursive practices*—rather than language in use or how people “*practise* discourse”, i.e.—write or speak.

To be clear we are not saying that there is only one, correct meaning of discursive practice/s. Instead, the perspective we develop builds on Tanesini’s suggestion that concepts and categories are not descriptive of anything; rather, they are “proposals about how we are to proceed from here” whose purpose is “to influence the evolution of ongoing practices”.⁷ In line with this thinking, we recommend the political usefulness of discursive practice/s, as developed by Foucault, as an analytic focus. In particular the aim is to show how the concept bridges a symbolic-material division and highlights the politics, the complex strategic situations,⁸ involved in the production of “the real”. To understand the significance of this argument requires some background on contemporary debates about language and “reality”, introduced in the following section.

Political/theoretical context

The last two decades have been characterized by a development in social and political theory commonly called the “linguistic turn”. This development is associated with a primary focus on language as central to the nature of lived experience. This focus has generated a reaction

³ Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Polity Press, 1992), 5, 73, emphasis added. Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The critical study of language*, 2nd ed. (Harlow: Longman, 2010).

⁴ Michael J. Shapiro, *Language and Political Understanding: The Politics of Discursive Practices* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 18, 127.

⁵ Gary Gutting, *Michel Foucault’s Archaeology of Scientific Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 102. Roxanne L. Doty, “Foreign Policy as Social Construction: A Post-Positivist Analysis of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy in the Philippines,” *International Studies Quarterly* vol. 37, no. 3 (1993), 257-302. Iver B. Neumann, “Returning Practice to the Linguistic Turn: The Case of Diplomacy,” *Millennium – Journal of International Studies*, vol. 31, no. 3, (2002), 627, 629.

⁶ Michel Foucault, “The Discourse on Language”, in Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, translated by A. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 224.

⁷ Alessandra Tanesini, “Whose Language?”, in K. Lennon and M. Whitford (eds.), *Knowing the Difference: feminist perspectives in epistemology* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 207.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1* (London: Penguin, 1978), 93.

among those who argue that the “linguistic turn” undercuts political analysis by making language a determining influence and by refusing to engage with “material reality”.⁹ Due to Foucault’s association with the term “discourse”, which in common parlance refers to speech, he is often linked to “linguistic determinism” and criticized for being concerned solely and simply with language.¹⁰ In recent work, Susan Hekman challenges this common view and positions Foucault as an ally of a direction in social analysis she calls the “new ontology”.¹¹ Hekman is clearly disillusioned with linguistic constructionism, which she treats as synonymous with social constructionism.¹² In particular she is concerned that a privileging of language leads inevitably to charges of relativism that undermine a viable defence of de-privileged social groups, such as women.¹³ In the place of “linguistic determinism” Hekman offers the work of a range of scholars who, in her view, resurrect “reality” to its rightful place, without lapsing into modernist conceptions of “the real”.¹⁴ This new ontology, she suggests, “rejects both the fixed ontology of modernity and the linguistic constructionism of postmodernism”.¹⁵

It is not possible in this paper to engage fully with Hekman’s argument. We wish, however, to signal the dangers of constructing overly simple categorizations of complex theoretical positions, such as social and linguistic constructionism, which (moreover) we do not see as identical. Our purpose is certainly not to defend “linguistic determinism”; however, we also have problems with the “new ontology”. We believe that there are nuances among those Hekman clusters under this rubric that deserve attention. Specifically we prefer Mol’s “ontological politics”¹⁶ to Barad’s “agential realism”,¹⁷ and see the former as more directly indebted to Foucault.¹⁸ Our reasons are given below.

⁹ Susan Hekman, *The Material of Knowledge: Feminist Disclosures* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), 2-3.

¹⁰ Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: the basics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 126.

See Robert Nichols, “Postcolonial Studies – the Discourse of Foucault: Survey of a Field of Problematization”, *Foucault Studies* no. 9 (2010), 111-144. Nichols describes how the later Edward Said and Aijaz Ahmad criticized Foucault for a kind of textual determinism. Edward Said, “Afterword”, in Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1995). Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory* (London: Verso, 1992).

¹¹ Hekman, 3.

¹² *Ibid.*, 2

¹³ *Ibid.*, 3, 63.

¹⁴ Hekman includes Bruno Latour, *We have never been modern*, translated by Catherine Porter (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), Joseph Rouse, *How Scientific Practices Matter: Reclaiming Philosophical Naturalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002) and Andrew Pickering, *The mangle of practice: time, agency, and science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

¹⁵ Hekman, 89

¹⁶ Annemarie Mol, “Ontological Politics: A word and some questions”, in John Law and John Hassard (eds.), *Actor Network Theory and After, Sociological Review Monograph* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).

¹⁷ Karen Barad, “Agential realism: Feminist intervention in understanding scientific practices”, in M. Biagioli (ed.), *The Science Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

¹⁸ Annemarie Mol is a seminal thinker within Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and the broader Science and Technology Studies. Along with Bruno Latour, John Law and Michel Callon, Mol challenges the self-evident fact of objects within the natural sciences much as Foucault has done in the social sciences. Mol makes explicit the political nature of selecting, preferring and prioritising some methodologies (modes of interference

Barad and Hekman want to insist on the necessity of bringing “the real” back into political discussions. They offer sophisticated analyses that in their view bridge the divide between language and materiality. Barad coins the term “*intra-action*” to overcome the way in which *inter-action* invariably keeps the elements “language” and “materiality” separate.¹⁹ Hekman finds Pickering’s concept of the “mangle” and Rouse’s term “disclosure” useful in conceptualising a new and complex vision of the elements that shape “reality”.²⁰ For Hekman (but not for Barad²¹), Foucault offers a similarly complex understanding of the nature of language-material “intra-actions”.

We beg to differ from this interpretation in one important respect. We do not see Foucault’s “history of the present” as revealing “a deeper understanding of the reality that is already there”.²² Indeed we find this phrasing problematic as it suggests a “reality” waiting to be understood—“there is a world out there that we understand”.²³ As we go on to show, Foucault illustrates how political practice *necessarily* “takes part” in the “emergence, insertion and functioning” of discourse, understood as knowledge, and hence in what is “real”.²⁴ Mol captures this perspective in the term “ontological politics”—the suggestion that there are multiple realities and that politics plays a pivotal role in the coordination of specific (singular) realities.²⁵ Foucault’s concept of discursive practices, which “combines materiality and language in a single configuration”,²⁶ fits this perspective. It tells us not what is “real” but how politics is always involved in the characterization and experience of “the real”.²⁷ Mol and Foucault, we believe, usefully identify the practices of coordination—the discursive

in materiality) over others, given they each provide different versions of reality. Mol, “Ontological Politics. A word and some questions”. See also John Law, “On Sociology and STS”, *The Sociological Review*, vol. 56, no. 4 (2008), 623-649, and Jonathon Murdoch, *Post-structuralist geography: a guide to relational space* (London: Sage, 2006), 59.

¹⁹ Karen Barad, “Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter”, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society. Special Issue: Gender & Science: New Issues*, vol. 28, no. 3 (2003), 815.

²⁰ Hekman, 22, 25, 129 fn 2. Pickering, *How Scientific Practices Matter*. Rouse, *The Mangle of Practice*.

²¹ Hekman and Barad clearly disagree on whether or not Foucault adequately bridges a linguistic-material divide. Karen Barad is ultimately disappointed in Foucault’s analysis whereas Hekman is much more enthusiastic. It would have been useful to see these differences discussed given that Hekman appears to endorse Barad’s “agential realism”. Karen Barad, *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 64-65. Hekman, 73-79.

²² Hekman, 51-52.

²³ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁴ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 163.

²⁵ Mol, “Ontological Politics: A word and some questions”, 75. Annemarie Mol, *The Body Multiple: ontology in medical practice* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), vii-viii.

²⁶ Annemarie Mol, *The logic of care: health and the problem of patient choice* (London: Routledge, 2008), 8.

²⁷ Hekman acknowledges that “[F]or Foucault, ontology is not a fixed given reality. ... Rather, it is a historical construct, a fluctuating and heterogeneous multiplicity”. However, she insists that “this does not detract from its reality or, indeed, from its materiality”, and that Foucault “never questions that the material reality is there to *be* disclosed”. Hekman, 58, 61, emphasis in original. By contrast we suggest that the primacy of politics in Foucault redirects attention from “reality” to how “the real” is produced.

practices—involved in the production of a singular reality or “the real” as a key analytic focus and target for political action.

The paper explores Foucault’s development of the concept, discursive practice/s, therefore, to dispute the equation of Foucault with “linguistic determinism”. We are concerned to both demonstrate the materiality in discursive practices and indicate the political usefulness of the concept Foucault spent such effort elaborating. Our goal is not to draw a close comparison between Foucault’s analysis and Barad’s or Hekman’s but to develop his larger claim—that politics is always involved in the production of “the real”. To this effect we illustrate how “discursive practices” challenges any notion of “the real” outside politics.

Meanings of discursive practice/s

We start from the rather contentious claim that Foucault had little invested in the concept of “discourse”. According to Cousins and Hussain, Foucault’s “use of the term discourse may be taken to be tactical. It may be thought of as an attempt to avoid treating knowledge in terms of ‘ideas’ ... The use of the term ‘discursive’ should be taken as no more (but no less) than an index of this attempt”.²⁸ Foucault’s biographer, Eribon, relates an incident that supports the proposition that Foucault used the term “discourse” tactically.²⁹ In the case he relates, Foucault altered the Preface to *Naissance de la clinique (Birth of the Clinic)*, when it was reissued in 1972, changing the words “structural analysis” to the words “the analysis of a type of discourse”.³⁰ He was concerned at the time to challenge the characterization of his work as a form of structuralism. Given that Foucault’s main preoccupation was the *practices* that install regimes of truth, we suggest that Foucault’s primary analytic category was not discourse, but “discursive *practices*”:

In earlier studies, we were able to isolate a distinctive level of investigation among all those approaches which permit the analysis of systems of thought: *the analysis of discursive practices*. This context discloses a systematic organisation that cannot be reduced to the demands of logic or linguistics.³¹

Part of the difficulty with the concept “discursive practice/s” arises from the different ways in which Foucault uses the term. On some occasions the term appears to imply active deployment of “discourse”. For example in a 1968 article Foucault refers to “that person’s discursive

²⁸ Mark Cousins & Athar Hussain, *Michel Foucault* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1984), 78.

²⁹ Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault*, translated by B. Wing (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991), 185.

³⁰ Michel Foucault, *Naissance de la clinique. Une archéologie du regard médical* (Paris: P.U.F. 1963). Michel Foucault, *Naissance de la clinique. Une archéologie du regard médical* (Paris: P.U.F., 1972a), xiv-xv.

³¹ Michel Foucault, “History of Systems of Thought, summary of a course given at Collège de France – 1970-71”, in Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, edited with an introduction by D. F. Bouchard, translated by D. F. Bouchard and S. Simon (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 199, emphasis added.

practice".³² This usage appears also in comments such as "the emergence of rules *proper to discursive practice*"³³ and "a setting-up of relations that characterizes *discursive practice itself*".³⁴ However, on other occasions, the term becomes a collective noun that describes a group of complex relations involved in knowledge formation. Most explicitly, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault describes a discursive practice as "a body of anonymous, historical rules".³⁵ Applying this meaning he later describes Marx and Freud as "initiators of discursive practices".³⁶ To make sense of these different usages it is necessary to become familiar with Foucault's project.

In the 1968 article mentioned above, Foucault explains that his project is to offer a "history of discursive practices".³⁷ Elsewhere in the same piece he notes that "It is the history of these 'things said' that I have undertaken to write" – "*what they say*, that little fragment of discourse—speech or writing, it matters little" –, and that he intended to write a "history of discourse".³⁸ Now we can certainly understand how comments like these could lead to the conclusion that Foucault was interested in language and how people use it. However, Foucault challenges the "idea of a sovereign subject".³⁹ Hence his focus is not on "what *people* say" but on "*what people say*", or, as he puts it, on the "things said". Moreover, it is not the "things said" in terms of their content or linguistic structure that interests him but the operation of a whole package of relationships, including symbolic and material elements, that make those "things said" legitimate and meaningful. Hence, the reference to "that person's discursive practice", mentioned earlier, refers to "what they say" but only in the broader context of the plural and contingent processes involved in producing *what they say* as "true".⁴⁰ It is this total package that is captured in the term "discursive practice". As Young remarks, what is analysed here is

not simply that which was thought or said per se, but all the discursive rules and categories that were a priori, assumed as a constituent part of discourse and therefore of knowledge, and so fundamental that they remained unvoiced and unthought.⁴¹

³² Michel Foucault, "Politics and the study of discourse", in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon & Peter Miller (eds.), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 58.

³³ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 49, emphasis added.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 46, emphasis added.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 117.

³⁶ Michel Foucault, "What is an author?", in Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, 131.

³⁷ Foucault, "Politics and the study of discourse", 64.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 63, 71, emphasis in original

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁴⁰ As Connolly argues, "'Untruth' is deeper than truth and falsity, then: untruth is that which cannot adhere sufficient standing within the terms of a discourse of a time without stretching contemporary standards of plausibility and coherence to their limits of tolerance." William E. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 5.

⁴¹ Robert J. C. Young, *Untying the text: a post-structuralist reader* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), 48.

Foucault specifies that he wishes to study the “things said” (*what* people say), “at the level of their existence”, “precisely as they were said”.⁴² To refer to “these ‘things said’”, Foucault uses the word “statements”. To encourage us to think about “statements” “at the level of their existence”, Foucault describes them as “events” or “monuments”, giving statements an intrinsic materiality.⁴³ The next section of the paper, with its accompanying diagram, defends this claim. First, however, it is necessary to map out Foucault’s project in more detail.

As Foucault explained in 1968 (see above), his interest is in the *history* of “things said” (“discursive practices”). His purpose is to understand how—on what basis—it is possible to say certain things. Put in other words, he wishes to explore how “things said” could be “in the true”—accepted as “knowledge”. In his analytic framework “knowledge” is (simply) “that of which one can speak in a discursive practice”, as illustrated in this quotation:

This group of elements, formed in a regular manner by a discursive practice, and which are indispensable to the constitution of a science, although they are not necessarily destined to give rise to one, can be called *knowledge* [*savoir*]. Knowledge is that of which one can speak in a discursive practice ... there is no knowledge without a particular discursive practice; and any discursive practice may be defined by the knowledge that it forms.⁴⁴

This position clearly challenges any sense of knowledge as transcendental. Knowledge is (simply) what it is possible to say “within the true”.

Foucault clarifies that what *is* said is not all that *can* be said. “What *can* be said” is taken as all those things that would be linguistically or logically correct. And these are virtually infinite. Foucault is not concerned with these but rather he is interested that, given the sheer volume of what could be “correctly” said, only a small proportion is *actually* said. It is this bit—the small bit that is actually said—that interests him. “Discourse”, he argues, “is constituted by the difference between what one could say correctly at one period (under the rules of grammar and logic) and what is actually said”.⁴⁵

This is a vital point as it dismisses language and logical propositions to concentrate on mechanisms of refinement—practices which “work upon or shape” what is said. It is in this space between *what can be said* (grammatically or logically) and *what is (actually) said* that mechanisms, procedures and processes are at work. Foucault’s target consists of those mechanisms, procedures and processes, which he calls “rules of formation”. These rules “at a given period and for a given society define ... [T]he limits and forms of the *sayable*”.⁴⁶ Asking, as he does, “What is it possible to speak of?”⁴⁷ provides a novel and powerful form of political analysis: “to show not how political practice has determined the meaning and form of medical discourse, but how and in what form it [political practice] takes part in its [medical dis-

⁴² Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 109.

⁴³ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 27. Foucault, “Politics and the study of discourse”, 60.

⁴⁴ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 182-183, emphasis in original.

⁴⁵ Foucault, “Politics and the study of discourse”, 63.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 59, emphasis in original.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

course's] conditions of emergence, insertion and functioning", an analysis that extends to other discourses (knowledges).⁴⁸

To analyse the "conditions of emergence, insertion and functioning" of knowledge, Foucault identifies four rules of formation described in relation to the formation of objects, subjects, concepts, and strategies or theories. He dedicates a chapter to each of these themes in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.⁴⁹ The rules of formation delineate how "discourse" (or knowledge) "relates to" non-knowledge "conditions" (or non-discursive practices), such as the position of certain individuals who are better placed than others to appropriate the "property of discourse".⁵⁰ In his most explicit formulation of the meaning of "discursive practice", Foucault makes a direct link between discursive practice and the rules of formation:

what we have called "discursive practice" can now be defined more precisely. ... it is a *body of anonymous, historical rules*, always determined in the time and space that have defined a given period, and for a given social, economic, geographical, or linguistic area, the conditions of operation of the enunciative function.⁵¹

On the frequent occasions when Foucault refers to "a discursive practice" he is talking about *one specific* "body of anonymous, historical rules", also described as a "set of regularities".⁵² The reference earlier to Marx and Freud as "initiators of discursive practices" signals Foucault's conviction that each of their theoretical contributions, as "things said", involves a distinct and distinctive set of rules of formation.

Discursive practice therefore refers simultaneously to the "things said" and to the rules that explain how it becomes possible to say (or know) certain things—"the rules governing a knowledge".⁵³ This simultaneity is possible because Foucault's "rules" are not principles of organization or structures,⁵⁴ but *sets of relationships*, "a complex group of relations that *function as a rule*".⁵⁵ Applied to the first of his rules of formation, he explains: "When one describes the formation of objects of a discourse, one tries to locate *the relations that characterize a discursive practice*".⁵⁶

As sets of relations, the "rules of formation" do not stand outside discursive practice, shaping what people say. Instead, they are "immanent" in the practice of *what* people say (discursive practice), not "extrinsic" to discourse "but, on the contrary, its formative ele-

⁴⁸ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 163.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, Chapters 3 through 6.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 68. See below "Rethinking non-discursive practices".

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 117, emphasis added. See the next section for elucidation of the concept of the "enunciative function".

⁵² See, for example, Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 48, 182.

⁵³ Cousins & Hussain, *Michel Foucault*, 94.

⁵⁴ Compare Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change*, 57.

⁵⁵ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 74, emphasis added.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 48, emphasis added.

ments”.⁵⁷ This insistence on the “immanence” of the rules of formation represents Foucault’s resistance to the proposition that outside “interests” manipulate people’s “ideas”, a resistance indicated by his rejection of the term “ideology”.⁵⁸ Just as there are no subjects *using* discourse in Foucault, nor are there subjects or “interests” *shaping* discourse, reflecting Foucault’s opposition to humanist conceptions of the subject.⁵⁹

Identifying the rules of formation as immanent within a discourse allows Foucault to make his strongest claim—that “discourses” need to be thought of *as practices*: “discourse is a complex and differentiated practice subject to analyzable rules and transformations”.⁶⁰ He often uses the term “discourse” to refer to specific knowledge forms, such as “psychiatric discourse” or “clinical discourse” (see below). In the 1968 article referred to earlier he names as discourses, and sometimes as discursive formations, “mathematics”, “biology”, “psychopathology”, “political economy”, “general grammar”, “medicine, economics, the human sciences”.⁶¹ Therefore, as Hook says, discourse in Foucault refers to knowledge/s, not to language.⁶² However, crucially, discourses are not “things”; they are *practices*.

The term “practice” is a critical focus in Foucault’s work, explaining his popularity among scholars across many disciplines who subscribe to the “practice turn”.⁶³ Practices are understood “as places where what is said and what is done, rules imposed and reasons given, the planned and the taken for granted meet and interconnect”.⁶⁴ Starting from “what is said”

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 46, 68. As Veyne says, “Foucault’s philosophy is not a philosophy of ‘discourse’ but a philosophy of relation”. Paul Veyne, “Foucault Revolutionizes History”, in Arnold I. Davidson (ed.), *Foucault and his Interlocutors* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 177.

⁵⁸ Colin Gordon (ed.), *Michel Foucault: Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, translated by Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 118.

⁵⁹ B. Brown & M. Cousins, “The linguistic fault: the case of Foucault’s archaeology”, *Economy and Society*, vol. 9, no. 3 (1980), 269. While we clearly agree with Hook’s argument that “Foucault’s conception of discourse is situated far more closely to knowledge, materiality and power than it is to language”, we would dispute that Foucault is looking to identify “the motives and operations of power-interests”. Derek Hook, “Discourse, Knowledge, Materiality, History: Foucault and Discourse Analysis”, *Theory & Psychology*, vol. 11, no. 4 (2001), 531, 542. See also Edward Said, *The world, the text and the critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 212, on “interests”.

⁶⁰ Foucault, “Politics and the study of discourse”, 71.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 55, 56, 65.

⁶² Hook, 542.

⁶³ Here we contest Neumann’s view that in discursive practices “discourse” is the “privileged concept”. Neumann, “Returning Practice to the Linguistic turn”, 629. On the “turn to practice” and the related concept, performativity, see J. Eveline and C. Bacchi, “Power, resistance and reflexive practice”, in Carol Bacchi and Joan Eveline (eds.), *Mainstreaming Politics: Gendering Practices and Feminist Theory* (Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press, 2010), and Hekman, 13-14. It should be noted that there are theoretical differences in interpreting the “practice turn”; see for example C. Oswick, et al., “Discourse, practice, policy and organizing: some opening comments”, *Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, vol. 27, nos. 11/12 (2007), 429-432, and Barbara Simpson, “Pragmatism, Mead and the Practice Turn”, *Organization Studies*, vol. 30, no. 12 (2009), 1329-1347.

⁶⁴ Michel Foucault, “Questions of Method”, in Burchell, Gordon, & Miller, 75.

(“*what* people say”) Foucault highlights the mechanisms through which these “things said” operate, or work, to install regimes of truth (knowledge).

So, discursive practice, as a concept, designates the practices of *discourses* in the activation of the four rules of formation.⁶⁵ It refers, not to people practising “discourse” (i.e. language), but to how discourse (i.e. knowledge) operates through “rules that are its own”, rules “proper to” or immanent within discursive practice.⁶⁶ This point is supported by the way in which Foucault positions specific discourses as themselves engaged in working through the rules of formation:

Example 1: “In these fields of initial differentiation, in the distances, the discontinuities, and the thresholds that appear within it, *psychiatric discourse finds a way* of limiting its domain, of defining what it is talking about, of giving it [its domain] the status of an object—and therefore of making it manifest, nameable, and describable”.⁶⁷

Example 2: “Let us generalize: in the nineteenth century, psychiatric discourse is characterized not by privileged objects, but *by the way it forms objects* that are in fact highly dispersed”.⁶⁸

Example 3: “It can be said that this relation between different elements ... *is effected by clinical discourse: it is this, as a practice, that establishes between them all a system of relations*”.⁶⁹

In these examples, “psychiatric discourse” and “clinical discourse” are positioned as grammatical subjects. Hence, they become the focus of study. This makes it possible for Foucault to direct attention to the complex groups of relations immanent to what is “said” in psychiatry or clinical medicine, the sets of “anonymous, historical rules” that include and exclude certain things. Therefore, when Foucault refers to “the discursive practice of psychiatry”,⁷⁰ he is not referring to how psychiatry is practised “discursively”, through writing, speaking, producing texts within psychiatry. His interest is not language; rather, he is describing the practices of *psychiatry*, the operation of the sets of relations characteristic of psychiatry as an accredited form of knowledge.

To insist, as Foucault does, that discourse is a *practice* de-ontologises “objects”, undermining their foundations and politicising their formation:

⁶⁵ We are not attributing discourse with consciousness nor are we implying that “discourses as practices” determine outcomes.

⁶⁶ Michel Foucault, Pamphlet submitted to Professors of the *Collège de France*, 1969, cited in Eribon, 216. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 49.

⁶⁷ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 41, emphasis added.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 44, emphasis added.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 53-54, emphasis added. While Dreyfus and Rabinow puzzle over the meaning of this reference to “discourse ‘establishing’ a ‘system of relations’”, we argue that this is a clear exposition of the operations (practices) of discourse/s. Hubert L. Dreyfus & Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982), 65.

⁷⁰ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 75.

To define these *objects* without reference to the *ground*, the *foundation of things*, but by relating them to the body of rules that enable them to form as objects of a discourse and that constitute the conditions of their historical appearance.⁷¹

The emphasis here shifts from “real” things to the strategic relations that produce something as “real”. The political target, for example, is no longer how psychology or psychiatry controls or labels people but all the interconnected practices that give these knowledge formations authority.

Given, as we have seen, that Foucault distances himself from linguistic approaches, why is he so often associated with the “linguistic turn” and criticized for being a linguistic determinist? The fault is partly Foucault’s. While he asserts that the term “discourse” is understood quite differently in linguistic interpretation,⁷² he also admits that he uses the term in several different ways in his work—“treating it sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes *as a regulated practice* that accounts for a certain number of statements”.⁷³ He settles finally on the last of these meanings:

it [the system of formation] lays down what must be related, in a particular discursive practice, for such and such an enunciation to be made, for such and such a concept to be used, for such and such a strategy to be organized. To define a system of formation in its specific individuality is therefore to characterize a discourse or a group of statements by the regularity of a practice.⁷⁴

Discourse is a “regulated” practice in the sense that it is both regular and “rule like” through its routinization. Discursive practice/s are the rules or, more precisely, the routinized sets of heterogeneous relations among bodies, things, actions, concepts and so on, at work in the formation and operation of discourse, understood as knowledge. It is now time to explore how Foucault’s understanding of discursive practice/s bridges a symbolic-material division.

The materiality of statements: bridging the symbolic-material division

“The statement”, a key concept in Foucault’s understanding of discourse and discursive practices, is responsible for much of the confusion in interpreting him.⁷⁵ This confusion arises from the almost commonsensical view that statements are elements of speech. However, Foucault introduces the concept of “the statement” to refer to exactly *those things said—what people say*

⁷¹ Ibid., 47-48, emphasis in original.

⁷² For example Foucault, “Politics and the study of discourse”, 63. Gordon, *Michel Foucault: Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, 198.

⁷³ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 80, emphasis added.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 74. Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 400.

⁷⁵ Foucault describes discourse as “a regulated practice that accounts for a certain number of *statements*”. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 80; emphasis added,

or write—not as language, but as “monuments” or “events”.⁷⁶ Foucault described his approach to knowledge as *an archaeology*. Statements, therefore, are to be analysed as material artefacts, *at the level of their existence*. The focus is on how they have come to be, rather than on what they might mean:

The analysis of statements, then, is a historical analysis, but one that avoids all interpretation ... it questions them [statements] as to their mode of existence, what it means to them to have come into existence, to have left traces, and perhaps to remain there, awaiting the moment *when they might be of use once more*; what it means to them to have appeared when and where they did—they and no others... what one is concerned with is the fact of language (*langage*).⁷⁷

The reference to the “fact of language” does not indicate a linguistic analysis. By the “fact of language” Foucault means the actual existence of “things said” that makes them usable and able to have an impact through their use, a “function” that “requires if it is to operate ... a *materiality* (which is not only the substance or support of the articulation [of signs] but a *status, rules of transcription, possibilities of use and re-use*)”.⁷⁸ This description depicts the operation of the rules of formation that secure the status of “discourses” as knowledge.

Foucault insists that statements are concerned with neither language nor logical propositions; rather, statements have a materiality and a specific function in activating an entire field and its relations. He calls this their “enunciative function”. They have uses (see quote above) and make things happen—“to speak is to do something”⁷⁹—repeating Foucault’s central premise that discourses are practices. Examples of statements include a genealogical tree, population pyramid, accounts book, a constitution.⁸⁰ The particular instance of a statement—such as the Australian constitution or the population pyramid for India—is not the issue but the *active nature of the statement*: its activation of other statements and its location within specific routines of relations (see diagram).

For example, population pyramids activate registrations of births, deaths and border crossings, clinical observations, census collections and compilations of national statistics together with the sites, practices and things through which each of these statements is enacted.⁸¹ They function to call up and assist in the formation of a whole domain of objects—infant and maternal mortality, fertility rates, age cohorts, population distributions. The activation of statements confers authority on “what is said” and allows a range of things to be said that are “within the true”—population pyramids can be used at a range of spatial scales to make claims about people in particular localities. And, finally, statements prescribe subject posi-

⁷⁶ Foucault, “Politics and the study of discourse”, 60. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 27.

⁷⁷ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 109, emphasis added.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 115, emphasis added.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁸¹ Mol, *The Body Multiple*, 23-26. Young also provides an excellent example of the materiality of the statement in his description of the event of making a “police statement”. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, 402.

tions with important constitutive effects for their subjects. Borrowing from Foucault, a statement describes “the specific position of the enunciating subject”, the position of those who can make any particular statement.⁸² As Foucault says:

We will call *statement* the modality of existence proper to that group of signs: a modality that allows it to be something more than a series of traces, something more than a succession of marks on a substance, something more than a mere object made by a human being; a modality that allows it to be in relation with a domain of objects, to prescribe a definite position to any possible subject, to be situated among other verbal performances, and to be endowed with a repeatable materiality.⁸³

In this account, a statement “always has borders peopled by other statements”.⁸⁴

In the accompanying diagram⁸⁵ statements are recognized as artefacts that are formed through, and that form objects, subjects and places. They are of interest, not because of their meaning or content, but because of the role they play in installing networks of relations⁸⁶, which are necessarily political as they affect every dimension of how lives are lived. These relations or discursive practices are necessarily always productive of “the real”, identifying their operation as a target for intervention.

⁸² Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 94.

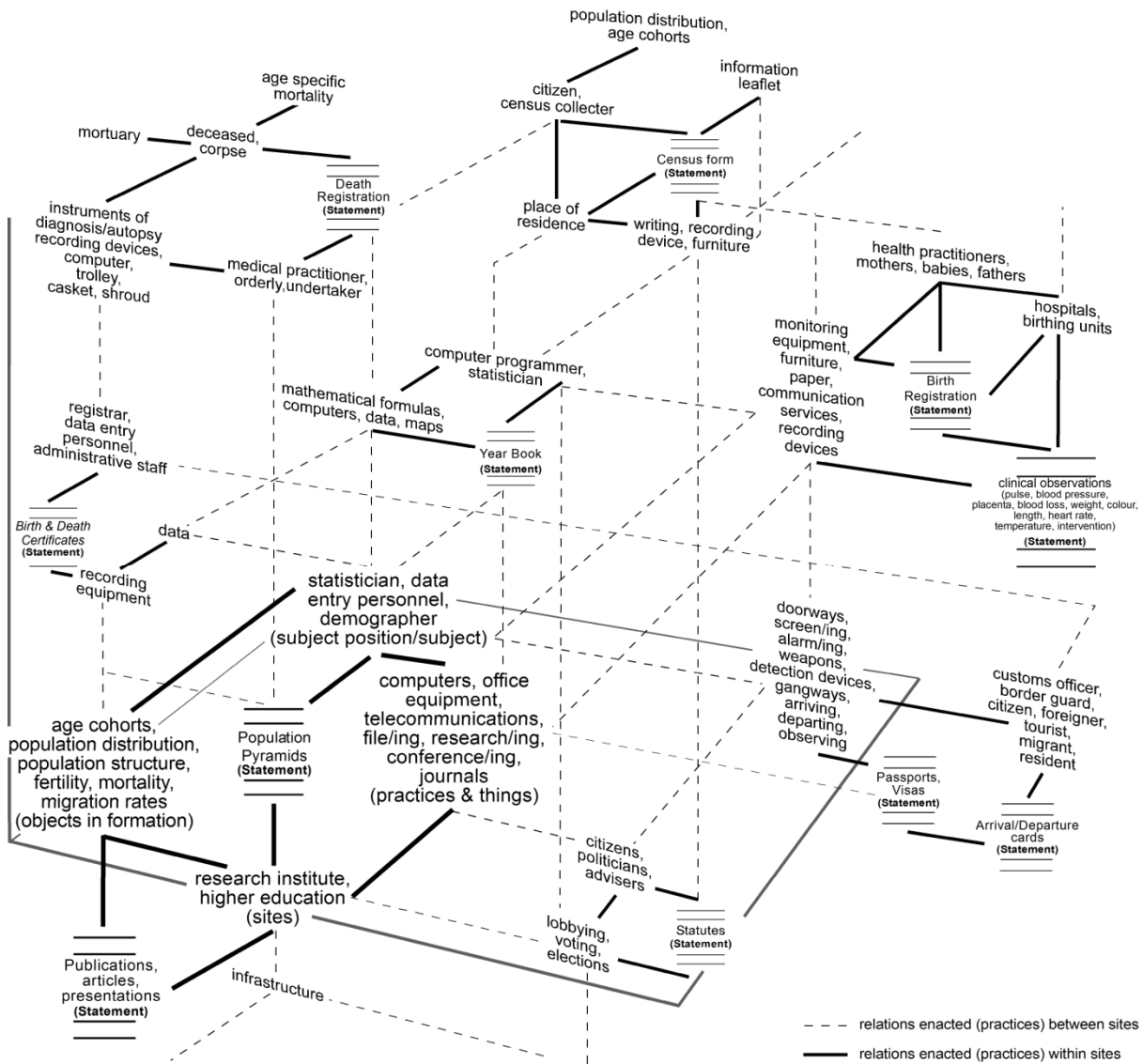
⁸³ *Ibid.*, 107, emphasis in original.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 97-98.

⁸⁵ The static nature of a two-dimensional diagram struggles to invoke the action, fluidity and potential variability of continually enacted relations. We offer the ‘Field of Dispersion of Population Statements’ as a best approximation of the network of relations which might apply to any field of statements.

⁸⁶ Mark Coté, *The Italian Foucault: Communication, Networks and the Dispositif*, unpublished Doctoral Dissertation (Canada: Simon Fraser University, 2007), 17.

Field of Dispersion of Population Statements



Note: 'Sites' are made up of networks of relations and include Practices and Things (actions, objects and interactions), some of which may be exclusive to particular sites while others may be common across sites. Technically, everything within a site is in continual formation but 'Objects in Formation' have been marked out to indicate specific objects formed within the field of population statements.

There is some debate as to whether “statements” are “speech acts”. In speech act theory, a comment like “I do” in a marriage ceremony has the effect of establishing a legal institutional relationship between two people. The focus on the way in which language does things indicates some similarity in the terms. Foucault conceded that statements are like “speech acts” in the broad sense that John Searle uses the term. He wrote to Searle:

I was wrong in saying that statements were not speech acts, but in doing so I wanted to underline the fact that I saw them under a different angle than yours.⁸⁷

The “different angle” is significant. As Cousins and Hussain note, speech acts are “restricted to language which the statement exceeds”.⁸⁸ The statement itself does not create meaning; rather, statements involve a network of rules, or sets of relationships, that determine what is meaningful. The statement therefore is explicitly concerned with the authority that can be conferred upon “what is said”. Statements are not important for the language used or for the content of claims made through them but for how they install the authority of being “within the true”. To question language in a Foucauldian way is to identify the rules that enable “speakers to be taken seriously”.⁸⁹

It follows that Foucault does not examine *all* that is said. Rather than focusing on “everyday” “utterances”, he concentrates his attention on the specific unities, or knowledges (“discursive formations”) that emerge within what is said. To ensure that readers recognize that Foucault was not interested in statements in general Dreyfus and Rabinow name “this atypical subset of statements” “serious speech acts”.⁹⁰ We prefer to retain the term “statement”, rather than “speech act”, because it maintains the focus on the function of the statement rather than slipping into an analysis of the meaning of what is said. We also suggest that it would be more accurate to identify Foucault’s target as “serious *knowledge* acts” rather than “serious *speech* acts” to highlight that Foucault’s concern is what must be taken-for-granted for statements to do their work. Dreyfus and Rabinow well recognize Foucault’s scepticism about contemporary knowledge forms, noting “he simply does not take serious speech acts seriously at all”.⁹¹ While agreeing with this assessment we would say that Foucault simply does not take knowledge “seriously” at all. That is not to say that knowledge is unimportant but its real importance is in *what can be regarded as knowledge* at any particular time. Indeed, Foucault’s purpose is to show *how knowledges form their truths*, through “bodies of rules” (sets of relations) which are in effect discursive (or knowledge) practices.

This understanding of knowledge formation is not deterministic, despite the many attempts to portray Foucault in this light.⁹² As Young notes, “Discourses remain fragmented, dispersed and incomplete” and, hence, “The objects of a discourse are quite capable of being contradictory”.⁹³ The possibility of transformation of discourses is a continuing theme in Foucault’s work.⁹⁴ As he explained, “my aim was to show what differences consisted of, how it

⁸⁷ Foucault, cited in Dreyfus & Rabinow, 46 fn 1.

⁸⁸ Cousins & Hussain, 90-91.

⁸⁹ Dreyfus & Rabinow, 48.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., 50.

⁹² See, for example, G. Stedman Jones, “The Determinist Fix: Some Obstacles to Further Development of the Linguistic Approach to History in the 1990s”, *History Workshop Journal*, Issue 42 (1996), 19-35. Also Johann Graaff, “The Seductions of Determinism in Development Theory: Foucault’s Functionalism”, *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 27, no. 8 (2006), 1387-1400.

⁹³ Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, 403-404.

⁹⁴ For example, see Foucault, “Politics and the study of discourse”.

was possible for men (sic), *within the same discursive practice* [read: “body of anonymous, historical rules”], to speak of different objects, to have contrary opinions, to make contradictory choices”.⁹⁵ A discursive practice is not a blueprint; it establishes “an interactive relation between otherwise heterogeneous material elements (institutions, techniques, social groups, perceptual organizations, relations between various discourses).”⁹⁶ Indeed, it is precisely because it is a practice that it is mutable.

Statements are “useful” — they have uses and they make things happen. Given their significance, according to Foucault, we need to study the rules (of formation) that give them authority. These rules do not exist in people’s heads. They are built into institutional systems and practices, and hence have a “repeatable materiality”. For Foucault “things said” are material artefacts that can be studied as discursive practices, examining how what is said (“the fact of language”⁹⁷) comes to be said, and understood as “in the true” (as knowledge).

Rethinking “non-discursive practices”

A challenge commonly mounted to this interpretation is that Foucault imagined a space outside of discourse for “real” material relations, which he called, on different occasions, a “non-discursive domain”, non-discursive practices, or non-discursive relations. For example, Foucault refers to “the *function* that the discourse under study must carry out *in a field of non-discursive practices*”.⁹⁸ It is often assumed that Foucault’s distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices, illustrated in this quote, installs a language-material dualism.⁹⁹ Barad, as one exponent of this position, insists, on these grounds, that it is necessary to add “material” to Foucault’s “discursive practices”, producing “material-discursive practices”.¹⁰⁰ However, given that discourse in Foucault relates to knowledges rather than to language, when he talks about non-discursive domains (or practices or relations), he is (simply) identifying sites that are *not* explicitly named as knowledge formations. His notion of discursive practice/s, as we have seen, is material at its core. It is therefore unnecessary to add “material” to the term, as Barad suggests. Indeed, in our view, doing so cements an ideal-real distinction, the very distinction Foucault set out to challenge.

Foucault signals the importance of “non-discursive” domains (*those not explicitly named as “knowledges”*) precisely so that he can explore the relationships *between* those sites *and* specific knowledges. Archaeology, he tells us explicitly, “reveals relations between *discursive formations* [which, in Foucault, are knowledge formations, not texts or speech] and non-discursive domains (institutions, political events, economic practices and processes)”¹⁰¹ or,

⁹⁵ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 200, emphasis added.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 72. See diagram.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 68; emphasis in original.

⁹⁹ R. Keith Sawyer, “A Discourse on Discourse: An Archaeological History of an Intellectual Concept”, *Cultural Studies*, vol. 16, no. 3 (2002), 441. David Howarth, “An Archaeology of Political Discourse? Evaluating Michel Foucault’s Explanation and Critique of Ideology”, *Political Studies*, vol. 50, no. 1 (2002), 121.

¹⁰⁰ Barad, “Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter”, 818.

¹⁰¹ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 162, emphasis added.

more precisely, “nondiscursive formations”.¹⁰² As a specific example, he describes the role that the discourse (or knowledge) called “General Grammar” played in the “non-discursive” field of “pedagogic practice”.¹⁰³

Foucault made an attempt to clarify his position on this contentious issue in a 1977 interview with J. A. Miller (and others). Reflecting on Foucault’s new concept of the *dispositif* (apparatus)¹⁰⁴, Miller asks Foucault why he designates institutions as non-discursive when “these new ensembles [apparatuses], which articulate together so many different elements, remain, nonetheless, *signifying* elements”.¹⁰⁵ Foucault’s reply deserves to be quoted in full:

Yes, if you like, but it doesn’t much matter for my notion of the apparatus to be able to say that this is discursive and this isn’t. If you take Gabriel’s architectural plan for the Military School together with the actual construction of the School, how is one to say what is discursive and what institutional? That would only interest me if the building didn’t conform with the plan. But I don’t think that it’s very important to be able to make that distinction given that my problem isn’t a linguistic one.¹⁰⁶

As indicated here, Foucault does not wish to draw a distinction between the architectural plan and the actual construction of the Military School, with the plan (or text) characterized as discursive and the actual building as non-discursive or material. He sees such a distinction as one that a linguist might make. By contrast, he is interested in *the practices through which knowledge is produced and operates within each and across the two “domains”* or sites, at the level of the architectural plan and simultaneously at the level of the actual building.¹⁰⁷ While some might continue to see this distinction as imposing a symbolic-material division, we need to remember that knowledge formations, such as the architectural plan, are themselves material.

¹⁰² Gilles Deleuze, “Desire and Pleasure”, in Arnold I. Davidson (ed.) *Foucault and his Interlocutors* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 183, emphasis added.

¹⁰³ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 68.

¹⁰⁴ While we have some sympathy with Bussolini’s argument that *dispositif* should not be translated as *apparatus* this argument is beyond the scope of the current paper. Jeffrey Bussolini, ‘What is a dispositive?’, *Foucault Studies*, no. 10 (2010), 85-107.

¹⁰⁵ Gordon, 197-98, emphasis in original.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 198.

¹⁰⁷ Laclau and Mouffe are unhappy with Foucault’s use of a discursive, non-discursive distinction. Their reasons are similar to Miller’s – that “so-called non-discursive complexes” are themselves “discursive articulations” – and hence are addressed above. They are also concerned with the implication of the distinction for the meaning of the “concept of discourse”. Ernesto Laclau & Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony & Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985), 107, 145 fn 13. However, as we have argued, Foucault invests little in the concept “discourse”. Concepts, in his view, are (simply) parts of knowledge systems, no more, no less. Foucault’s project, therefore, is to track the *practices* involved in the formation and operation of knowledge. Discursive practice as an analytic starting point renders distinctions between sites of knowledge formation and operation – be they texts, institutions, buildings, medical instruments, copyright laws – a secondary consideration.

The only distinction being drawn, therefore, is between the different kinds of sites where knowledge is formed.¹⁰⁸

Against this view Dreyfus and Rabinow suggest that, in *The Order of Things* and *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault makes discourse, understood as linguistic practices, the priority.¹⁰⁹ They contrast these two volumes (unfavourably) with Foucault's explicitly institutional studies, *Madness and Civilisation (Histoire de la Folie à l'âge classique 1972c)*, *Birth of the Clinic (Naissance de la clinique, 1972)* and *Discipline and Punish (Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison, 1975)*,¹¹⁰ which set out to analyse the knowledge produced and operating within institutional practices. However, Foucault stipulated that in *The Order of Things*, which he acknowledged to be an experiment, his objective was to isolate "realms of knowledge", not texts or language, in order to study their internal architecture.¹¹¹ Rather than distinguishing between linguistic and material "domains", therefore, Foucault studied both "theoretical texts" and "institutional sites" to reveal how knowledges are practices in each case.¹¹² For example, in *The Order of Things*, he illustrated the sets of relations (rules) through which knowledge of grammar is located "within the true".¹¹³ Indeed Foucault states clearly that it is inappropriate to confine the concept of discursive practices to textual studies:

Discursive practices are not purely and simply ways of producing discourse. They are embodied in technical processes, in institutions, in patterns for general behavior, in forms for transmission and diffusion, and in pedagogical forms which, at once, impose and maintain them.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁸ Brown & Cousins claim that *Archaeology of Knowledge* is a "contradictory text", sometimes seeing "discourse" as tied to social practices, but at other times carving out a distinct sphere of "primary relations" or "non-discursive relations". Brown & Cousins, "The linguistic fault: the case of Foucault's archaeology", 276 fn 3. Gutting offers a different and in our view more persuasive interpretation of "primary relations". In this interpretation "primary relations" are not "non-discursive relations"; rather Foucault introduced the categories of "primary" or "real" relations ("things") and secondary or "reflexive" relations ("words") (simply) in order to demarcate the distinctiveness of discursive relations. Gutting, *Michel Foucault's Archaeology of Scientific Reason*, 243. Foucault describes his goal thus:

to dispense with "things". To "depresentify" them. ... To substitute for the enigmatic treasure of "things" anterior to discourse, the regular formation of objects that emerge only in discourse. ... To write a history of discursive objects that does not plunge them into the common depth of primal soil [read "primary relations"] but deploys the nexus of regularities that govern their dispersal.

Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 45, 47-48.

¹⁰⁹ Dreyfus & Rabinow, viii, 17. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 1994). Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

¹¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972). Michel Foucault, *Naissance de la clinique. Une archéologie du regard médical* (Paris: P.U.F., 1972). Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).

¹¹¹ Foucault, 1969, cited in Eribon, 215.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 216.

¹¹³ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 88-120.

¹¹⁴ Foucault, "History of Systems of Thought, summary of a course given at Collège de France – 1970-71", 200.

Knowledge *in* practices and knowledge *as* practices (discursive practices) sit alongside one another as complementary perspectives, bridging a symbolic-material division.

Hekman also challenges the reading of Foucault offered in Dreyfus and Rabinow. She states, in a position similar to our own, that in *The Order of Things* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault “never loses sight of the connection between the discursive and the non-discursive”.¹¹⁵ However, in her account discourse means language whereas we argue that in Foucault discourses are practices that form knowledge across different sites.¹¹⁶ The political implications of these contrasting positions are highly significant, as discussed briefly in some concluding remarks.

Conclusions

Unfortunately, in many interpretations of Foucault, discourse continues to be equated with forms of speech or writing, meaning that non-discursive practices emerge as some form of non-textual or “material” space. Indeed, it is unusual to find an author, even among those who understand that for Foucault discourse does not equate with language, who does not adopt this convention. For example, Hook, who clearly identifies the connection between knowledge and discourse in Foucault, describes this position as collapsing “the *textual/material*, ‘*discursive*’/‘*extra-discursive*’”, equating “discursive” with “textual”, and “extra-discursive” with “material”.¹¹⁷ Setting up this opposition in this way inadvertently reinforces the very dichotomy Foucault was intent on challenging through his explorations of the various spaces where knowledge is formed. As Mol describes, in Foucauldian discourse analysis, “words, materialities and practices hang together in a specific, historically and culturally situated way”.¹¹⁸

And so we turn in the end to recent determinations to restore “the real” to political debate (see opening section on “Political/theoretical context”). As mentioned at the outset, this “real” is somehow to be set off from both modernist and postmodernist conceptions.¹¹⁹ However, Foucault’s intervention highlights the *always* political nature of the “real”, how things said and things done are *practices*, not essences of any form. As Mol concludes, there are many possible “reals”.¹²⁰ What needs to be analysed and hence understood, therefore, are the “practices of coordination”, the discursive practices, that entrench particular singular realities as “*the real*” — “what is being done and what, in doing so, is reality in practice made to be”.¹²¹ So long as the suggestion is that there is something “out there” that can be contacted or referenced outside of politics, so long are those who claim access to “the real” empowered.

¹¹⁵ Hekman, 60.

¹¹⁶ See Hekman, 2, for the usage “language/discourse”.

¹¹⁷ Hook, 537, emphasis added.

¹¹⁸ Mol, *The logic of care*, 8.

¹¹⁹ Hekman, 89.

¹²⁰ Mol, “Ontological Politics: A word and some questions”, 75. Mol, *The Body Multiple*, 7.

¹²¹ Mol, *The Body Multiple*, 160.

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Carol Bacchi
School of History and Politics
University of Adelaide
North Terrace, Adelaide, Australia, 5000
carol.bacchi@adelaide.edu.au

Jennifer Bonham
School of Social Sciences
University of Adelaide
North Terrace, Adelaide, Australia, 5000
jennifer.bonham@adelaide.edu.au