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From Knowledge and Practice to Language? A Comment from a Discourse Analyst

(doi: 10.2383/78822)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 2, maggio-agosto 2014

Ente di afferenza:

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From Knowledge and Practice to Language?

A Comment from a Discourse Analyst

by Johannes Angermuller

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While academic knowledge production has increased greatly over the last hundred years, the division line between academic and non-academic types of knowledge has become more and more difficult to maintain. Academic knowledge, especially from the social sciences and humanities, has become an integral part of everyday experience in so many non-academic domains. At the same time, there is growing insight into the non-academic conditions under which academic knowledge is produced. As a consequence, the idea of pure knowledge as an exclusive property of a group of specialized experts has become problematical. Knowledge turns out to be entangled in a web of practices, relationships and structures, often overlooked or “forgotten,” without which individuals and groups could develop no durable, relevant and legitimate beliefs and theories. This is the line of argument which Camic, Gross and Lamont put forward in their long introduction which is to give coherence for a rather heterogeneous volume with contributions from a variety of disciplines in the social sciences.

Given its interdisciplinary composition, this volume is more than just another reminder of the lively and ongoing debates in the sociology of knowledge. More generally, it insists on the fundamental importance of the nexus of knowledge and practice in the social sciences – from the tacit know-how of experts to institutional knowledge *dispositifs*, from professional expertise in epistemic cultures to policy-making arrangements. If both “knowledge” and “practice” are defined in rather broad, somewhat eclectic terms, the emphasis placed on these terms testifies to the

debt that most of the authors owe to interpretive and historical traditions of social research.

For sociologists, the social character of knowledge is not exactly a new idea. Indeed one can see the very beginnings of sociology as a discipline in terms of a struggle against the timeless and universal knowledge claimed by philosophers – a struggle in which macrosociologists like Marx/Engels and Durkheim, the German sociologists of knowledge from Mannheim to Luckmann, and a few decades later microsociologists such as Cicourel, Garfinkel, and Goffman made the case for knowledge as a socially situated and practically constructed phenomenon.

If the contributions to this volume tend to see practices as institutionalized, “normal” ways of acting in a community, especially those with a wider political relevance, one can ask how to observe and account for these practices. Bottom-up approaches in qualitative social research (such as ethnomethodology and ethnography) usually make the case for direct qualitative observation of symbolically mediated actions and turn-taking processes between actors who negotiate their relationships according to the “needs” of the situation. Representatives from microsociological traditions may feel that the contributors could have accounted more for these concrete practices and processes. However, one cannot ignore the limits that these microsociological methodologies in view of historical academic practices (Abbott, Grafton, Lemov), non-public, thus non-observable decision-making situations (Lamont and Huutoniemi, Stark) or questions of political and societal relevance in larger social communities (Jasanoff, Mallard and Lakoff). Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine how to observe the more societal processes and dynamics which are dealt with by the authors from the point of view of conversation analysis, ethnographic fieldwork inspired by ethnomethodology or constructivist work in the line of laboratory studies (Knorr Cetina’s pathbreaking work has offered valuable new directions here).

What makes the contributions to his volume so significant is that they invite us to ponder over some of the more general challenges in social research which seems sometimes trapped in a double bind between micro and macro approaches, where the first tend to limit their attention to directly observable practices of oral conversations in face-to-face situations while the latter produce rather interpretive theories of the common, shared practices of a larger community based on written texts, archival material and documents.

I certainly do not want to criticize these lines of research, which have decisively informed my own work and have contributed to the many praxeological lines of research developing for a few decades. Rather, I would like to remind the reader of perspectives which insist on the role of language and which may help to go beyond the micro-macro double bind. This is not the place where I could do justice to the

many currents dealing with the interplay of language, knowledge and practice [see our introduction to Angermuller *et al* 2014]. Let me just cite many transdisciplinary fields like pragmatics, sociolinguistics, social semiotics, rhetorics or argumentation, which are sometimes grouped together under the label of Discourse Studies, some of which testifying to work on academic and non-academic knowledges at the crossroads of sociology and linguistics [see Angermuller 2013; Hyland 2009; Hicks and Potter 1991].

Discourse approaches study the way practices are realized and knowledge circulates in and through language. From a discursive point of view, speakers use written and oral texts to do certain things and to make certain ideas available to others. While oral communication is oftentimes limited to the here and now of the situation, written texts can span large spatiotemporal distances and create ties among people who never meet or even know each other. Against an instrumentalist view, sometimes shared by mainstream currents in the social sciences, discourse analysts hold that language does not just describe a social world. Rather, by representing the world, language can contribute to constituting it: its actors, their relationships and social structures. Language in other words can be seen as constitutive in that many, if not most, practices cannot be realized without the linguistic resources speakers mobilize to create social meaning. To make a decision, to come to a judgment, to change a policy and to circulate theories – how could all this be pulled off without language? Against this background, it seems difficult to ignore the fact that language allows individuals to realize knowledge-related practices, especially those that are the object of the investigations in this volume.

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Angermuller, *From Knowledge and Practice to Language?*

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A Comment from a Discourse Analyst

Johannes Angermuller obtained his MA from Erlangen-Nuremberg University, Germany, in 1997, and finished his doctorate in Discourse Analysis and Sociology in a joint PhD programme of the University of Paris 12, France, and the University of Magdeburg, Germany, where he was lecturer for ten years. Since the 1990s, he has spent longer periods of time in Germany, France, the U.S., and Russia. In 2009 he became a W1-Professor in sociology at the University of Mainz, Germany. He has been a Professor in Discourse at the Centre for Applied Linguistics at Warwick since 2012.