

# ANALYZING TEXT and DISCOURSE

Eight Approaches for the Social Sciences

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# 1

## Analyzing Text and Discourse in the Social Sciences

Göran Bergström and Kristina Boréus

A university lecturer wakes up in the morning. After her hot shower she quickly registers a few headlines in the daily paper before she puts it down on the breakfast table and turns on the radio morning news which also presents sports results. Uninterested, she turns the radio off and cannot avoid reading about the qualities of her cereals on the package while having breakfast. On the Underground she stares at an ad for electronics which claim to be very suitable as Christmas presents. Walking from the metro station to the university she is presented with a leaflet about a new exhibition and passing through the corridors to her office she registers pieces of texts on posters, information boards and cafeteria menus. During most of her workday she will be working with texts, consuming and producing them, while in lots and lots of other workplaces people will also read and write, speak and listen to others, all day long.

### 1.1 Texts in the study of power and other social phenomena

Before her workday has even begun the fictive lecturer above has been exposed to a large number of texts – some of which she has chosen to read, others that are just there as unavoidable parts of her surroundings. As this little story is meant to illustrate, texts are crucially important in modern societies. For that reason, they are also important objects of analysis for the social sciences. Through its different disciplines, people in societies are researched. The objects of study include power, politics, families, oppression, governments, equality, inequality, crime, economic markets, traditions, migration, conflict, consensus and many other social phenomena. Obviously when such phenomena are studied, texts are crucial artefacts.

Just to illustrate the importance of texts with an example from the list of social phenomena: take governments. They take decisions formulated in texts and express their proposals textually to parliaments. There are texts that regulate what governments may and may not do. In government departments, large amounts of texts circulate every day. Governments are criticized in texts. Not only do texts need to be studied by those who want to learn about governments, it is also difficult to imagine studies of governments that would not use texts as part of their materials. It is indeed hard to think of any social phenomena the study of which would not need the analysis of texts in the wide sense of 'text' that will be explained in this chapter. Before we turn to what a text is, we will exemplify how textual analysis might be applied when the object of study is the first one in the list above: power. Power is very often examined in social research and power-related issues will be used throughout the book to exemplify how texts can be analyzed in the social sciences. The examples here illustrate how the complex objects of study of the social sciences are constructed in different ways and how these differences imply different tasks for textual analysis.

There are several different ways of conceptualizing power. Steven Lukes (2005) describes it as having three dimensions (or faces). According to the **first dimension of power**,<sup>1</sup> power is about making somebody do what they would not otherwise have done. A typical example is when a decision is taken by a political body and those in opposition have to yield to the majority. In using such a concept of power texts like voting protocols and texts that express opinions could be analyzed. The **second dimension of power** is broader: the usage of **non-decision making**, when some issues are never put to a vote, perhaps due to shifty agenda-setting techniques, is also power. In this case, crucial texts can exist outside the arenas of decision making and could include statements or petitions from groups whose issues are excluded from the decision-making process. The **third dimension of power**, according to Lukes, is about manipulating people to want things that are not really in their interest. When such power over the minds and souls of people is studied, other texts become relevant. It might be assumed, for instance, that mass media play an important role in making people hold certain beliefs. In this case, mass media texts would be important to study. Pictures might be interesting to analyze from all the mentioned perspectives, but presumably most important for the third dimension of power. Images can influence us in partly unconscious ways, avoiding our shield of critical thinking – which is why they are so important in advertising.

The social sciences also use other concepts of power, such as that formulated by Michel Foucault. According to Foucault, studying power is not about finding out which agents have power over others, the way Lukes conceptualizes power studies. In Foucault's conceptualization, individuals do not have power – they are

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<sup>1</sup>Note that the first time a term is explained or discussed in the book it will appear in bold.

instead **locations of power** (Foucault, 1980). Power is diffused, always shifting and present, almost everywhere, not least in the details – what Foucault refers to as the **micro-physics of power**. Power exists between people and within people as self-discipline. When studying power, one should analyze how it is exercised, its technologies – is it exercised e.g. by weapons, by linguistic means or through different forms of surveillance and control? The way power is institutionalized should also be investigated: institutions like families, prisons and mental hospitals create different conditions for power (Foucault, 1994: xv–xvi). An example of how texts can be used to study technologies of power and their institutionalization is provided when Foucault, in one of his major studies, *Madness and Civilization* (2001 [1967]), examines the shifting meaning of ‘madness’ in European culture, law, medicine and other contexts from the Middle Ages until the end of the nineteenth century. He uses not only texts that describe madness but also texts that describe how those considered mad were treated during different periods. Thus, Foucault uses reports by inspectors of the institutions where ‘the mad’ were confined that describe how they were treated – which can be understood as descriptions of the technologies of power used within institutions – to interpret how madness was understood. Such descriptions could give us important clues about how people with mental diseases were conceptualized at different points in time: e.g. as criminals that needed ‘correction’ or as animals that could not be corrected but needed to be locked away.

According to a conceptualization of power based in **critical realism**, a theory of science referred to by Norman Fairclough as related to CDA, critical discourse analysis (see Chapter 8), power is a potential: defined as possibilities created within the social structures in which agents (individuals or groups) act. Analyzing texts becomes a first necessary step in assessing how power is reproduced and how it changes (Fairclough, 1992: 113). If the project is to study how power changes in academia, we need to analyze policy documents and texts in which universities describe what they do and ask how the content of such documents and texts has changed over time. We also need to study which groups are allowed to influence important decisions in academia, such as the distribution of research grants and the content of the education (see Fairclough, 2015: 73–6). To analyze the texts is to study the ‘empirical’ domain (Bhaskar, 1978/2008: 56), which is necessary to get at the mechanisms that affect power relations which are to be found in the ‘real’ domain. Fairclough has often referred to the shifts in power relations between university staff, politicians, students and commercial interests as a result of changes in capitalism (Fairclough, 2015: 63–7).

As the examples show, texts can hardly be avoided in the study of power or other social phenomena. They are not the only things that ought to be analyzed: social practices need to be studied through observations of how people go about doing things; it might be necessary to ask people and to study other artefacts of societies, such as buildings. It might also be indispensable to study the distribution of goods such as money, arms or the ownership of the means of production. But text studies of one kind or the other are crucial to the sciences of people and societies.

A view of textual analysis as a method for the social sciences we would like to promote is that texts in one way or another relate to people and groups of people. People have created the texts and people are their addressees. Texts mirror conscious ideas as well as unconscious ones. They might reproduce, strengthen or challenge power and they also do myriads of other things in social settings. They can be studied in the quest for learning about relations between individuals or groups of people. It is in this way that texts become interesting from a social scientific point of view. They might also be highly interesting for other reasons, like stylistic or aesthetic ones, but that is not what this book is about.

As with any method, a student who wants to learn to use text studies will need to get a grasp of the basic ideas and techniques. The aim of this book is to function as a guide in such a learning process. The rest of this chapter is meant as a manual for reading and using the book. To begin with we explicate the central concepts of sign, text, genre and discourse.

## 1.2 Sign, text, genre and discourse

A basic concept in textual analysis is that of the sign. **Semiotics**, as elaborated by Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure (the latter of which used the word **semiology**), is the science of signs within human communication. A **sign** in language is conceptualized as the combination of a **concept** and a **sound-image**. When talking about trees we utter the word that is pronounced /tri:/ in British English, and it has a written image: tree. 'Tree' is the sound-image of the sign. The sound-image is called the **signifier** and it signifies the concept of trees – the general idea of what trees are that we carry with us – which is the **signified** part of the sign. Figure 1.1 is a diagram based on Ferdinand de Saussure's definition of a sign.

Parts of the sign	Example
Sound-image (signifier)	'tree', 'träd', 'árbol', 'Baum', 'puu'...
Concept (signified)	The concept of trees

**Figure 1.1** The sign, according to Saussure (Source: based on Berger, 2014: 8)

The relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary: the concept of a tree could well be signified with other written or spoken words – which it is in other languages. This is the basic problem of interpretation: there is no natural connection between the words read or heard and the concepts they refer to. The meanings of signifiers are learned by individuals as social beings in relation to shared cultural understandings but not once and for all:

Anyone who communicates uses associations between signifiers and signifieds all the time. Because in real life the relationships are arbitrary and change rapidly, one must be on one's toes all the time. Signifiers can become dated and change their significance all too quickly. (Berger, 2014: 8)

Apart from words a vast amount of other phenomena have meanings and thus function as signs: when it comes to people, their clothing, hairstyles, brands of sunglasses, gestures, facial expressions and a lot else carry meaning. These become signs and obtain their meaning through culture and communication. Semiotics is not only about how meaning is created, but also about relations between signs. In semiotics all kinds of meaningful systems of signs are referred to with the word **text**: written documents, pictures, films, advertisements, parades, plays and other cultural products. In this book we use this wide concept of text that includes not only written text but also pictures, film, spoken text (such as speeches by political leaders) and other cultural products. The book is thus about how to analyze not only different kinds of texts, including written texts and images, but also **multimodal** ones – texts comprising different forms of communication – such as written messages and images which interact in conveying meaning.

Written texts are distinguished from random lists of letters or words by being coherent, communicative and cohesive. Being **coherent** means that they have themes that are rationally organized and can be followed in given cultural contexts. Being **communicative** refers to having a message, being meaningful to someone and requiring some kind of reaction from a person reading the text. **Cohesive** refers to how texts are delimited and internally kept together through linguistic means such as lexical repetition or referencing within the text (see Halliday and Hasan, 1976). Pictures and other non-written texts are also coherent (even though coherence in pictures is interpreted differently from that in written texts), communicative and to some extent cohesive through, for instance, uses of similar colour schemes in composite images.

Languages and other systems of signs, and therefore texts, can be understood to have three main functions, two of which are of particular importance for this book (see Fowler, 1991: 68–70; Halliday and Hasan, 1976). First, language is used to express thoughts and ideas. The **text producer** (author, speaker) uses language to reflect, to express their ideas about the world around them and their inner experiences. Such ideas are expressed in texts. This aspect is referred to as the **ideational** or **content aspect** of texts. Second, we use language in our social relations with others, e.g. to express an opinion, inform somebody about something, ask a question, greet somebody, give an order, or joke. Language is thus used not only for reflection but also for action. This aspect is called the **interpersonal aspect** of language. (The third function is the **textual** one that connects the other two functions into interpretable, communicative texts. Put differently, the textual metafunction has to do with how words and clauses are combined into coherent and cohesive texts.) If we take this book as an example, we, the authors,

have spent a lot of work on its ideational aspect. We have, for instance, wanted to express a particular view of how textual analysis ought to be used within social sciences and how to explain methods clearly. We have also considered the interpersonal aspects of the text and asked ourselves questions such as who it is we are writing for, what function do we want the book to fill in academia, and what kind of reactions would we like to get. Related to these questions we have considered how to write clearly, what style and tone are appropriate, and so on.

Texts follow given conventions with regard to how they are both produced and consumed. They belong to different **genres**. Texts like news stories in daily papers, articles in journals of anthropology, children's school essays, emails and this book belong to different genres. Also texts that are not written – a telemarketer's interaction with a potential customer, a romcom movie, or a photo of a convict in a police file – can be said to belong to particular genres. Genres develop over time and in particular contexts. Texts in different genres have different purposes and uses. A recipe is meant to guide cooking, not to amuse or convince people to take certain political action. This is taken for granted both by the authors of cookbooks and someone who wishes to make a sponge cake at home. Genres can also be recognized by their special content, what they are about (McQuail, 2010: 370). Recipes are about quantities of ingredients and how to mix and treat these to obtain a certain result. They are also structured in a genre-specific way, often beginning with a short description of the dish to be made, and thereafter listing ingredients and what quantities to use, followed by a step-by-step description of how to make the dish.

We have now travelled from signs, the building blocks of texts, to genres or text types. The fourth basic concept to be introduced in this section is that of **discourse**. In Chapter 8 on discourse analysis there is a detailed explanation of different concepts of discourse. Here we will simply point to some common characteristics. Common to concepts of discourse used in the social sciences is that they refer to some kind of **social practice** as regards language use or the use of other sign systems in particular social contexts. Social practices are ways in which humans do things: patterns of action, habits and conventions that follow more or less explicit rules. Examples of social practices at universities are how teaching is carried out; how students interact at lunch breaks; which routines are followed when the university buildings are cleaned; and how staff wages are decided. In people's social practices, language use is crucial. Discourses are wholly or partly made up of language use as part of wider social practices. According to a narrower definition of 'discourse', discourses are merely the linguistic aspects of the wider social practices; according to other definitions 'discourse' refers to more aspects of social practices than only what is said or written. Both the narrower and the wider discourse concepts, in one way or another, connect rules and conventions for how people speak and write to other ways they act in societies. According to the narrow definition the discourse of university teaching would include how lecturers speak when they lecture or lead seminars, what they talk



about (and what they keep silent about), which terms they use, the content of pictures and other material they use in teaching, and how that material is composed. According to the wider definition, the teaching discourse could also include the way lecturers move about (or stand still) in lecture halls, where students sit in relation to their teachers, and which software and equipment are used in teaching, from PowerPoint slides to microphones. Texts are concrete manifestations of discourses, such as a particular lecture given by a particular teacher or what they have noted on the whiteboard.

### 1.3 Approaches to textual analysis

To analyze something is to identify and scrutinize its components. Different approaches to textual analysis are about identifying and studying different parts of texts, different phenomena that relate to the two basic aspects of texts mentioned above, the ideational and the interpersonal. The book presents eight broad, partly overlapping, approaches.

**Content analysis** is used both within the humanities and social sciences. By conducting content analysis a student might make comparisons based on quantifications of different elements in texts, which may be useful, for example, if the purpose is to study changes over time. If it is found that the frequencies of certain words in certain genres, such as editorials, change over time, this could be a sign of ideological change. Content analysis might focus on both the ideational and the interpersonal aspects of texts. The approach is sometimes divided into qualitative and quantitative content analysis, respectively. In this book we treat these varieties as different in degree rather than in kind.

**Argumentation analysis**, which focuses on the structure of argumentation, is also in use in both the social sciences and the humanities and comes in several varieties. It might be of interest to study aspects of what different agents are arguing for or against, and with which arguments. Argumentation analysis is about the ideational aspect of texts since it studies certain ideas expressed in texts. Argumentation is used for persuasion. But people will use other means than arguments when trying to persuade, such as addressing someone's feelings rather than their intellect. Argumentation analysis is related to the wider approach of **rhetoric**, which is seen as an approach to the interpersonal aspect of attempts to persuade.

**Qualitative analysis of ideas and ideological content** is an approach with methodological roots and a long and venerable ancestry of studies in theology, history, philosophy, law, literature and political science. The key concepts are ideology and its component single ideas; the focus is on intentional action. Ideologies are analyzed as consisting of ideas which guide the actions and interactions that make up society with its institutions, social relations and power relations. The aim is to identify, interpret, describe and classify the ideological content in thought and language not only in existing institutions and social fields, but

also in the debates, movements and organizations striving for preservation or change of the social order.

From its origins as a method used almost exclusively by historians, **narrative analysis** has spread to all branches of the social sciences and beyond. It involves the explication of stories as a way of gaining insights into ideological power and 'common-sense' understandings of the way the world works. A student might be interested in which components constitute a narrative, in what order different kinds of events take place and what roles there are in the story. Or they might want to study how something is narrated, e.g. whether the story-teller keeps their distance from the characters in a story or if they seem engaged with their destinies. The ideational aspect is most central in narrative analysis.

In the chapter on **metaphor analysis** and **critical linguistics** we have brought together two approaches to textual analysis with their roots in different fields of linguistics: metaphor analysis, as it is conducted within cognitive linguistics, and critical linguistics. Both approaches can be used to uncover less explicit ideological content in texts. The kind of metaphor analysis explained in this chapter is about the ideational aspect of texts, the idea being to reveal how people conceptualize abstract and complex social phenomena by studying which metaphors they use. Researchers who depart from critical linguistics claim that both grammar and choice of words in a text convey information about the world view expressed in that text. The ideational aspect of texts is central here, too.

In the chapter on **multimodal discourse analysis** we present tools for analyzing many visual resources and their ideational and interpersonal aspects. Images of all kinds, like written texts, can be manifestations of discourses. Interest in studying both pictures as such and multimodal texts, e.g. how writing and pictures interact on a website, has been growing lately. Although both verbal language and pictures can represent reality and are used to create and maintain social relations, they do so in different ways. In verbal language aspects such as the composition of a clause are used to express offers or demands; in pictures an important way in which this is done is by humans' different ways of looking at the viewer.

**Discourse analysis** – henceforth often DA – is also used both within humanities and the social sciences. As explained above, a way to understand a discourse is either as linguistic practice in context or as linguistic and other kinds of social practice. Aspects of discourses that might be studied are the frames for what ought (not) to be said in a particular context, which categories are in use and what is taken for granted but not explicitly expressed. The overarching purpose of DA is often to study issues related to power, an example being how different categories of people (like 'the mad' in Foucault's analysis referred to above) are linguistically constructed and how this might affect their possibilities to act. Discourse analysis is used to study the ideational aspects of texts.

The different approaches presented in this book have grown out of different academic traditions, and studies inspired by them are more or less clearly anchored

in particular theories of science. In some of the chapters we discuss issues to do with the theory of science. We deal with two general aspects, epistemology and language. In the next section we introduce a few basic ideas that will be revisited in coming chapters.

## 1.4 Textual analysis, language and learning about the world

The theory of science deals with **ontology**, i.e. the issue of what is real and what exists, and **epistemology**, issues regarding knowledge and how we can know things. A number of epistemological questions will be brought up in the following chapters. Central epistemological questions are whether it is possible to know anything about reality and how we can obtain knowledge. One position here is that it is, at least in principle, possible to reach true knowledge. The **empiricists**, close to the school of **logical positivism** that was active from the late 1920s (Carnap, 2002 [1928]), claimed that it is possible to gain knowledge by using our senses and that scientific knowledge can be reached using a **neutral observation language**, a language for scientific descriptions that would be neutral and objective in the sense of being related to the sensory experiences common to human beings (Kitcher, 2002). This neutral observation language would relate to reality and refer to its parts in exact ways. More modern scholars influenced by the empiricists consider these ideas too simplistic but still stress the relationship to sensory impressions and the distinction between reality and language.

The possibility of a neutral observation language is rejected by other approaches. They treat language as central and often claim that our knowledge is based in language. According to a **constructivist** view of language and reality, the two cannot be separated. We cannot meaningfully speak about reality without language working as a lens that makes us see things in certain ways. While the idea about the neutral observation language implies that it is possible to construct a language that adequately represents reality, this is impossible according to the constructivist idea. At least when it comes to ourselves as human beings and the societies we inhabit, there cannot be anything like neutral representation. Our minds create, through language, ways of seeing the world. It is meaningless to speak about realities other than those that we create for ourselves in our societies (Barthes, 1993 [1970]; Berger and Luckmann, 1966).

Yet another epistemological position is the above mentioned critical realism, developed by Roy Bhaskar, which can be considered a position in between the somewhat simplistic empiricist ideas on how to gain knowledge about reality and constructivism. According to critical realism it is possible to obtain knowledge about the **real domain** of social mechanisms by studying phenomena in the **empirical domain**, which is accessible through our sensory experiences and by studying processes that take place in what is referred to as the **actual domain**. While it is possible, according to critical realism, to gain knowledge about reality,

data must be considered as dependent on our theories (Bhaskar, 1978/2008: 56–7; Collier, 1994: 52–4). Bhaskar’s epistemology differs from positivism, which he sees as the dominating theory of science of our time – ‘an ideology’, as he refers to it. He does not accept the idea that we would be able to constitute an empirical world simply through our senses: reality cannot be reduced to a series of events that could be represented more or less automatically. Critical realism, however, also rejects positions that are often considered to be typical for constructivism, e.g. its inherent scepticism towards scientific knowledge and that all knowledge should be of equal worth (Bhaskar, 1986: 228–30).

**Poststructuralist** approaches emphasize the role of language and deny given meanings of social phenomena. Constructivism is one of their keystones, meaning that knowledge can never be neutral. In post-structural traditions such as some kinds of discourse analysis the term **essentialism** is used to question the empiricist way of understanding how knowledge can be gained. Poststructuralists criticize the tendency for social sciences to take categories like ‘women’, ‘man’ or ‘class’ as givens (Butler, 2007; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). The category ‘man’ has no previously existing essence but is created in discourse. The category is differently constructed in different societies and at different times. It might also be differently constructed within different social groups in the same geographic setting. Thus poststructuralism defends anti-essentialism. Anti-essentialists argue for a pluralist approach to science (e.g. Rorty, 1995).

The poststructuralist emphasis on the unique role of language in understanding reality has been criticized from several standpoints. The current theory of **new materialism** comprises a critique aimed both at the idea that nature is reflected in language and the idea that language is the basis for our concept of reality (Barad, 2003; Åsberg et al., 2011). Another critique of poststructuralism aims at its unclear ontological and epistemological positions, sometimes described as relativistic. This kind of critique has also been aimed at poststructuralist discourse-analytical approaches. An attempt to meet this challenge is made by Howarth and Glynn (2007) who try to develop a stringent philosophy of science for discourse theory, i.e. the kind of discourse analysis primarily based on the writings of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; 2008). As stated above, another variety of DA, critical discourse analysis as developed by Norman Fairclough, starts out from critical realism (Fairclough, 2010).

## 1.5 Textual analysis and interpretation

The verb ‘to interpret’ has two meanings in this book. On the one hand, it refers to the fact that texts must be interpreted: they must be understood, the meaning of what is stated must be drawn out of the text; signifiers must be related to particular signifieds. On the other hand, it refers to the step in the research process that follows the textual analysis where the meaning of the results is interpreted, i.e. their

significance for the social scientific problem that the analysis was meant to shed light on. In this section we will only discuss interpretation in the first sense.

Both written texts and pictures need interpretation. Regardless of how the text is analyzed – through argumentation analysis, narrative analysis or other approaches – it has to be interpreted. Interpretation is a more or less complex process. The complexity is due to the research problem one is working on, the nature of the text itself and the kind of analytical approach chosen. In a content analysis where words are encoded, interpretation problems might not occur. In a discourse analysis in which both explicit and implicit meaning are important, the interpretation problems are likely to be more challenging.

We will begin with the interpretation context most relevant for the reader of this book: interpreting texts in order to conduct a social scientific study. This context is different from many others in which interpretations are made: e.g. reading a novel for pleasure or when people interpret each other's body language in everyday encounters. In this particular context of interpretation there are a number of crucial elements: the text, the discourse that the text is a manifestation of, the context in which it occurs, the text producer, the primary receiver or addressee of the text and the interpreting analyst, i.e. the researcher. The text producer might be a single person or an organized group of people, like an NGO, a board or a government. The interpreting analyst is a receiver, too, but a particular one. Firstly, because they do not interpret a text – say an advertisement – in exactly the same way as the addressees the advert was originally meant for, referred to here as the **primary addressee**. Secondly, because the analyst might have a particular interest, namely to interpret the primary addressee's understanding of the advert, hence they are interpreting an interpretation.

From these elements we will develop four strategies of interpretation: one that primarily relates the interpretation to the analyst, one that relates it to the producer of the text, one that relates it to the primary addressees and one that relates it to the discourse without focusing on particular agents. Neither of these strategies is pure: normally one does a little bit of everything but with different emphasis. In this context we will introduce a fundamental insight from **hermeneutics**, the art and theory of reading and interpreting, namely the role of the prejudices with which every reader approaches a text.

According to the **analyst-oriented strategy** the text means what the analyst reads into it. Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) stresses that every reader comes to a text with prejudices (Gadamer, 1989). The analyst is interpreting a text from their particular historical horizon. Without prejudices, interpretation is not possible. Our individual experiences, our understanding of the world, the social context in which we exist, our education, our knowledge of the genre of the text, our language, all influence our interpretation. Gadamer describes the analyst's own historically and socially conditioned prejudices as the starting point from which it is at all possible to appreciate texts from other times and cultures. The meaning of the text changes, since different readers interpret it differently

in different historical contexts. It is impossible to reconstruct exactly what the author wanted to say with the text, hence also how other addressees have interpreted it. The text and we as socially and historically conditioned interpreters are what matters. Understanding texts is a never-ending process; the horizon of the interpreter is always integrated with other historically-determined horizons (Gadamer, 1975). The Gadamerian strategy can be described as putting the analyst at the centre. Most important, in our understanding, is awareness of the prejudices that always exist: we never meet a text as clean slates.

A variety of this interpretative strategy occurs when the analyst uses special tools or interprets with particular purposes related to the study that would be foreign to both the text producer and the primary addressees. To interpret Jean-Jacques Rousseau's texts with the help of game theory does not teach us a lot either about what Rousseau wanted to express or about how contemporary readers understood the text (see Hermansson, 1992 for such an interpretation). Rousseau was an eighteenth-century philosopher while modern game theory was developed in the twentieth century. But such an interpretation can be of value for other purposes, e.g. to generate new ideas or to show logical relations between elements in texts. It shows a new reading made possible by the new tools. This interpretation strategy can thus be seen as an extreme variety of Gadamer's way of reading.

The **producer-oriented strategy** is primarily focused on the meaning of the text at its production, not at its reception. The meaning of the text is decided by what the person or the people that formulated it meant it to mean. In hermeneutics Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) is often referred to as a researcher who considered interpretation to be a reconstruction of what the text producer meant, a form of interpretation that Gadamer opposed (Schleiermacher, 1998). Historians of ideas often use this way of reading when studying texts by dead authors. Art might also be interpreted that way.

In relation to this kind of interpretation Quentin Skinner gives us some sophisticated advice, the essence of which is, firstly, that it is essential to understand what kind of **speech act**<sup>2</sup> – what is *done* by this act of using language – has been carried out by producing the text. Did the author write a piece of social satire, a scientific report, a political pamphlet or something else? To be able to decide one has to be familiar with the kind of speech acts that were, or are, usually carried out by producing texts of that particular kind. What is an author of news articles, economic reports or medical records supposed to be writing (Skinner, 1988a)? Secondly, the meaning of the text must be interpreted in relation to the given author's language use and way of arguing. Skinner (1988b) stresses the importance of not reading one's own (the interpreter's) meaning into the terms used in the text. This is crucial when studying old texts, but the vocabulary does not need to be that old for

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<sup>2</sup>The concept of speech act is drawn from linguist J.L. Austin (1975) but Skinner's use of the concept is wider than is usual in linguistics.

the interpreter to fall into linguistic traps. Thirdly, knowledge of context is very important for good interpretations. The context should, however, not be seen as decisive for what is expressed in texts but rather be of help for determining the frames inside which reasonable interpretations can be made.

Stuart Hall (1994) also has advice to offer to those interpreting texts from the perspective of the text producer. He is less interested in particular individuals (such as Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill or whatever author's texts are being interpreted) and more interested in societal structures and the positions created by them for different agents. He concentrates on what resembles Skinner's first point. What might – say – a journalist on a TV channel in a particular part of India in the mid-2010s be doing when publishing a TV news report? What frames are created by technical issues, format of the news programme, owners of the TV channel and other social structures? What are the production routines, professional ideologies and the news producers' conceptions of their audience? Here Skinner's third advice for interpretation should be remembered, that the frames are just frames inside which great variation is possible.

When interpreting images we also use knowledge about conventions to understand what the text producer wanted to convey. We know that text inside a balloon above somebody's head in a comic tells us what the person says and that the cartoonist wants to convey that the person is in pain and dizzy when they draw a ring of little stars around the head of a character that has for example just been beaten over the head. This example illustrates the importance of a knowledge of conventions, in particular text genres, for the interpretation of texts, while the genres in themselves partly decide what speech acts are possible.

The purpose of the **addressee-oriented strategy** is to understand which meaning a particular text might have for its primary audience. The meaning of the text is determined by its reception, just as stated by Gadamer. In media reception studies it might be asked how certain groups of people – the poorly educated, the highly educated, people in blue- or white-collar jobs, female, male, young or old – tend to interpret a certain news item. Hall explains that different social groups interpret what they read, hear and watch from different frames of interpretation and sets of values. This interpretation strategy is thus about learning about the prejudices of others and how they meet with texts. Of relevance to some studies in this context is the concept of **preferred reading** (Hall, 1994), which refers to the reading that a text producer intended the addressees to make, or, more loosely, to a dominant reading that most people would have made at the time. But people also interpret messages in ways other than those intended by text producers and might produce oppositional readings, using alternative frames of reference.

According to the **discourse-oriented strategy** the text receives its meaning from a wider discourse in which agents are not the primary focus. In discourse analysis this is the most common strategy of interpretation. The meaning of a particular text is thus understood through other texts that it is related to and from discourses that the texts manifest. It works the other way round as

well: the discourse as a whole is interpreted and understood from interpretations of many single texts. Discursive patterns – such as how categories are used, and the claims and evaluations that are made when particular subject matters are treated in particular contexts – are studied in a systematic fashion and these patterns are related to a wider social reality. An example of an interpretation of patterns in discourses not primarily interested in agents is Fredric Jameson's the **political unconscious**. He creates Marxian interpretations of fiction written in certain social conditions and finds in them expressions of social contradictions being symbolically processed in narratives (Jameson, 1989). This interpretation strategy is also used for images, symbols and multimodal texts. Recurrent images of the nation's flag as well as photos of triumphant members of the national team lifting the victory trophy towards the sky may be interpreted as **banal nationalism** (Billig, 1995), i.e. an everyday recurrent message that 'we' belong to the same nation which we naturally feel is ours, which we esteem and want to defend. Individual images of flags could not be interpreted in this way: every single image gets its potential meaning by being part of a social practice in which flags and other national symbols are often depicted.

Table 1.1 summarizes the four interpretation strategies. In practice, interpretations normally focus on several aspects.

To what degree the different interpretation strategies should be kept apart depends on the study. The meaning of the text encoded by the producer and how it is interpreted by its addressees will often overlap if they share a society and culture.

**Table 1.1** Interpretation strategies

<i>Interpretation strategy</i>	<i>Whose meaning is in focus?</i>	<i>What aspects should be studied?</i>	<i>Example of use</i>
Analyst-oriented strategy	The analyst's as an addressee with special interpretative purposes	Patterns and particularities in texts available using particular interpretative tools	Specialized kinds of interpretations
Producer-oriented strategy	The text producers' as individuals or groups of people	The producer's particular social position and the speech acts likely to be performed in certain genres from that position; the addresser's normal language use; context	The history of ideas; interpretations of art and literature
Addressee-oriented strategy	The primary addressee's	Addressees as agents in particular social positions	Media reception studies
Discourse-oriented strategy	Meaning created through discourse	Discursive patterns regarding particular subject matters in particular contexts and the discourse in relation to its social context	Discourse analysis



The analyst might also be part of the same social context. In practice, many of the same steps should be taken whichever interpretation strategy is chosen.

We will end the discussion of interpretation with a practical example of interpretation in line with the producer-oriented strategy, which might easily be tilted towards the discourse-oriented strategy.<sup>3</sup> The example shows practical tools that will serve in most cases of interpretation. The text to be interpreted is a short passage from a well-known ideological text, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, namely the preamble. The first goal is to interpret its meaning according to its authors.

A spectre is hunting Europe - the spectre of Communism. All the powers of the old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre: Pope and Czar, Metternich and Guizot, French Radicals and German police spies.

Where is the party in opposition that has not been decried as Communistic by its opponents in power? Where the opposition that has not hurled back the branding reproach of Communism, against the more advanced opposition parties, as well as against its reactionary adversaries?

Two things result from this fact:

- I. Communism is already acknowledged by all European powers to be itself a power.
- II. It is high time that Communists should openly, in the face of the whole world, publish their views, their aims, their tendencies, and meet the nursery tale of the Spectre of Communism with a Manifesto of the party itself.

To this end, Communists of various nationalities have assembled in London, and sketched the following Manifesto to be published in the English, French, German, Italian, Flemish and Danish languages.

To start at the word-level, we do not think that the prejudices of a modern reader would make them, as Skinner warns, fall into traps. The word usage is rather modern and there is no need to consult an English dictionary from the time of the text production. Yet the text includes several words that need to be interpreted in their historical context to make sense to a modern reader. We find words that refer to historical persons, events or situations like the 'holy alliance', 'Metternich', 'Guizot', 'French Radicals', 'the nursery tale of the spectre', 'police spies'. These words are all void of meaning without specific background knowledge that must be obtained from encyclopedias, historical or political research, or textbooks.

Another kind of words whose interpretation might cause problems are 'Communism' and 'Communists'. What do they refer to? Do the authors have specific movements or ideologists-philosophers in mind? These questions could possibly be answered in the following parts of the *Manifesto*, or in other related

<sup>3</sup>This part of the chapter was written with Mats Lindberg.

texts by the authors. Another complicated term is ‘the party’, with a definite article, where we should avoid the pitfall that Skinner warns against, inferring ideas of what a party is from our own present word use. In 1848 in Europe there was no such thing as the modern party system. So what kind of entity does ‘the party’ refer to – something already existing or something hoped for?

Background knowledge gained from previous literature is thus indispensable. In some cases we will also need more textual material from the authors to be able to understand their usage of single words. We might also need to consult other relevant texts of the time. Lastly, we will need at least some knowledge of the historic situation to understand what the authors were saying. Just in the short preamble of the Manifesto several prominent statesmen representing different governments and diverse political movements are mentioned. Movements or political tendencies of the time were the monarchist, the national republican, the liberal radical, the reformist, and the socialist ‘parties’; all lining up in different camps and with different power resources in the shattering turmoil of the upcoming revolution of 1848. Thus, knowledge about the social context in which the authors produced the text, as well as about their standard use of language, is indispensable. More knowledge about the particular speech act – what the authors were doing when launching a manifesto – would also help.

Thus, a successful interpretation focusing the producer’s meaning normally needs four kinds of textual material: 1) the chosen text itself; 2) the relevant surrounding textual **corpus** (i.e. collection of texts of a certain kind) of the authors; 3) relevant texts by other authors and 4) texts that provide necessary information about the social and political situation at the time.

In a discourse-oriented interpretation strategy the goal is to understand the *Manifesto* through patterns in the discourse of which it is a textual manifestation, so we would need more material that informs us about the discourse, about the relevant linguistic practices in relation to wider social practices. In the case of *The Communist Manifesto* the relevant context involves numerous agents that all produced essays, pamphlets and articles in the political press. We would also presumably need to consult more material regarding the relevant context in which the discourse developed. These conditions involve the institutions of and the privileges of the church and the clergy as well as of the monarchy and the aristocracy.

Informed interpretation is a prerequisite for good textual analysis, but it is not sufficient. In the next section we discuss what more it takes.

## 1.6 What is a good textual analysis in a social scientific study?

A good textual analysis for the purposes described in this book is an analysis that casts light on a social scientific research problem. A good textual analysis as such is not necessarily relevant for such research problems. It is perfectly possible to analyze a political text from certain linguistic perspectives, answering questions

of interest within the field of linguistics that lack relevance for politics as studied within political science. Such an analysis might reveal something about the language of the text without telling us much about politics. For an analysis to be relevant to the social sciences, it needs to ask questions relating to the study objects of these disciplines. Methods for answering such questions might be borrowed from linguistics' solid techniques of analyzing text and language or from other disciplines.

To answer research questions, methodological tools are needed. It is important both to know how to use different tools and to choose the right ones for the task. When wood needs to be chopped it is probable that the clumsiest axe-user will do a better job than an expert user of sewing machines. But unlike the woodcutter who can fall back on centuries of experience of wood cutting during which axes of all sorts were developed, the social scientist who wants to analyze texts lacks precise tools to choose between for particular research questions. There is nothing like an offer of readymade axes for different chopping purposes to choose from. Instead there are more general tools that in most cases need to be honed to precision and often combined with other available tools. This is important to keep in mind when reading this book.

The tool metaphor illustrates the aspect of a good study that is referred to as **validity**. In the empiricist perspective a method is valid if – and only if – it measures what is intended to be measured in a particular study. Is frequency of mosque visits a valid way of measuring the strength of religiosity in a community? Presumably in many cases but in others not at all, as in a predominantly Christian community. To turn to a real research example, Robert Putnam, in a renowned study, investigated to what extent **social capital**, i.e. social, trust-generating connections between people, generates democracy and economic growth (Putnam, 1993). He compared southern Italy with northern Italy. An indicator used for the existence of social capital was the proportion of people who read daily papers. Critical questions regarding the validity of the extent to which people read daily papers as a way of measuring social capital could well be posed.

To turn to textual analysis, take the research question of whether the views on 'madness' or mental illness differed between two points in time in a particular place. This could be analyzed by comparing two corpora including texts from the same genre and kind of context from the different points in time. There are more or less valid methods for making this comparison. Should we compare the lengths of sentences in the texts in the two corpora in a simple content analysis? Or perhaps use narrative analysis to compare in what order events are told in narratives that might possibly be found in the texts? There is reason to doubt that either of these strategies would be valid: why would they tell us anything about the views on mental illness expressed in the texts? We should start by going through some of the texts in search of a suitable method. Comparing how 'madness' or people categorized as mad are described, what treatment is proposed for them and what evaluative expressions are used about them might be more valid methods.

Yet another aspect of validity is the choice of texts to analyze for answering a particular research question. If, for example, one wants to conduct textual analysis to pin down the positioning of a political party in a particular policy area – say foreign policy – there will be a vast choice of texts to study: party manifestos, internal party publications, leaflets, webpages, private bills or propositions from a party that has been in government, minutes of parliamentary debates, documents from party conferences, texts from its youth organization if there is one, and many more. What texts ought to be analyzed to answer the question? The choice should be well motivated.

Theoretical ideas also play a part when it comes to validity. Is it sufficient to investigate who got a majority for their propositions and who was voted down to know who exercised power in the university board? *Yes it is, it is a valid method for analyzing power*, an adherent of power's first dimension would answer. *No, it is not*, someone who prefers the second or third dimension of power would argue, *that is not a valid way of measuring power*.

The meaning of the concept of validity in relation to a constructivist take on research is more complex. Some authors claim that the issue of validity changes if the terms used in the social sciences do not refer to objects that researchers can study and judge regardless of their own prejudices. When questions about power, oppression, criminality or any other social scientific object of study are asked, the researcher is not just an outside observer. On the contrary, they are involved in shaping the study objects and their own prejudices limit the possible answers to the research questions. For that reason not only the research tools but also the researcher with their historically and socially influenced prejudices must be taken into account when evaluating validity. If researchers widen their understanding of their own prejudices, e.g. by learning more about the culture of science in which they have been trained and the social context in which their research takes place, validity can be improved (see Salner, 1989).

Good validity is not enough to make a study credible. Even though it might be preferable to use an axe clumsily to trying out a sewing machine on wood, some ability to handle an axe is necessary to get the wood chopped. It is, for example, crucial to hit the wood rather than other nearby objects. In other words, there is a need for precision. This is true also for the research study. This aspect is referred to as **reliability**. When this concept is used in the context of an empiricist view of science the way of obtaining high reliability is to be sufficiently accurate in measuring and counting. The concept may also be used in a broader sense and refer to operations other than measuring and counting. It then refers to being accurate and precise in all steps of the study and to eliminating sources of error as far as possible. For most textual analyses interpretation is a matter of reliability. Whatever interpretation strategy is used, the reading must be careful enough for the purpose.

A way of testing reliability is to compare the results of independent studies of the same phenomenon which were carried out in the same way. If different persons conduct them and reach the same results, they have a high **intersubjectivity**.

How strongly intersubjectivity is emphasized varies with the theory of science. The empiricist ideal states that it should be possible for different researchers to use the same type of analysis of the same material (e.g. a text corpus) and reach exactly the same results. This is an ideal based on the idea of a neutral observation language. In social sciences and humanities that use interpretation of human communication and activities, this ideal is controversial. Even if complete intersubjectivity is seen as an impossible ideal, good research should still be transparent and the results well argued for. The reader should be able to reconstruct the steps taken by the researcher to reach the conclusions. For this to be possible, interpretations of written texts should be argued for with the help of quotes and records of the texts. The interpretation of pictures can be argued for by using descriptions of the image, references to its context and the meaning that certain camera angles, for instance, have in a particular genre.

Another aspect of reliability is **intrasubjectivity**. Good intrasubjectivity implies that the same person gets the same results from the same kind of analysis of the same material at different points in time. The purpose is to guarantee that the researcher is judging consistently. This is particularly important when comparisons are made. If the differences found between corpora from different points in time are best explained by the researcher having judged the texts of the corpora in different ways, there is a reliability problem at hand. In that case the result is due to differing researcher judgments and not to differences in the texts.

Texts and documents that function as **sources** ought to be handled in particular ways. A source is a text that is invoked to extract particular pieces of information, which contributes to accepting this piece of information as true; i.e. a text used to verify data, thereby taking a part in the production of evidence. Minutes, interviews and research articles are common sources in research. A first step in evaluating sources is to answer the question: is this source authentic? This is sometimes known as **external criticism of sources** and deals with whether the document is genuine: is it what it is claimed to be (Tosh, 2015: 102)? The next step in evaluating sources is **internal criticism**, which involves an assessment of the credibility of the text content. If one wants to reconstruct a course of events by the use of texts, such an evaluation is indispensable. What kind of information did the text producer have access to? Did they have an interest in lying, idealizing, understating or overstating? From what perspective, what position, did the text producer view what happened? What could and could not be known from this position? Is the text a primary or secondary source?

Table 1.2 summarizes what has been stated about good research above.

The description above should not be taken to mean that we look upon the research process as compartmentalized into neat units that follow a particular order: a research question is asked, it is decided how it should be answered, the material for the study is selected, relevant theory is chosen, the analytical tools are developed, the analysis is conducted and the results reported. This is not the way things usually work out. When these steps are described in a research article it

**Table 1.2** Criteria for good textual analysis for social scientific purposes

<i>Criterion</i>	<i>Aspects and meaning</i>
Posing of good research questions about the study objects of social sciences	
Choice of appropriate methods	Might include adapting analytical tools found in the literature to suit the particular study
Informed interpretation of text content	Awareness of which interpretation strategy is used
Validity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Choice of right method to answer each particular research question</li> <li>• Well-motivated choice of appropriate texts for answering each research question</li> </ul>
Reliability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being accurate and precise in all steps, including counting, measuring and interpreting texts</li> <li>• Intersubjectivity (= the possibility for other researchers to repeat the study and reach the same results; particularly important from an empiricist view of science)</li> <li>• Intrasubjectivity (= the result of the researcher themselves having judged all parts of a corpus consistently)</li> </ul>
Transparency	In all methodological steps, including interpretation
Well-argued results	
Appropriate handling of texts that function as sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• External criticism (= judging whether the source is genuine)</li> <li>• Internal criticism (= credibility assessment of text content)</li> </ul>

is normally not a description of how the research process actually developed. The process is usually much messier than that: one tries to develop the research questions and the analytical tools simultaneously, perspectives and research questions change throughout the process, coincidences lead to new ideas. In some ways inspired cooking is a good metaphor for the research process. The actual result depends on the time and cooking utensils at the cook's disposal, previous cooking experience and available ingredients. An inspired cook does not always follow given recipes but can draw an advantage from the cookbooks they read and the cooking courses they attended previously.

It is our hope that this book will be used like a cookbook by an inspired cook. We explain how food processors, sharp knives and different kinds of pans might be used and provide examples of how others have used such utensils. The purpose is not that you should slavishly follow recipes however.

## 1.7 How to use this book

Apart from this introductory chapter the book contains seven more chapters, each of which presents an approach to textual analysis, as well as a chapter with suggested solutions to the exercises included in the other chapters. The approach chapters

are all organized in the same way. To begin with there is a 'Background' section that provides an overview and puts the approach in perspective. Sometimes this part relates the approach in question to other approaches, sometimes it explains key concepts. In some chapters the background section is fairly long since we wanted to shed light on a theoretical issue.

The purpose of the 'Analysis' section – which is at the heart of each chapter – is to demonstrate how the methodological approach can be used in social science studies. These demonstrations are very hands-on and their objective is to make it possible for readers to use the analytical tools in their own studies. To show how they might be used in a detailed fashion, we present existing studies or parts of studies; in some cases we have constructed the examples ourselves for the purpose of the book.

After 'Analysis' follows a section entitled 'Critical reflections', which is meant to deepen the understanding of each approach and be of help both to those who have already decided to use the method in question and to those still hesitant about whether or not to use it. This section frequently points out the pros and cons of the practical usage of the method. Sometimes it discusses more theoretical issues, e.g. questions to do with epistemology, language or interpretation; in some chapters issues of reliability and validity are brought up.

The section '... analysis and the study of power and other social phenomena' has been included to stress the importance of always asking whether a particular method is relevant for studies within the social sciences. Not surprisingly we have only included methods that, in our opinion, are suitable for social science studies. Suitability is, however, always a matter of which methods are relevant for answering particular research questions. In this section we sometimes discuss the approach as such while sometimes we refer to studies in which it has been used.

Every chapter has a 'Summary' in two parts. The first part examines for what the approach is and is not useful, the second summarizes the central elements of an analysis according to the approach in a step-by-step fashion. The summary can be used either as a way for a reader to check whether they have missed an important part of the chapter or be read at the beginning to gain an overview of the content of the chapter.

A section 'Suggested reading' contains commented suggestions for those readers who want to broaden their understanding of the method or dig deeper into certain aspects.

A student who really wants to learn to use the methods and not only get an orientation about them should work with the exercises included in each chapter. The exercises are all about trying out the methods on real texts. A 'Suggested analysis' for each exercise is provided in the concluding chapter. The analyses we suggest are also examples of how the different kinds of textual analysis can be conducted and can be used as such after reading the approach chapters. A reader who tries the analysis out before comparing it with our suggestions will get the best value out of the exercises.

The book, like most textbooks, ends with a list of all the references and an index for the many terms explained in the different chapters.

This book is primarily meant for college and university students and researchers. It should be useful not least for thesis writing. For those who choose to analyze different kinds of texts in doing research for their Bachelor's or Master's theses this book will presumably be sufficient as a methodological basis. If needed some of the literature recommended under 'Suggested reading' can be added. For PhD students and other researchers not very familiar with textual analysis the book can be used as an overview of methods and a gateway to further reading. The seven approach chapters can be read separately, but this introductory chapter should be read first.

Before we enter the maze of text analytical paths, we want to stress an important point: that research starts with problems, with research questions about a subject matter. Methods – in this book various kinds of textual analysis – should not become aims in themselves and should be considered and used in relation to research problems as well as theory.

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### Suggested reading

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Berger (2014) is a basic and accessible introduction to semiotics and how it could be used in media analysis.

Introductions to the theory of science can widen one's theoretical understanding of language, text and power. Alan Chalmers' introductions to the question of what characterizes science are important (1990; 1999). For a deeper understanding of critical realism its best known representative (Bhaskar, 1978/2008) or an introduction to critical realism (Collier, 1994) can be consulted. Rorty advocates a completely different approach, exemplified in *Philosophy of Hope* (1999).

Robert Audi's extensive introduction to epistemology (2010) can be recommended, as could *The Oxford Handbook of Epistemology* (Moser, 2005). Both present different epistemological positions, such as varieties of constructivism and empiricism. John Searle's (1997) work on constructivism has been seminal. Bruce Aune's (1970) *Rationalism, Empiricism and Pragmatism: An Introduction* is a standard work for argumentation about rationalism (knowledge through reason) and empiricism (knowledge through sensory experience).

A number of journals in different disciplines publish hermeneutic and empirical studies in which different models for interpretation are used (e.g. Carpenter, 2003; Kinsella, 2006; Lee, 1994). There are a number of works by Gadamer himself and about his writings and hermeneutics to choose from. One of his most important works is *Truth and Method* (1989), another one is *The Relevance of The Beautiful and Other Essays* (1986), which presents his general ideas on hermeneutic thinking. There are about 30 works on Gadamer in English, e.g. Silverman's *Gadamer and Hermeneutics* (1991), Weinsheimer's (1985) *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of 'Truth and Method'* as well as Wiercinski's (2011) *Gadamer's Hermeneutic and the Art of Conversation*. After Gadamer's death in 2002, *The Gadamer Reader* (Grondin, 2007) was published.