

French theories in IS research : An exploratory study on ICIS, AMCIS and MISQ

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ABSTRACT

This paper claims that theories from the French-speaking world have an influence on current thinking in IS research, including at the American and at the international levels. French theories are first defined and classified in 10 trends that correspond to 10 main authors. The frequency of their quotation is then measured in American and international conference in IS and in MISQ. The result is that Habermas is the most quoted philosopher in the conferences and in MISQ. However, Piaget and Latour are more often quoted than Giddens in MISQ. In the conferences, there are more papers quoting Latour than Heidegger. The most quoted French theories in IS are actor-network theory, constructivism, post-structuralism, hermeneutics and discourse analysis.

Keywords

French theories, IS research, actor-network theory, constructivism, post-structuralism, hermeneutics and discourse analysis.

INTRODUCTION

French theories had and still have an important influence in sociology, psychology, linguistic, history and philosophy. In each of these disciplines, they brought particular approaches, such as for instance actor network theory, structuralism, post-modernism but also originally, positivism and rationalism. In IS, Philosophical foundations come from diverse cultural traditions. Among these traditions, European philosophies and theories play a role in contemporary IS research. These traditions are usually considered as German and British. The most important German theories in IS are usually the theory of communicative action of Habermas (1984), the phenomenology of Heidegger (1962) and the hermeneutics of Gadamer (1975 ; 1976). The most important influence of British theories is usually considered to be the Structuration theory of Giddens (1984). This paper claims that theories from the French-speaking world however have an influence on current thinking in IS research. The stake is that a much wider diversity of approaches could be included in our discipline, and therefore to improve our body of knowledge.

The attribute “French” does not refer to a political country but to language communities. It especially includes Switzerland, Belgium and Québec. This paper question the influence of French theories not in Europe, but at the American and International level. In a first part, the concept of “French theory” will be discussed in order to propose a methodology for testing this idea of influence on IS research. In a third part, this methodology will be on the American Conference in IS (AMCIS), the international conferences on IS (ICIS), and on MIS Quarterly. A fourth part will discuss these results and propose theoretical and methodological enhancements of this preliminary study.

FRENCH THEORIES

There are many ways to describe theories. Insights from other disciplines where French theories have an important influence might appear as the most obvious way to compare to their influence in IS. We will call it the *comparative* point of view. The second point of view is to wonder if these French theories have consequences in the research methods that we use in IS. This will be the *methodological* point of view. A third is to start from the improvements that these French theories had in other disciplines such as sociology or psychology and to make a recommendation about how they could improve IS research. We will call it the *normative* point of view. Finally, a very simple point of view is to wonder the reality of the use of these theories in the nowadays IS research. This is the *descriptive* point of view.

The comparative point of view

From a *comparative* point of view the focus on French theories invites comparison with other disciplines. For example, in philosophy and sociology, the reference to post-modernism and post-structuralism became almost unavoidable. While François Lyotard has launched the word “post-modernism”, the word “post-structuralism” is attributed to Foucault (1972),

Deleuze and Derrida, especially after their conference at the John Hopkins University. The paradox is that these authors are sometimes much more studied in the USA than they are in France.

The methodological point of view

From a *methodological* point of view, the substantial contributions of French theories to the developments of positivist approaches in IS research become apparent. Auguste Comte (1995) coined the word “positivism”: *posé*, in French, means based, i.e. relying on evidences, and especially on data and we owe the strong reliance on “method” to Rene Descartes’ (1637) insistence on the importance of systemic, reproducible procedures for distinguish truth from falsehood. Of course, this is not to deny the seminal thinking of John Locke to the empiricist side of positivism, which came from the other side of the British Channel. However, the importance of positivist qualitative methods in IS, especially cases studies, demonstrate that, beside empiricism, two other important influences within positivism are rationalism and functionalism. The two prominent founders of rationalism are the English James Bacon along with the French René Descartes. The primary creator of functionalism is the French Emile Durkheim (1968) who inspired Talcott Parsons (1968). It is then obvious that French theories have had a decisive influence on IS research through positivism, rationalism and functionalism.

The normative point of view

From a *normative* point of view, papers are invited to question what *could be*, or *should be* the influence of French theories on IS Research. For example, there is a growing trend in France for young IS researchers to associate themselves with *constructivism* in the sense as the French-speaking, Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (1967) developed it. French sociologists often associate themselves with the *sociology of action* (Touraine, 1965) or Crozier’s (1977) interactionism.

The descriptive point of view

However, the point of view adopted in this research will be *descriptive*. Indeed, the use of French theories in the IS field has become a practice, not only in the IS conferences, but also in a growing number of publications in Europe. the Actor Network Theory of Bruno Latour (1982), have captured the interest of a generation of IS scholars (Baskerville & Myers, 2002; Walsham, 1997). On of the most successful is especially in Scandinavian conference like IRIS. In human and social sciences, the names of Piaget, Foucault or Ricoeur (1981) are well-known, but what is the situation in IS research in America and at the international level?

METHODOLOGY

The first step of the proposed methodology is to establish a reduced number of theories and to relate them to the main author. The difficulty is here to select authors that represent each of the 4 points of view. Foucault seems to us the most representative of the comparative point of view because of his famous post-structuralist approaches in sociology. Among the authors that had a methodological influence in the human sciences, the names of Descartes, Comte and Durkheim appear to be the most important. From our knowledge of their theoretical influence, we select Piaget for constructivism, Crozier for interactionism and Touraine for sociology of action. Finally, the French authors the most quoted in IFIP 8.2 were Latour, Ricoeur and Bourdieu (Jones, 2000). Therefore, they will be hereby used in order to represent the descriptive point of view. Table 1 provides the list of the theories selected.

<i>Author</i>	<i>theory</i>
Bourdieu	Discourse analysis
Comte	Positivism
Crozier	Interactionnism
Descartes	Rationalism
Durkheim	Functionalism
Foucault	Post-structuralism
Latour	Actor-network theory
Piaget	Constructivism
Ricoeur	Hermeneutics
Touraine	Sociology of action

Table 1. Sample of French theories

In order to compare the influence of the French theories, some of the most quoted German and British theories in IFIP WG 8.2 transactions (Jones, 2000) have been selected like depicted in Table 2.

<i>Author</i>	<i>Theory</i>
Gadamer	Hermeneutics
Giddens	Actor-network theory
Habermas	Constructivism
Heidegger	Hermeneutics

Table 2. Sample of German and British theories

The frequency of the quotation of the authors through online keyword search have been then measured in the American conference AMCIS and in the international conference ICIS. It is also measured in the highest ranked journal in IS : MISQ. The selection of these conference and of this journal has been suggested for methodological simplicity : the keyword search on the online proceedings or the online release of the Journal.

RESULTS

The result in the ICIS and AMCIS conferences given in Table 3.

	ICIS and AMCIS
<i>Habermas</i>	60
<i>Giddens</i>	43
Latour	35
<i>Heidegger</i>	24
Foucault	21
<i>Gadamer</i>	17
Piaget	15
Bourdieu	13
Ricoeur	9
Descartes	8
Durkheim	7
Crozier	3
Comte	1
Touraine	0

Table 3. Number of papers with quotations of authors in ICIS and AMCIS

Then, the measurement has been performed on MISQ with a result given in Table 4.

	MISQ
<i>Habermas</i>	14
Piaget	9
Latour	8
<i>Giddens</i>	5
Foucault	4
Heidegger	4
Ricoeur	3
Callon	2
Bourdieu	2
<i>Gadamer</i>	2
Durkheim	1
Comte	1
Descartes	0
Crozier	0
Touraine	0

Table 4. Number of papers with quotations of authors in MISQ

DISCUSSION

If it is confirmed that Habermas is the most quoted philosopher in the conferences and in MISQ. However, if in the conferences he is followed by the British sociologist Giddens. Piaget and Latour have more papers quoting them than Giddens in MISQ. In conferences there are more papers quoting Latour than Heidegger. The importance of Piaget in MISQ might be especially important for the French community. Indeed, in France, most of the young researchers claim to be non-positivist. But instead of defining themselves as interpretivist, they rather choose the word constructivist, especially with reference to Piaget. As we said, Latour has a very important influence in Scandinavia, but a very limited influence in French Speaking IS research. The situation of Foucault, who is more quoted than Gadamer, is also a paradox. It seems that the influence of the French sociology at the international level is more important than within the French Speaking IS research. May we add that, from a normative point of view, the *archaeology of knowledge* and the analysis of power in post-structuralism might appear as one of the most fruitful way for the human sciences? Finally, the hermeneutics of Ricoeur and the discourse analysis of Bourdieu seem to have an influence, even if this influence is limited. The result is that the most quoted French theories are actor-network theory, constructivism, post-structuralism, hermeneutics and discourse analysis.

CONCLUSION

This paper claims that theories from the French-speaking world however have an influence on current thinking in IS research, including at the American and at the international levels. French theories are first discussed according to 4 points of view : comparative, methodological, normative and descriptive, and then classified in 10 trends that correspond to 10 main authors. The frequency of their quotation is then measured in American international conference in IS and in MISQ. The result is that the most quoted French theories are actor-network theory, constructivism, post-structuralism, hermeneutics and discourse analysis. There are many limitations about the methodology of this research. Comparisons could have been made with the European Conference ECIS, the French Speaking Conference AIM or some European journals (ISJ, EJIS) or French-Speaking Journals (SIM). The search by keywords on author names also present weaknesses and other searches by theories or concepts could have been performed. The research should also be enlarged to other international and American IS journals like ISR, JMIS or Information and Organization. Finally, the influence of American philosophers like pragmatists or analytical philosophy could be compared to the French theories. These limitations should be the basis of future research. They might be overcome by promoting, through pre-ICIS workshops, AMCIS mini-tracks or special issues in high level journals like MISQ, a debate about the French theories in IS.

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