

## LITERATURE AS DISCOURSE: PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS OF ITS 'ABOUTNESS'

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### ABSTRACT

Intellectual discourse is a multifaceted and complex study that encompasses all aspects of human thought, with statements or 'énoncés' representing events with distinctive attributes tied to a particular historical context. Michel Foucault's scholarly inquiry delves into profound and substantial statements within discourse, which possess a level of autonomy and are further distinguished and individualized based on their adherence to a singular system of formation. His methodological approaches include archaeology and genealogy, which are interrelated but distinct methods. Archaeology focuses on uncovering the historical underpinnings and presuppositions of a given system of thought, while genealogy seeks to trace the historical processes of descent and emergence through which a particular system of thought takes shape and undergoes transformation. Foucault's archaeological studies aim to account for the organization of discourses by examining the connection between perception and action, exploring why specialists in knowledge perceive objects differently at different historical junctures. Literature as discourse and its distinction from social science are significant, as literature holds a distinct significance in its representation of social realities, maintaining an underlying thread of plausible reality even when delved into fictional realms seemingly distant from contemporary circumstances. Social science exhibits limitations in its capacity to illuminate the full spectrum of social realities, such as a lack of room for exploring probabilities and possibilities, and lacks the imaginative coloring intrinsic to literature.

**Keywords:** Intellectual discourse, Human thoughts, Foucault's archaeological, social science

### EXPLANATION

An enquiry into the 'aboutness' of an intellectual discourse opens various debates. To embark on this journey, it is imperative to commence with a fundamental inquiry: What precisely constitutes a discourse? The responses to this question exhibit a rich spectrum of perspectives, each contributing to an ever-expanding treasury of definitions. Is a discourse fundamentally a compendium of meticulously documented arguments, their various interpretations, and the cyclical process of reinterpretation that unfolds over an extended temporal context? Does it represent a manifestation of a theoretical framework, a structured mode of thought and analysis, through which ideas and knowledge are constructed and disseminated? Or perhaps, is it an earnest form of communication, meticulously crafted to educate and elucidate complex subjects to others? Alternatively, could it be an intricate amalgamation of all these facets, transcending its initial appearance as something simple? This quest for understanding pushes us into a labyrinth of contemplation, wherein we dissect the layers and dimensions of intellectual discourse, seeking the true essence of what it means to communicate, deliberate, and evolve our collective understanding.

The exploration of the 'aboutness' of discourse unfurls numerous inquiries, for it constitutes an investigation that envelops the entirety of intellectual thought. Every human thought, regardless of its constituent elements, can be categorically linked to a specific discourse. A discourse is elucidated in the context of statements or 'énoncés' that encapsulate the essence of 'things said.' These statements represent events with distinctive attributes, inherently

tethered to a particular historical context while maintaining the potential for repetition. The position occupied within a discourse is discerned as a direct result of the functional role of these statements. Consequently, it is crucial to recognize that statements do not equate to mere propositions or sentences, nor are they to be confused with phonemes, morphemes, or syntagms. As Michel Foucault eloquently articulated,

In examining the statement what we have discovered is a function that has a bearing on groups of signs, which is identified neither with grammatical ‘accept-ability’ nor with logical correctness, and which requires it to operate: a referential(which is not exactly a fact, a state of things, or even an object, but a principle of differentiation); a subject(not the speaking consciousness, nor the author of the formulation, but a position that may be filled in certain conditions by various individuals); an associated field (which is not the real context of the formulation, the situation in which it was articulated, but a domain of coexistence for other statements); a materiality (which is not only the substance or support of the articulation, but a status, rules of transcription, possibilities for use and re-use). (*“Archaeology”* 114)

Foucault’s scholarly inquiry delves into a specific subset of statements within discourse—namely, those of a profound and substantial nature. These statements possess a level of autonomy, typically characterized by their inherent capacity to make truth claims. They are further distinguished and individualized based on their adherence to a singular system of formation. Within this framework, Foucault introduces the concept of a “discursive formation,” signifying the systematic regularities that exist among a collection of “objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices” (Foucault *“Archaeology”* 38). In other words, a ‘discursive formation’ can be construed as the overarching enunciative structure that governs a cluster of verbal performances. This concept captures the intricate web of interrelationships between various components of discourse, encapsulating the prevailing conventions, language choices, and the systematic structuring of knowledge within a given intellectual or sociocultural context. By exploring the dynamics of discursive formations, Foucault delves into the mechanisms through which power, knowledge, and meaning are constructed and disseminated within the tapestry of human discourse.

To comprehend Michel Foucault’s concept of discourse, it is essential to grasp his methodological approaches, which constitute a critical aspect of his work. Foucault employs two distinct but interrelated methods: archaeology and genealogy. Archaeology is primarily concerned with unveiling the historical underpinnings and presuppositions of a given system of thought, while genealogy seeks to trace the historical processes of descent and emergence through which a particular system of thought or process takes shape and subsequently undergoes transformation. Within the framework of archaeological analysis, the central objective is to unearth the rules that govern the formation of discourses or discursive systems. This method operates at a technical level, focusing on statements (énoncés) to uncover rules that elucidate the appearance of phenomena under scrutiny. It is an exploration of the

regularities, or the discursive conditions, that structure a form of discourse and dictate how such structures evolve. Crucially, it does not concern itself with analyzing the veracity or truth of knowledge claims but instead delves into what Foucault terms ‘truth games.’ In essence, discourse is dissected in terms of the governing rules that give rise to it. Foucault’s archaeological studies aim to account for the organization of discourses. He clarifies this by stating, “my object is not language but the archive, that is to say, the accumulated existence of discourses. Archaeology, as I intend it, is akin neither to geology (or analysis of the sub-soil) nor to genealogy (as a description of beginnings or sequences); it is the analysis of discourse in its modality of archive” (Foucault “Discourse” 25). Thus, archaeology directs its focus toward the connection between perception and action, exploring why, at different historical junctures, specialists in knowledge perceive objects differently. At the heart of the archaeological method is an endeavor to elucidate the discursive practices and the rules governing the formation of discourses by asking the fundamental question, “how is it that a particular statement appeared and not another?” (Foucault “*Archaeology*” 27). As Manfred Frank aptly points out, Foucault’s interest lies more in the conditions that enable the emergence of structures than in the structures themselves. For Foucault, the foundation for the constitution of an order is not a subjective entity but rather another order, ultimately leading to the order of the discourse with its “regard déjà codé” – the already coded look (Frank 107). This layered approach to analysis sheds light on the intricacies of discourse and the multifaceted forces that shape its contours.

However, instead of embarking on an exhaustive examination of discourse in its broadest sense, our current investigation will narrow its focus, shedding light on the realm of literature as discourse and how it distinguishes itself from the discourse found in the field of social science. To commence, it is pertinent to delineate two overarching categories of discourses: the Sciences and the Humanities. C. P. Snow expounded on the dichotomy of ‘two cultures’ within the broader framework of Western intellectual society. These cultures encompass the fields of Sciences and the Humanities. Despite C.P. Snow’s critique of the British education system’s historical inclination to favor the Humanities, he staunchly advocated for equitable nurturing of citizens’ competencies in both the Sciences and Humanities. In his seminal work, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (1959), C. P. Snow refrained from adjudicating the superiority of one discourse over the other, thereby fostering a nuanced debate. Returning to the bifurcation of discourses into science, it is important to note that the discourse of science can be further subdivided into Natural Science and Social Science. Notably, both of these discourses are anchored in empiricism, rendering them as factual discourses. Within these domains, a scientific perspective is an indispensable prerequisite for the analysis of any subject. Natural and Social Sciences, as purveyors of knowledge, prioritize reality over the ephemeral and the fictional. These discourses are resolute in their pursuit of verifiable conclusions subjected to rigorous scrutiny. However, the realm of Humanities in its entirety will not be subject to examination within this context. Instead, our

analysis will center on literary discourse, which is often critiqued for its overlap with Social Science in its shared concern for anchoring in empirical realities. The central inquiry herein pertains to what distinguishes literature from the discipline of Social Science, if indeed there exist distinctions.

In a broad context, literature is often characterized as a reflection of the era in which it is produced. Likewise, social science can be regarded as a more precise and systematic depiction of society, offering an in-depth analysis. It could be contended that social science provides a more faithful portrayal of the specific period it addresses. Consequently, one may argue that both these intellectual domains share a fundamental similarity in their mission to represent the overarching social realities. Nevertheless, the question remains: What truly distinguishes literature from the discipline of social sciences?

At this juncture, it becomes pertinent to begin the present examination with the exploration of social sciences first. Social sciences involve the systematic examination of society, offering a scientifically grounded observation of social realities. Their primary function is to present us with a comprehensive portrayal of factual realities, achieved through rigorous testing procedures and thorough analysis. On the other hand, literature holds a distinct significance in its representation of social realities. Literature is inextricably entwined with society, and even when literary works delve into fictional realms seemingly distant from contemporary circumstances, they maintain an underlying thread of plausible reality. The assertion that a writer from any given epoch serves as an advocate for social realities carries considerable validity. Consequently, literature shares a foundational connection with social sciences in its grounding in factual representations. However, literature transcends this boundary by delving deeper into its role as a social representative.

The domain of social science exhibits certain limitations in its capacity to illuminate the full spectrum of social realities. Within social sciences, there is often a dearth of room for exploring probabilities and possibilities. At times, social science may inadvertently manifest a biased predisposition towards certain facets of social realities. This partiality can be attributed to the fact that the discourse of social science is frequently under the influence of powerful institutional mechanisms. These influential forces wield considerable control over the representation of realities, invariably swaying it in their favor. It is not that genuine facts become distorted; rather, one facet of reality is accorded primacy within mainstream discourse while others are marginalized. An exemplar of this phenomenon can be found in historical writing, where colonial powers, particularly Europeans, selectively emphasized aspects of reality that served their colonial interests. Their written accounts depicted non-Europeans as uncivilized and barbaric. This portrayal was so influential that people residing in non-European regions began to internalize this characterization, aligning with the European perspective. Colonialism was justified as an essential vehicle for the civilization of non-European societies. Remarkably, this prevailing structure of representing a preferred

reality persists in contemporary social science writings. It is equally disconcerting that presenting a particular truth within the realm of social sciences can sometimes lead to professional and personal repercussions. Furthermore, social science lacks the imaginative coloring that is intrinsic to literature. Literature not only addresses events that have transpired or are currently unfolding but also delves into scenarios that could potentially occur or might have occurred in an alternate reality. It is this imaginative dimension of literature that renders it an invaluable tool for contemplating unexplored facets of social realities.

Conversely, literature thrives on the vibrant tapestry of imagination. Literature not only explores the realm of historical events or current occurrences but also delves into the possibilities of what might have transpired or what could potentially unfold. It is worth acknowledging that literature, too, is susceptible to partiality, and a skewed perspective of reality can find its place within its narratives. Nonetheless, the scope of literary discourse is notably broader and more inclusive. It accommodates a space for recounting the stories of realities that have been excluded from mainstream narratives. The 'fictive stance' employed in literary discourse allows it to venture into the realm of forbidden truths. This distinction between literary discourse and the discourse of social science is particularly evident. Both are rooted in the foundation of factual observations, yet literature ventures into the uncharted territories of untold truths. Literature acknowledges the contentious nature of such realities but does not relegate them to obscurity. Instead, it employs the power of imagination to shape these truths into representational forms within the realm of fiction. It is this harmonious interplay between factuality and fictionality that sets literature apart.

Linearity stands as a foundational principle in social science, where events unfold in sequence, and causal relationships connect them. Social science diligently investigates these causal events and observations, adhering to established procedures to reach definitive conclusions. Imagination has little place in this disciplined pursuit, as it focuses on elucidating concrete realities. In literature, keen observation of social and behavioral dynamics also plays a pivotal role. Literary creations are constructed upon these observations. However, literature does not conform to a linear pattern of events, nor does it aspire to yield scientific conclusions. Literature occasionally deviates from reality altogether. This departure constitutes a significant dimension of literary discourse, as eloquently expounded by Aristotle in his *Poetics* (335 BCE). Literature often addresses scenarios that may appear highly improbable but not entirely impossible, a concept Aristotle terms 'probable impossibility.' Literature employs this Aristotelian concept to elicit specific effects on its readers. Consider Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915), where readers willingly suspend their disbelief at the notion of Gregor Samsa transforming into an insect. While such a transformation seems highly improbable, it is not entirely beyond the realm of possibility, especially in light of recent advances in genetic science. Kafka's work masterfully employs the element of 'probable impossibility' to offer profound insights into the absurdity of human existence. To fully appreciate these works, one must suspend disbelief and engage in a nuanced



interpretation. Such literary works can wield a far greater impact than straightforward accounts of events, given their capacity to engage readers on multiple levels.

Reducing literature to the confines of the social science discourse would be an oversimplification. Both of these discourses operate according to distinct methodologies and principles. Literature possesses a unique quality of 'literariness' that allows it to encompass untold stories of marginalized individuals and groups. It is not inaccurate to assert that literary discourse, in addition to its grounding in factuality, possesses an emotive appeal that resonates with its readers. On the other hand, the discourse of social science typically adopts a clinical approach in its analysis of social issues, often yielding solutions to prevalent societal problems. The ultimate goal of both discourses is to contribute to the advancement of humanity. These two discourses are not inherently contradictory; in fact, they should work in harmony due to their complementary natures. Each serves a distinct purpose within the intellectual landscape, addressing diverse aspects of human experience and understanding.

## CONCLUSION

Intellectual discourse is a complex study of human thought, with statements or 'énoncés' representing events with unique attributes tied to a historical context. Michel Foucault's research focuses on profound and substantial statements within discourse, which are individualized based on their adherence to a singular system of formation. His methodological approaches include archaeology and genealogy, which are interrelated but distinct methods. Archaeology focuses on uncovering the historical underpinnings and presuppositions of a given system of thought, while genealogy traces the historical processes of descent and emergence. Foucault's archaeological studies examine the connection between perception and action, exploring why specialists perceive objects differently at different historical junctures. Literature, as discourse, holds a distinct significance in representing social realities, maintaining an underlying thread of plausible reality even in fictional realms. Social science, on the other hand, lacks the imaginative coloring inherent in literature.

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