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# Discourse analysis faced with the coronavirus crisis: a few thoughts

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In the acute crisis that we are going through, the media are giving the floor to a wide range of experts from biology or medicine, but also from philosophy or social or human sciences: historians, sociologists, psychologists... But, in France at least, language science specialists are not concerned. Yet the pandemic is not only a biological and a social reality, or even a health reality that combines the biological and the social, it is also a discursive reality. This setting aside of the question of language is not surprising; as Foucault pointed out, it requires a great deal of effort to "loosen the apparently strong embrace of words and things", to "maintain the discourse in its consistency", not to "make it the sign of something else" (1969, p.65). From this point of view, discourse shares the paradoxical status of the coronavirus: it is everywhere but invisible. Probably never in the history of humanity has an epidemic provoked so many "words", but these words are rarely considered as such: they are supposed to be transparent to the "things" they deal with.

Discourse analysts, of course, see the problem in a different way. But they cannot ignore the fact that the Covid-19 pandemic is likely to have significant effects on their concepts and practices: discourse analysis is part of history and cannot ignore the transformations of the world in which it takes place. This is particularly obvious when transformations in communication devices are involved; it is thus inevitable that the prodigious development of digital communication technologies will profoundly modify the methods of discourse analysts. On the other hand, things are much less obvious when it is not a question of technical mutations but of events such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

Confronted with this massive and brutal phenomenon, discourse analysis can respond by simply extending its corpora, but it can also question its concepts and practices. Extending the corpora means applying to the statements produced during and about the pandemic the tools that discourse analysis has been developing for more than half a century. Revisiting its concepts and practices means asking how the statements made possible by the pandemic require us to refine, correct, and even disqualify our usual analytical tools. It is rather in the latter direction that my reflection will be directed here.

## 1 From discursive moment to discursive saturation

By its extreme nature, the Covid-19 pandemic brings us closer to the conditions of a thought experiment. By "thought experiment" philosophers mean a way of solving a problem using imagination, when the conditions of an experiment are not feasible. It is a familiar approach in physics since Galileo Galilei, but also in philosophy, especially in analytical philosophy: "What would happen if...?". In the case of the pandemic: What would happen if all the media in the world were all talking about the same thing all day long? What would happen if the entire population of a country was confined to their homes? What would happen if humans could only communicate through technical mediation?...

I just asked the question "What would happen if all the media in the world were talking about the same thing all day long?" To designate this kind of situation, discourse analysts have at their disposal the concept of "discursive moment", which S. Moirand defines as follows: "the emergence in the media of an intense and diversified discursive production about the same event (May 1968, War in Kosovo, Russian intervention in Chechnya, World Football Cup, Cannes Festival, mad cow crisis...)" (in Charaudeau and Maingueneau (eds), 2002, p.389). Covid-19 pandemic highlights two characteristics of a discursive moment – the intensity of production and the diversity of the genres involved – but in some respects it also goes beyond this framework.

1) In ordinary discursive moments, the production of statements may be "intense", but it does not saturate the entire media space for months on end, as the Covid-19 does. The pandemic is a kind of media black hole that absorbs all the information.

2) As shown by the examples that S. Moirand gives in brackets in her definition, a discursive moment implies an implicit reference point: in her case it is France. In fact, a discursive moment is in principle of interest only to a part, often a small part, of humanity, or even to a single country. The events of May 1968 or the mad cow crisis certainly were not "discursive moments" in Indonesia or Ecuador. But in the case of Covid-19 it is the whole world that is concerned. We can even go further: not only is everyone talking about it, and everywhere, but each region of the globe is obliged to keep abreast of what is happening in other regions because it has an impact on everyone, directly or indirectly: should travellers from a particular country be forbidden access? Is the focus of the pandemic shifting? Can we predict from the example of this or that country the evolution in ours? Is the policy of our governments more effective than the one implemented elsewhere? etc.

3) Within a country, not everyone is interested in the World Cup or the Cannes Film Festival. In the case of Covid-19, the situation is different: the virus threatens each individual for the sole reason that he or she is a human being; everyone must ask themselves what they should and should not do to avoid getting sick. If there is a debate, it is not about the necessity to fight the pandemic, but only about the most effective ways to do so.

4) The events that give rise to discursive moments concern the vast majority of people for information purposes only. Even if they have monopolized the media's attention, the September 11th attacks in New York or the 2015 Islamist massacres in Paris have changed

the way of life of only a small minority of people. In the case of Covid-19, it is the whole of existence that is concerned: to preserve one's health, one must be informed about the disease.

Under these conditions, it would be more relevant to speak of "discursive saturation" rather than "discursive moment". Discursive saturation is the extreme realization of the discursive moment: the event invades the media but also the whole existence of individuals, whose smallest gestures in daily life are the subject of meticulous commentary in the media: should we wash the vegetables? Is it possible to touch elevators buttons? How far away should we stand from each other? How long does the virus survive on paper? On metal? etc. Of course, the saturation of existence is largely related to the fact that the media are saturated by statements about the coronavirus, but we cannot pretend that in the contemporary world the existence of individuals can be thought of independently of their permanent connection to the media.

## **2 Beyond popularization**

A major characteristic of the discourse generated by this pandemic is the proliferation of statements that aim to popularize knowledge about the virus: the media are swarming with experts who are invited to give explanations to laymen. However, one may wonder whether the notion of popularization is not too vague to account for this situation.

The common representation of popularization is that of a mediator who tries to translate statements from a "closed" discourse – i.e. produced for an audience that could produce the same kind of texts – to make them intelligible to an audience outside the field concerned and driven by a pure desire to understand. But this characterization covers only part of the actual situations. In the media, in fact, two kinds of popularization coexist: that which aims to disseminate knowledge, to explain scientific advances, and that which is imposed by current events, when the demand for knowledge is linked to the immediate needs of all or part of the population. This distinction is itself too summary; it can be further refined by distinguishing five categories.

1) The popularization whose purpose is above all to enrich the knowledge of a public interested in research advances. It is reserved for specialized journals or programs intended for a limited audience.

2) When popularization is aimed at a wide audience and is done through media that are not or only slightly specialized, it is supposed to resonate with the concerns of the recipients: a women's magazine publishes an article on antibiotics because mothers are concerned about antibiotic resistance; a magazine for executives devotes a few pages to artificial intelligence because journalists think that this subject is of interest to their readers, who want to understand the changes in the economy, etc.

3) News programs almost automatically trigger popularization activities: during the 2003 war in Iraq, French television channels gave a large place to the comments of military experts, hurricanes bring meteorologists to the television sets, assassinations are the business of psychiatrists or psychologists... But these explanations serve above all to shed light on the events, they do not directly concern the viewers' existence.

4) The popularization imposed by events that interest a large number of people but which have immediate and strong consequences only on a very small part of the population. One could speak of "emergency" popularization, as one speaks of "emergency medicine". Hurricane Katrina in 2005 really affected the lives of only a small part of the American people, but it did interest the entire population.

5) The popularization that is commensurate with discursive saturation: this is the case with the Covid-19 crisis. It has created a pressing demand for popularization to which the media are striving to respond. The explanations of the experts are also received as reasons to legitimize a behaviour. If a professor of medicine comes on television at prime time and says that it is useless to wear a mask, his words, whether he likes it or not, will serve to legitimize decisions made by actors in the health or political world and will influence the behaviour of part of the population. If he says that serological tests are not reliable or that antibodies only confer transitory immunity, this may incite parents to put their children in school or not, to go back to work or not, etc. A symptom of this concern is the increasing number of "dictionaries" on the Web that aim to shed light on the meaning of medical terms connected with virology.

Traditionally, popularisation is considered to be an activity that translates a "high" utterance, a word of authority, in order to adjust it to non-specialists, placed in an inferior position. However, this model is undermined by the development of digital communication, which increasingly gives space to statements that circulate in ways other than those of the dominant media and maintain a relationship of distrust, even contestation, with regard to statements coming from "above". On social networks and in the comments on articles published by websites, a multitude of utterances question the validity of texts produced by scientific authorities. This phenomenon did not appear with the Covid-19 pandemic, but it took an extreme turn on that occasion. Indeed, for a number of years now, the new channels of diffusion offered by digital technologies have made possible a systematic contestation of what could be called the political-media "Authorized Sphere", which claims to submit to norms: moral norms (refusal of discrimination, insults, etc.), but also intellectual norms (verification of sources, conformity to scientific protocols, etc.). This asymmetrical contestation is verified in the news sites themselves, where the superiority of the journalist's position is constantly called into question by its association with an indefinite number of "comments" of unknown origin. A shift in the centre of gravity then occurs: it is no longer the article that matters, but the relationship between the article and the comments it elicits.

The Covid-19 pandemic has offered a good opportunity to display this attitude. A multitude of comments or tweets accuse the Authorized Sphere of hiding the truth; they cast doubt on official figures, on the explanations given on the causes of the pandemic, they promote alternative therapies to those recommended by the health authorities, etc. These two modes of circulation of statements – those produced within the Authorized Sphere and the others – feed off each other. The actors who belong to the Authorized Sphere legitimize their status and their word by constantly denouncing "fake news" or "conspiracy theories".

In the case of Covid-19 crisis, the weakening of the traditional model of popularisation has been aggravated by the fact that within the Authorized Sphere itself the authority of

Science has been eroded. To a large extent, this loss of legitimacy can be explained by a disruption in the normal temporality of scientific publications.

In the ideal functioning of scientific production, in a first step the text begins a slow process which leads it to a possible publication, after a series of revisions requested by the reviewers. A second stage may then begin: the discussion of the results by other publications, themselves submitted to reviewers. Once a result has stabilized, either because there is a consensus among specialists or because the hypothesis is deemed credible by a significant part of the community, it can be popularised. But with the urgency created by Covid-19 crisis these filters cannot work: thousands of articles are "published" on the Web without any other control than that of their authors. Moreover – just as important – these texts are immediately read by actors closely linked to the media, so that they can be massively disseminated outside the scientific world. This diffusion inevitably generates controversies among scientists, amplified by social networks. To take a telling example, the hydroxichloroquine debate has blurred the usual boundaries between common opinion, science and politics.

### **3 Numbers**

Numbers play an essential role in our societies. Just think about the economy: stock market fluctuations, inflation rate, unemployment rate, growth rate, gross domestic product, etc. But the Covid-19 has extended this concern to previously unsuspected levels.

The world of figures is presented as that of objectivity and universality; this universality is guaranteed by a system of signs that are meant to be transcultural and therefore to be able to measure a pandemic which, by definition, is global; thanks to them, it can be represented in a homogeneous way from one part of the planet to the other. While a small minority of people regularly consult economic figures, almost everyone, or almost everyone, scrutinizes with concern the figures of the pandemic every day. And never before had the media provided so many of them, in the most diverse ways: geographical maps, curves, histograms, tables... Meticulous counts are constantly updated: for the whole world, a continent, a country, a region, a department, or even for each town: number of contaminated people, new contaminations in 24 hours, number of hospitalized patients, patients in intensive care, patients cured, number of tests performed, number of positive tests, etc. These figures are connected with others: number of newly unemployed people, full-time or part-time, proportion of trains in circulation, number of post offices open, hours at which it is permitted to play sports, legal distance from home, etc.

The covid-19 crisis is very creative in this respect. In addition to the traditional "digital representations" (curves, tables, histograms, etc.) produced by specialized organizations, many representations are produced by journalists, who compete with each other to produce, with the help of office software, representations that are both practical and accurate. New technologies even make it possible to produce embedded diagrams: for example, if on the map of a country you click on a region, you get statistics specific to that region, and so on.

These numbers – and all the numerical representations they make possible – play such an important role because they are an essential remedy for anxiety: they transform what

cannot be represented into something representable, something that can be measured and placed in well-defined cells. The virus can be seen under an electron microscope, but the pandemic as a pandemic exists only as a constellation of numbers. From the place they occupy, individuals cannot picture its spread; and this is all the more true since a large number of infected people do not show any symptoms: no one is sure that they are not infected, no one knows if the individuals they meet are infected. Numbers are the only way to reverse the balance of power: thanks to them we can dominate the evil that dominates us.

Usually, the media give figures from official organizations without systematically discussing their validity; they only serve as a basis for writing articles. With the coronavirus the situation has changed. Given the crucial role these figures play, a multitude of controversies develop over the reliability of their sources and the manipulations they may have undergone, alongside the usual debates over the effectiveness of government health policy. A large number of articles question the official figures or, in a more technical way, analyze the procedures that made it possible to construct them, while a growing number of texts reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of such kind of curve or histogram.

Discourse analysts cannot be satisfied with simply noting the crucial role played by numbers and explaining it using anthropological considerations. They are also obliged to question their relationship to this type of data.

Clearly, in general discourse analysts are not very interested in numbers. They study the use of statistics by a politician in a televised debate, but very rarely do they study the discursive path that these statistics have followed before reaching the media. This reluctance of discourse analysts can be explained in two ways. First, numbers and numerical representations are not linguistic utterances; their study is then spontaneously entrusted to other disciplines. Secondly, numbers are produced through practices that are difficult to interpret in terms of ideological positioning. Understandably, discourse analysts have a predilection for texts, and in particular for texts that can be related to a field in which positions are in conflict. But when an employee enters numbers in the boxes indicated by a software program, then sends this file to another employee, who will himself enter these data in an Excel table, then transform them into a curve generated by another program, we are far from research on political parties, school gender, interactions between doctors and patients, court trials... The study of bureaucratic practices therefore tends to be abandoned to ethnological or anthropological approaches.

At this point, discourse analysts are faced with an alternative. Either they decide that "real" discourse is only oral interactions and institutional texts, or they consider that it must be studied in all the diversity of its manifestations, in which case, given the crucial role that numbers play in our society, they must take into account the practices that make them possible, even when they do not produce texts in the usual sense of the term.

Producing figures means first of all translating perceived data into mathematical signs and arranging them in pre-established categories: patients consulting a doctor, masks stored in a warehouse, bottles of hydroalcoholic soap, etc. But it also means integrating these figures into documents designed for this purpose. These documents allow us to make diagrams, curves, etc., which are then integrated into a kind of standardized text intended to

circulate in a given space: reports, notes, balance sheets, memorandums, etc. It is on this obscure production that a wide range of institutions (research institutes, consulting firms, trade unions, NGOs, international organizations, etc.) rely to fulfil their function.

When these figures are integrated into texts produced by the media, two kinds of articles can be distinguished. Some make the staging of the figures the core of the article. Others, more frequent, include the figures in a text. It is the case with this article on the website of the newspaper *Le Figaro*.

SITUATION UPDATE - New Balance Sheets, New Measures, Highlights: Le Figaro takes stock of the latest developments of the Covid-19 pandemic.

More than 9 million cases on the planet

More than half of the cases reported worldwide are in Europe and the United States, according to a count carried out by the AFP from official sources. As of 9 p.m. Monday evening, some 9,017,016 cases of infection were reported, including 469,060 deaths. With an additional 425 deaths due to coronavirus in 24 hours on Monday, the United States now reports more than 120,000 deaths related to the pandemic. Next come Brazil (50,617 deaths), the United Kingdom (42,647), Italy (34,657) and France (29,663) (...).

<https://www.lefigaro.fr/sciences/coronavirus-plus-de-9-millions-de-cas-sur-la-planete-enquete-sur-83-clusters-en-france-20200623> ; consulté le 24 juin 2020.

This article is self-categorized in French as a "point" ("Le Figaro fait le point sur... ("takes stock of..")"). In France, this term echoes the "Point press", the daily television program where, at the height of the epidemic, the Director of Health used to come to give daily statistics. This noun "point" is a metaphor borrowed from the field of navigation: when one is on the open sea, "faire le point" means using an instrument to determine one's position thanks to the stars; this position is represented by numbers. Like the sea, the pandemic surrounds us from all sides, but we have the possibility to dominate it by numbers, provided we have the appropriate instruments and a solid chain of references.

#### **4 Between crisis and after-crisis**

When we mention the Covid-19 pandemic, the term that is widely used is "crisis". This noun may rightly seem imprecise, but it is not empty of meaning. The *Universal Philosophical Encyclopedia (Encyclopédie philosophique universelle)* characterises it in the following way: "Structure of discontinuity (...) affecting the regularly progressive development of a process whose meaning is thereby decisively and significantly altered, compromised and risked. (AUROUX (ed), 1990, p.511). This definition is underpinned by an axiological opposition: the regular process, by the very irruption of this discontinuity, retrospectively reveals itself as harmony, equilibrium threatened or lost. The medical metaphor plays a key role here: the opposition between health and disease, life and death, lies in the background. In a way, the notion of health crisis seems redundant: any crisis affects the health of an entity.



Among the crises we can distinguish a restricted subset, that of "disasters": an unexpected and brutal event that affects an entire community. Two types can be distinguished, which can be combined: material disasters (fires, hurricanes, tsunamis, etc.) and what might be called moral disasters, those that jeopardize the values of the community, causing a momentary loss of its bearings. The Islamist massacre in New York on September 11, 2001 is a good example of a moral disaster. For the Covid-19 crisis, as for serious health crises, the distinction between material and moral disasters becomes blurred: in a health crisis of this magnitude it is not only the lives of people that are at stake but also fundamental values, as the debates that have emerged show: should the economy be preferred to health? can the dying be deprived of the presence of their families? is it democratic to monitor the entire population? can religious cults be banned? etc.

Each type of disaster induces therapeutic manifestations of discourse that can be said to be "salient". For example, when the Islamist massacre occurred in Paris on November 13, 2015, political and compassionate responses prevailed. On the one hand, the government intervened immediately to denounce the enemies, launch police investigations, mobilize the army, in short, to re-establish its authority; on the other hand, we saw on social networks the outpouring of compassion towards Paris. These two types of responses can be illustrated by the following images.

The first shows the President of the Republic making a solemn declaration on television on November 14, 2015 from the Elysée Palace, a few hours after the attacks. The place chosen, the decor and the speaker's attitude are intended to reinforce the authority of his speech.



The other picture evokes the very important role played by two sentences ("I am Paris" and "Pray for Paris") to express compassion. They were massively disseminated on the web and gave rise to silent gatherings of demonstrators showing the black and white poster.



As we have seen, in the case of the Covid-19 crisis, it is neither compassion nor the affirmation of political authority that are salient in discourse production, but the intervention of experts in the media and the proliferation of information focused on numbers: two ways to reassure, to conjure up anxiety at a time when the population is looking for landmarks.

This pandemic, like the Islamist attacks of 2015, the fires in Australia in 2019 or the tsunami of 26 December 2004, is a crisis that can be said to be "exogenous" (MAINGUENEAU, 2019): a disruptive event that is brutally imposed on everyone. But alongside these crises, others can be said to be "endogenous"; in this case, the crisis in question is invisible or barely visible: it is in their texts that some speakers delimit and characterise it; they present it in such a way that they can claim to remedy it by their very enunciation. These endogenous crises are especially present in political, religious, philosophical and aesthetic discourse. The enunciator must present himself as a member of the community in order to show that he or she is deeply affected by the crisis it; but he or she must also show that he or she can take distance in order to produce a lucid and effective therapeutic word.

In the field of philosophy a good example of endogenous crisis is provided by E. Husserl's posthumous work *The crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* [=Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie (1954)]. As its title indicates, the work is based on the diagnosis of a crisis: the Greek project of a "humanity born from reason", at the source of mathematics and philosophy, would have been lost in the progressive autonomy of science. But this crisis, which is considered as a precondition for enunciation, is in fact constructed by Husserl's text, and it justifies the need for the phenomenological philosophy that claims to remedy it.

One of the interests of this Covid-19 crisis is that it was accompanied, at least in France, by a multiform discourse on the "post-crisis", which implies the identification of an endogenous crisis. Two discourses have thus become intertwined. The first is predictable: it is the discourse on the causes of the pandemic, its nature and the remedies that can be used to combat it. The second, which is less expected, transfers the crisis to another level: instead of focusing on the return to normality, on the pre-crisis, many people try to identify, beyond the pandemic crisis, another crisis that was already there and that Covid-19 would have revealed. This type of argument, which consists in moving from one crisis to another, supposedly deeper, is commonly used in political discourse. A good example can be found in France in the founding text of the far-left party "New Anticapitalist Party" (NPA), which was adopted in a congress on February 8, 2009. Its signatories say they want to state a

"response to the globalized crisis of capitalism" by promoting "a 21st century socialism that is democratic, ecological and feminist". Whereas Husserl was trying to remedy a crisis that bears his signature (not all philosophers agree in diagnosing this philosophical crisis that only exists if one adopts the point of view of Husserl's phenomenology), the NPA relies on an exogenous economic crisis whose effects could be felt by all: from 01/01/2008 to 24/10/2008, the shares listed on the Paris Stock Exchange lost no less than 43.11% of their value. The foundation of the NPA thus came at a time when the formula "the crisis", associated with a singular definite article, was circulating everywhere in the media. The problem of the NPA leaders was then to reinterpret this crisis, so as to make another, much more important crisis appear beyond it; this appears from the beginning of the first section of the text entitled "Capitalism puts humanity and the planet in danger":

The capitalist system generates *crises* that combine: food, economic, ecological, energy, financial, health, social, international tensions and wars, the consequences of which are always dramatic. Globalisation marked by an offensive of the ruling classes against the workers and peoples to increase profits leads to a deep and structural *crisis* of the capitalist mode of production itself (my emphasis).

We pass from the plural "crises" to "a crisis" that subsumes them all: "a deep and structural crisis of the capitalist mode of production itself". This calls for a "radical critique" of this economic system. The enunciation constructs the crisis that calls it into existence by relying on the uneasiness that "the current crisis" provokes in the recipient community, categorised as "exploited population". The crisis that the text deals with is therefore not just a topic: it is both the condition and the product of an enunciation that relies on it to justify its right to speak.

We find this pattern with Covid-19: in the same way as the economic crisis of 2008, the crisis of the pandemic is interpreted as the revelation of another crisis, deeper and with multiple effects, which each one, according to his or her ideological positioning, profiles in its own way: a crisis engendered by capitalism, neo-liberalism, consumerism, productivism, modernity, rationalism, Western civilisation, globalisation, individualism, etc. Without the construction of a pre-crisis prior to the health crisis it would not be possible to heal the ills of society, to define a "post-crisis".

## **Conclusion**

What I have just said about crises can be applied to discourse analysis itself when confronted with the Covid-19 pandemic. Discourse analysts may or may not decide to readjust some of their categories or procedures to take the measure of the health crisis; but if they decide to make adjustments, they are not obliged to integrate them into the frame of an endogenous crisis that would be a deep crisis of discourse analysis that the epidemic would have revealed. However, this possibility cannot be ruled out; it all depends on how the situation evolves. One thing is certain, however: this crisis, like any crisis that affects

society in depth, makes therapeutic discourses proliferate. Interestingly, these corpora remind us of a dimension of language that we tend to forget in normal times: speech does not only serve to inform. In times of serious crisis, there is no more neutral speech; it is only about health or illness, life or death: the media do not only talk about the health crisis, their words also help to reassure or worry, to heal or make people sick. And it is on the basis of this simple and brutal criterion that everything that is said in the media is constantly evaluated.

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