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Say What?: Demystifying Discourse Analysis for Archaeology Students

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Most archaeology instructors are eager to have their students appreciate that the study of the past is relevant to the present. In fact, most current introductory textbooks include a section, however brief it may be, on the socio-politics of archaeology. These discussions are usually framed around how ideas about the past have been used to justify abuse (e.g., Nazi archaeology to support an Aryan homeland), or how the involvement of descendant communities in research is now considered best practice in the field (e.g., NAGPRA, community based archaeology). One of the most powerful tools for understanding how what we say about the past makes a difference in the present is discourse analysis. Ultimately, archaeologists communicate their findings via discourses: in reports, articles, books, museum exhibits, documentaries, podcasts, websites, and even occasionally fictional writings. Discourse analysis inspired by the work of Michel Foucault can be used to empower students to analyze and draw their own conclusions regarding the statements they encounter about "how the past was" and "what that means" in any context. It does not pre-determine or preclude any particular interpretation of the past-present relationship, or theoretical orientation, but instead supports the development of critical thinking with an eye to the power ramifications of "who says what."

Like other social scientists, archaeologists have been inspired by the work of French social historian and philosopher, Michel Foucault, who when he was elected to the prestigious Collège de France, asked that his title be "Professor of the History of Systems of Thought." Foucault's work sought to illuminate the various connections between knowledge, social institutions, and power at various historical moments. Some archaeologists have been put off by Foucault's association with postmodernism, or simply by the density of most English translations of his work. Whether we call his ideas postmodern, poststructuralist, or even hyper-modern (Pred and Watts 1992), there is significant value in his insights to the ways that language, systematically deployed and supported

by institutions, is a powerful force in shaping perceptions of reality, or culture.

Readers seeking to harness Foucault's ideas to analyze the archaeological record can turn to theoretical overviews such as Christopher Tilley's (1990a) chapter in *Reading Material Culture*, or any of numerous case studies from around the world (e.g., Hill 2005; Casella 2002; Knapp and van Dommelen 2008). Rather than focusing on how Foucault's work can be used to interpret archaeological data, however, this article provides suggestions and support for instructors wishing to use "Foucaultian discourse analysis" to help students understand the power of talking about the past in the present.

Sociopolitics of the Past

The idea that controlling what is said about the past can have political power in the present is not a recent revelation. After the reign of the heretic pharaoh Akhenaten (originally known as Amenhotep IV) ended in approximately 1336 BCE, subsequent rulers obliterated the new city he had founded, had his name stricken from carvings, and omitted him from historical lists of kings. These practices were designed to undermine not just his power in their present, but also to destroy any power he might hope for in the afterlife. Despite these efforts, Akhenaten and his story

have been rediscovered by archaeologists and revived as a symbol of revolution in the 21st century (Hessler 2017). Readers will no doubt also be familiar with the far more recent efforts of the Taliban to minimize reminders of Afghanistan's Buddhist past by destroying the Buddhas of Bamiyan (Morgan 2012).

Competing views of the past do not always resort to explosives or hammer and chisel to assert their primacy, as ideological dominance can also be accomplished via pen and paper, or even oral tradition if the authority of powerful social institutions can be leveraged to support it. While few U.S.-educated individuals have *not* heard of Pocahontas and her brave defense of John Smith, fewer still *have* read the contemporaneously translated (1609) accounts of her father's reply to John Smith's threatening war during trade talks. "Why should you take by force that from us which you can have by love? Why should you destroy us, who have provided you with food?" (Blaisdell 2000:4). Whether we agree with the quote famously (though perhaps erroneously) attributed to Winston Churchill, "History is written by the victors," or the even more contentious, "History is a set of lies that people have agreed upon" (attributed to Napoleon), what we say about the past has power.

For example, archaeologists and historians in South Africa continue to debate whether they did enough to bring their data to bear in the fight

against racial apartheid that peaked in the 1980s and '90s (Mazel 2014). Did they write histories that reinforced the idea of a natural and necessary separation of the races? Could they have done more to dismantle historical narratives grounded in racist assumptions about the past? Ciraj Rassool (2010) has written about "the power of representation and the politics of public scholarship" in South African institutions such as universities, museums, and schools. He grapples with the way written documents from European explorers have been significantly valued over oral traditions (dating from the same time period) of local indigenous groups in writing the country's history and the subsequent construction of truth. These insights lead him to problematize the notion of "expertise" in this context, as an extension of a colonial paternalism, and to wonder if "community outreach" is not a thinly veiled code for trying to convince people to accept national institutional interpretations over those of their own community.

In his consideration of, "the end of the essential archaeological subject," Adam Smith presents an extended case study of the politics of nationalism and ethnic identity "in relation to the kingdom of Urartu, which ruled the highlands of eastern Anatolia and southern Caucasia during the 1st millennium BC" (A. Smith 2004:1). This is a region where humans who believe they are part of "stable and historically enduring" identity

groups use history to justify violence as well as claims to land, sovereignty, and power, not unlike the conflict in Palestine-Israel (2004:18). Smith describes how Armenians, Turks, and other contemporary ethnic groups, have attempted to "lay claim to a status as primordial indigene" of the area by linking their heritage to the Urartu Kingdom (2004:13). Smith relates how those seeking to trace their ancestry to Urartu face an existential challenge in that, "it is exceedingly difficult to view Urartu as culturally ancestral to any modern claimants since, following its demise, it was entirely forgotten" (2004:14).

Smith's case study is doubly interesting because archaeologists and historians have documented Urartu practices of destroying the history of the peoples they conquered to reshape their identities as members of their new empire. They forcibly relocated populations, razed earlier polities' capitals, and engaged in "the deployment of images in various media, including inscriptions and images" to create new identities defined by new histories (2004:18, see also Smith 2000; 2003). Smith refers to these as technologies of "political memory and forgetting," or "the "production of forgetting" (2004:17-18). As we shall see, one important aspect of Foucault's methodology is that he encourages us to interrogate both what is being remembered (and talked about) *and* what is being forgotten (or silenced).

Michel Foucault

Michel Foucault was an intellectual heir of the French tradition of sociologié and rationalist philosophy. As such, readers will feel resonance in his work with that of René Descartes, Émile Durkheim, Jean Paul Sartre, Claude Levi-Strauss, and Ferdinand de Saussure. He was also influenced by his readings of Immanuel Kant and Karl Marx, among others. There are many secondary sources (or annotated volumes) available for readers looking for an easy introduction to Foucault's work ranging from graphic novel-style info-comics to scholarly analyses (e.g., Fillingham 1993; Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983; Gutting 2005; Rabinow and Rose 2003). The following summary is a deconstruction, designed to give an instructor a brief overview to contextualize the exercise described below.

Fundamentally, Foucault was interested in history. When he started researching the history of mental illness, for example, he found that what was considered "madness" had changed over time. Rather than being a constant, consistently defined, essential category, it was historically contingent, contested, and defined by institutions via systems of thought expressed through language, or discourses. His books *The Birth of the Clinic* ([1963] 1994]) and *History of Madness* ([1972]; with

Jean Khalfa 1976) explore the ways in which mental health became institutionalized with a body of experts who were authorized by the government to define sanity/madness, healthy/pathological, determine the appropriate treatment for such conditions, and generally control knowledge of and access to "what is normal."

Similarly, Foucault studied the history of criminality and punishment, looking at how what constituted a "crime" varied over time, and again, how the accepted definition of what is a crime came to be determined at any given historical moment. The history of crime and its management includes periods where the government focused on shocking public punishment (such as execution) aimed at scaring the rest of the community into compliance, others where the focus was revenge and retribution for the damage the crime did, and still others where it was reform of the criminal into a productive citizen. *Discipline and Punish* ([1975] 1977) for example, analyzed the way prisoners' bodies were managed through strict daily schedules, tightly managed spaces, and nearly constant surveillance. He showed how this kind of "disciplining the body" is also utilized by other modern institutions that seek to control people, such as schools.

At one point in his thinking, Foucault called his methodology "archaeology." This designation does not mean that he conducted

excavations, but rather that he found our discipline a useful metaphor for his intellectual project. He thought of himself as pulling away layers of history to reveal understandings of deeper systems of thought. He later started referring to his methodology as a kind of genealogy. Part of the reason for this switch was a desire to emphasize the interrelatedness over time of the systems of thought he was documenting, like a family tree of related discourses, each of which had lived in a specific place at a specific time, exercising certain kinds of power.

Foucault's understanding of the concept of power is one of the most hotly contested, and arguably, most significant, aspects of his work. First, consider what power in this sense is not: it is definitely not like a solid object, fixed in time, space, size, and density, and able to be grabbed and taken away, with all for one, and none for others. Instead, he conceived of it as a force (sometimes positive and sometimes negative) that is in flux all around us, constantly negotiated in/through/with language, embodied in, and deployed by, discourses operating in specific historical contexts. Power and knowledge are mutually constituting, that is, they simultaneously create each other in a dynamic manner, at multiple scales. For Foucault there are always processes of power/knowledge at work at the individual, local, and macro social levels, constructing our reality. The Foucaultian historian's job, then, is to research and document

the changing shapes and dynamics of various systems of power/knowledge, their effects on people's lives and events, and how they changed over time.

Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is a term used to refer to a variety of techniques used by scholars in literary analysis, linguistics, and other social sciences such as sociology and anthropology. It can mean a close reading of a specific text, a contextual analysis of natural conversation that is ethnographically recorded, or, as I do here, a **process of asking questions of socially and historically contextualized texts that reveals heretofore unseen or unquestioned relationships of power and knowledge**, inspired by the work of Michel Foucault. Here "texts" can be interpreted as broadly as all human meaning making practices (as in contextual archaeology or practice theory), or more narrowly, as any idea expressed in language (i.e., spoken or written word).

In *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method*, James Paul Gee (2014:2), states, "in language, there are important connections among saying (informing), doing (action) and being (identity)." Discourse analysis is about examining those connections, or as he says, "the study of language in use" (2014:7). He divides discourse analyses

into two types, "descriptive" and "critical" (2014:7). Descriptive

approaches are those that focus on form and content analyzing grammar

and word choice to document "how language works in order to understand

it" as a human phenomenon (2014:9). In contrast, critical approaches are

those that recognize, and take into account, that language is always

political. Gee defines politics in a way that is consonant with most

archaeological and anthropological understandings of the concept:

> Politics is not just about contending political parties. At a
> much deeper level it is about how to distribute social
> foods in a society: who gets what in terms of money,
> status, power, and acceptance in a variety of different
> terms, all social goods. Since, when we use language,
> social goods and their distribution are always at stake,
> language is always "political" in a deep sense. (2014:8).

Critical discourse analysis seeks to understand the cultural context of

specific language/speech "moments" and the socio-political effects they

create. When these moments are combined to form a body of knowledge,

and that knowledge is used to structure decisions and behaviors (i.e.,

practice) in a particular culture, it has formed a discourse in the

Foucaultian sense.

Thus, discourse, as a term, is multiscalar like the word culture. Just

as we can talk about the culture in a particular family's home, among

undergraduates at a specific institution, in a geographical region or

country, or even the "global media culture," we can talk about a discourse as a system of knowledge that structures an individual's understanding of their own identity, or at the level of an academic discipline, or at a particular moment in a national conversation on immigration policy. Again, an important aspect of a critical understanding of discourse is the insight that it both structures, and is structured by, what is understood as "knowledge" or "truth." It is generated by people's perceptions of reality at the same time that it helps shape that very perception.

History of Sexuality, Volume 1

Foucault wrote several volumes of his *History of Sexuality*, but the one that is most commonly read is *Volume I* because it contains an overview of his ideas on the subject, as well as some of his most adaptable theoretical concepts. The central historical argument is to challenge what he refers to as "the repressive hypothesis," or the idea that in the Victorian era discourse on sex and sexuality was forbidden, or even absent ([1976] 1978:10). Foucault proposes, and proceeds to demonstrate, that the discourses on sex and sexuality were actually shifted from private or community venues (as in earlier eras) to structured public ones, like medical, psychological, and even legal discourses. People who may have once confessed proclivities to a lover or a priest in a confessional, were compelled to submit to regulation of sexuality in

doctor's offices, on psychologist's couches, and even courtrooms. These sexual ideas and feelings were then subjected to judgment by these various institutions, with consequences ranging from "treatments," to incarceration.

Thus, in Foucault's estimation there were more people than ever talking about sex and sexuality from the 1800's on, creating discourses with significant power behind them to define and determine normalcy, deviancy, and even criminality. One of the cumulative effects of these discourses was/is that people were tasked with self-monitoring their sexuality; to be ever vigilant in looking for lapses in judgment, and report them if noticed. Medical discourse told you what was healthy or pathological. Scientific biology and psychology told you what was natural and expected. In combination with legal and religious discourses, these bodies of knowledge told you if you had transgressed either the law of nature, the law of society, and/or the law of God. With the advent of sex education in school settings, the age at which citizens were expected to have knowledge of the rights and wrongs of sex was pushed earlier, and another social institution, the school, leveraged to increase monitoring (by self and others) of appropriate behavior.

Volume I has been criticized for various things, including little or no treatment of female subjectivities or incorporation of feminist perspectives,

and being too focused on Western civilization, but it remains a fascinating

volume for its theoretical versatility. If we move past what *Volume I* may

or may not have to offer as a conventional "history" of sexuality, there is

much to learn from its approach. Says Foucault:

> [I would like]…to search instead for instances of
> discursive production (which also administer silences, to
> be sure), of the production of power (which sometimes
> have the function of prohibiting), of the propagation of
> knowledge (which often cause mistaken beliefs or
> systematic misconceptions to circulate); I would like to
> write a history of these instances and their
> transformations. (Foucault 1978:12).

These guiding questions can be adapted to analyze any discourse, or set

of statements that reveal underlying knowledge assumptions. In

combination with Foucault's insight that power (and resistance) is present

in all social deployment of language, we can harness his methods to gain

insight into how knowledge of the past is constructed.

Foucault to Go

I first read Foucault as an undergraduate student at Wesleyan

University in Middletown, Connecticut. My senior honors thesis research

began as an effort to look at how new theoretical perspectives I had been

exposed to at the University of Sheffield during a semester abroad, might

contribute to our understanding of the Native American mound building

cultures of the pre-contact Midwest. As background, I started looking at how changing theoretical viewpoints from the earliest European explorers to emergent post-processualism had changed people's interpretations of these remains and the cultures that built them. I traced how myth-busters from the Bureau of American Ethnology, the heavyweights of the culture history approach, and the titans of processualism had all used largely the same artifacts and sites to build their differing interpretations (Van Gilder 1991). At some point in the writing process, I realized that what I had started as an introductory literature review (before the main event of my own interpretation), was actually a powerful example of discourse analysis, and had implications for the history of archaeology as a whole (Van Gilder and Charles 2003).

I used the following passage from *History of Sexuality* to structure my Foucaultian analysis:

> Why has sexuality been so widely discussed, and what has been said about it? What were the effects of power generated by what was said? What are the links between these discourses, these effects of power, and the pleasures that were invested in them? What knowledge (*savoir*) was formed as a result of this linkage? The object, in short, is to define the regime of power-knowledge-pleasure that sustains the discourse on human sexuality in our part of the world. The central issue then…[is] to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which

prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said. What is at issue, briefly, is the over-all "discursive fact," the way in which sex is "put into discourse." Hence, too, my main concern will be to locate the forms of power, the channels it takes, and the discourses it permeates…" (Foucault 1978:11)

I refocused it by replacing the word "sexuality" with the system of knowledge, or set of discourses, I was interested in understanding:

Why has the **Hopewell/moundbuilders** been so widely discussed, and what has been said about it? What were the effects of power generated by what was said? What are the links between these discourses, these effects of power, and the **interpretations/conclusions** that were invested in them? What knowledge (*savoir*) was formed as a result of this linkage? The object, in short, is to define the regime of **power-knowledge-conclusion** that sustains the discourse on the **Hopewell/moundbuilders** in our part of the world. The central issue then…[is] to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said. What is at issue, briefly, is the over-all "discursive fact," the way in which **Hopewell/moundbuilders** is "put into discourse." (adapted from Foucault 1978:11)[1]

Since then, I have used this passage from *History of Sexuality, Volume I*, to teach students a simple way to harness the power of discourse analysis in numerous contexts[2]. To date, I have seen students use this Foucault passage to analyze such diverse topics as the

discourses of national cultural memory around the 9-11 Monument in New York City, how two of the most popular magazines for Catholic laypeople construct what it means to be a "good Catholic woman," and what Saturday morning cartoons say to children about being part of a family. I ask students to read the "Introduction" of *History of Sexuality, Volume I* (Foucault 1978:3-13) where they encounter the original passage quoted above. Then I rework it in this way:

> Why has **your topic** been so widely discussed, and what has been said about it? What were the effects of power generated by what was said? What are the links between these discourses, these effects of power, and the **interpretations/conclusions/relationships/policies** that were invested in them? What knowledge (*savoir*) was formed as a result of this linkage? The object, in short, is to define the regime of **power-knowledge-conclusion/relationship/policy** that sustains the discourse on **your topic** in **name of applicable part** of the world. The central issue then…[is] to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said. What is at issue, briefly, is the over-all "discursive fact," the way in which **your topic** is "put into discourse." (adapted from Foucault 1978, 11)

In a more archaeological vein, students have done fantastic research projects on subjects such as pseudoarcheology by pursuing topic sentences such as, "The central issue is to account for the fact that alien

intervention is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said" (adapted from Foucault 1978:11). Other students have used this prompt to analyze bodies of research on indigenous groups, specific documentaries, or a set of similarly themed websites. A particularly powerful senior paper was crafted by a student who went to three different local historical sites (all sites of early indigenous-European contact) and analyzed the discourse of the interpretive panels that talked about local Native Americans' artifacts and cultures.

Having students go out into the world to encounter and interpret specific statements about the past that are accessible in various media around them can be more powerful than reading an article about seemingly distant debates regarding obscure homelands. This type of exercise is particularly amenable to group projects at the lower division level when students are just learning how to analyze discourse. Remember to ask them to look for omissions, data that could be relevant but is not mentioned, topics and theories that could be mentioned but are not, and voices or perspectives that do not get heard. How would the discourse change if these omissions were filled?

Conclusion

In 2000, as part of the Society for American Archaeology's initiative to review education in archaeology, Brian Fagan (2000:192) wrote that the "ideal introductory archaeology course of 2025" would include: 1) occasional "carefully prepared and beautifully delivered lectures," 2) a custom "Course Guide" published on the web, 3) some print-based "basic readings in archaeology," 3) interactive web-based exercises, and 4) web-based instruction in the form of "perhaps, personal commentary, from several institutions and prominent archaeologists." Clearly, his vision anticipates instructors and students being able to access many different types of information, from many different types of sources, largely due to developments in the world wide web.

Catherine Clarke (2004:276) draws attention to the fact that, increasingly, "electronic media are key factors in building and promulgating the interests of archaeology (and with it archaeological knowledge)," yet cautions that we must take steps to be sure they are designed and "set within a sound pedagogic framework that both is evidence based and promotes critical reflection." Indeed, the issue of information literacy and critical reflection on sources is essentially one of understanding discourse analysis: how is this knowledge being produced and what are its power effects in the world?

As Yannis Hamilakis (2004:287) has fervently argued, "pedagogy, rather than being a passive process of delivery, is part of the field of cultural politics, a contested domain, a public sphere where knowledges, views, and perceptions of the past and the present are debated and contested, or valorized, reproduced and legitimized." As such, it is one of the most powerful fora to which most archaeologists have access, and must be given careful consideration.

In the Indiana Jones movies, the Nazis and other evil doers sought antiquities, such as the Biblical Ark of the Covenant or the Holy Grail, because they had the power to literally convey military invincibility or bodily immortality. In real life, however, groups like the Third Reich, or other particular interest groups, seek antiquities to control access to information about the past and lend credibility to the historical narratives they wish to see be accepted as truth. The archaeological community and the students it produces, all of whom become valuable (potentially voting) citizens, and some of whom become future archaeologists, writers, or teachers, must acquire the tools to critically examine knowledge production in the new media world. When everybody has an opinion, and everybody has a (via the internet, potentially global) platform to announce it from, we must deliberately cultivate the ability to critically evaluate knowledge claims. No less than the future of the past is at stake.

Notes

1. You can read a shorter, reworked version of the result in, "Archaeology as Cultural Encounter: The Legacy of Hopewell" (Van Gilder and Charles 2003).

2. I have used this exercise in lower division undergraduate courses, as well as senior capstones. It can accommodate a sliding scale of difficulty depending on the level of analysis you require in the answers to the questions in the passage. I have even taught a version of discourse analysis to my daughter's 7th grade class to help them understand the politics behind the discourses of "Hawai'i as tropical paradise." This exercise added a dimension of the anthropology of tourism to a school science trip formerly focused primarily on ecosystems and endemic species. Students noticed and analyzed statements about the tourism experience as they encountered them on their trip. Noting, among other things, the absence of Native Hawaiian voices in the discourses surrounding the tourist experience.

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