



# Between Communicative Interaction and Structures of Signification: Discourse Theory and Analysis in International Relations

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This paper discusses contemporary engagement with the theory and analysis of discourse in international relations. It argues that discourse understood as “meaning in use” has emerged as one of the core concepts in constructivist scholarship, being of tremendous theoretical and analytical value. The paper identifies two distinct types of discourse analysis around which most contributions in this field converge: micro-interactional approaches that emphasize the communicative, pragmatic aspects of discourse and macro-structural approaches focusing on discourse as structures of signification. What unites these studies is their interest in the diffuse power relationships that characterize social interaction in international politics and the productive effects of power that the term “discourse” serves to underline. Through a combination of these two different strands of discourse research, with two different conceptualizations of power (deliberative and productive), the paper develops a taxonomy of discourse approaches that reflects four distinct variants of discourse research. These variants are illustrated by means of an in-depth discussion of recent innovative studies. In conclusion, the paper points to a number of limitations in the present conceptualization of power through discourse as well as in terms of the uneasy combination of positivist epistemology and constructivist ontology in much empirical discourse research. Discussing the overlap between discourse and practice scholarship, the paper sketches future directions for research in this field.

**Keywords:** discourse theory, discourse analysis, power, constructivism, communicative interaction, signification

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“You taught me language; and my profit on’t  
Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you  
For learning me your language!”

Caliban in William Shakespeare’s, *The Tempest* (1611)

Discourse ranges among the buzzwords that resound widely across the discipline of international relations (IR) at present.<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding the appeal of the term, the field of discourse approaches presents itself as a highly varied collection of conceptual frameworks and analytical lenses.<sup>2</sup> This diagnosis is at best

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<sup>2</sup>The following writings must be considered core contributions to the study of discourse in IR (Der Derian 1987; Litfin 1994; Doty 1996; Larsen 1997; Price 1997; Campbell 1998; Milliken 1999; Weldes, Laffey, Gusterson, and Duvall 1999; Risse 2000; Diez 2001; Crawford 2002; Fierke 2002; Lynch 2002; Müller 2004; Payne and Samhat 2004; Bially-Mattem 2005; Hansen 2006; Epstein 2008; Steele 2008; Deitelhoff 2009; Wiener 2009; Holzscheiter 2010; Johnstone 2011).

inspiring, at worst confusing to anyone not familiar with the concept and its potential value for the investigation of international politics. In view of this variety, this paper pursues two goals: first, to provide a systematic overview of discourse approaches in IR and secondly, to evidence how the concept has proven to add to contrasting theoretical and analytical programs.

In 1999, Jennifer Milliken provided the, to date, most concise, cutting-edge overview over the use of discourse in IR—an article that is by now part and parcel of the syllabus of IR theory (Milliken 1999).<sup>3</sup> Milliken supported the argument that discourse is a concept closely attached to critical theory and poststructuralist approaches to IR. Consequently, most of the authors Milliken discussed were proponents of a first generation of IR discourse scholars, united by their vigorous critical gaze on the very discipline of IR (Der Derian and Shapiro 1989; Ashley and Walker 1990; Walker 1993; Campbell 1998). Yet, since Milliken's article was published, the concept of discourse has gradually traveled from post-structuralist islands to even the faraway shores of middle-ground constructivism that works hard to reconcile constructivist ontology and positivist epistemology. That said, the discourse approaches discussed in this paper may all be classified as constructivist in the broad sense that they theorize and investigate the co-constitutive relationship between agents and structure, text and context, albeit with differing assumptions on the degree to which agents are masters of discourse.

Such an examination of contemporary discourse scholarship in IR will still confirm what Milliken diagnosed some years ago—that “no common understanding has emerged in International Relations about the best way to study discourse” (Milliken 1999:226). Such a “common understanding” is neither desirable nor justifiable—in fact, agreeing on a “best way to study discourse” would be contradictory, considering the profoundly social constructivist legacy of the notion of discourse and the overall acknowledgment that discourse is not only about essentially contested concepts, but is itself such a contested concept. Nevertheless, I will argue that, today, it is possible to identify larger trends in IR discourse scholarship that emphasize different facets of discourse, broadly understood as “meaning in use” (Wiener 2009) or “talk and text in context” (van Dijk 1997:3).

After developing a working definition of discourse that allows bringing together the most diverse approaches to the study of communication and meaning, I will give a brief account of the intellectual history of the concept in IR. The core part of the paper revolves around a taxonomy of discourse approaches to international politics using two logics of differentiation mentioned above: levels of analysis (micro and macro) and power–discourse relationship (deliberative vs. productive). Within these different facets of discourse thinking in IR, four exemplary studies have been selected whose discourse-theoretical and analytical frameworks most accurately reflect the four specific types of discourse analyses that, at present, seem to be most commonly practiced in the study of international politics. A review of these cutting-edge studies therefore envisages less a critical assessment of the validity of their claims than an exemplification of a range of discourse-analytical lenses in IR research. Finally, the paper will point to certain conceptual and methodological weaknesses in the current employment of discourse, in terms of its persistent inability to adequately explain the sources of profound transformations in powerful narratives and in terms of the challenges associated with the study of non-material and more diffuse dimensions and effects of power that the concept of discourse entails. The theory and analysis of practice will be identified in the concluding section of the paper as a very likely bedfellow for future discourse scholarship as it offers possibilities to leave behind the contemporary preoccupation

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<sup>3</sup>For the most important discussions on the influence of the linguistic turn on IR theory see Zehfuß' discussion of early language-based constructivism and Fierke's discussion of the thin border between language and logic in IR: (Zehfuß 1998, 2002; Fierke 2002).

with the study of text toward more refined theorizing on the relevance of social context in the study of discourse.

### **Discourse and Reality—A Working Definition of Discourse**

Those not familiar with the term “discourse” often ask: Is everything discourse? Where is the boundary between discourse and the material (touchable and observable) world? Discourse scholars answer this question by stating that discourse is the space where human beings make sense of the material world, where they attach meaning to the world and where representations of the world become manifest. The existence of a material world outside discourse is, thus, not denied—what is refuted is the assumption that we can relate to this material world without discourse (Holzscheiter 2010). In its essence, discourse analysis is an engagement with meaning and the linguistic and communicative processes through which social reality is constructed. Discourse can therefore be defined as, basically, the space where intersubjective meaning is created, sustained, transformed and, accordingly, becomes constitutive of social reality. This preliminary and broad understanding of discourse already allows distinguishing discourse from language inasmuch as discourse is an inherently social concept. Rather than simply investigating the use of language in international politics, an exploration of discourse asks for the social and political effects that result from using a particular vocabulary on the one hand and the productive effects of particular constructions of reality on the agency and identity of individuals and groups. Any singular event of speaking or producing text, thus, is part of a larger social and political process: It is conceived of as “text in social context.”

When discourse scholars set out to analyze international politics, the struggle over meaning occupies a central role in their study—meaning understood as intersubjectively shared interpretations of reality (Mead 1934). Actors wrestle to fix their specific version of reality and one may ask: Who fights, using which strategies, and how is meaning fixed? By those with the greatest material capabilities? By those enjoying moral authority and credibility? What effects do these meanings have on individuals and on collectivities? How does the struggle over meaning manifest itself in the practice of international politics, for example, in diplomatic practice or international negotiations? Does it leave room for transformation and change and how much? Discourse *analysis*, then, examines what is achieved by using particular discursive repertoires and strategies and which dimensions of reality and options for political action are included and excluded by specific representations of reality. It is fundamentally concerned with the politics of representation, for example, the definition of and the answers given to particularly dramatic events in international politics, such as the deployment of Soviet missiles in Cuba in 1962 (Weldes and Saco 1996), an environmental catastrophe such as Chernobyl (Philipps 2004), or mass killings within an ethnic conflict such as those happening in Bosnia (Kent 2005) or in the Darfur region in Sudan since 2004 (Steele 2007). For all of these events, there is a range of possible interpretations, even though the material effects of these incidents appear to be overwhelmingly real at first. According to a discourse perspective on international politics, therefore, facts do not speak for themselves. Rather, it is assumed that facts have to be represented (in speech, written text, and images) in order to become socially real.

### **The Contemporary Engagement with Discourse in IR**

Today, many scholars no longer question the circumstance *that* language is important for the study of international politics, but instead seem to be eager to discuss “*how* and *why* language is important” (Fierke 2002:331). Resulting from

this general sensitivity of IR scholars toward linguistic and communicative dimensions of political life is a heterogeneity of discourse approaches in contemporary studies of international politics. It is constructivist research in particular whose understanding of social life fundamentally built upon the understanding that “the objects of our knowledge are not independent of our interpretations and our language” (Adler 2002:95). Here, discourse has offered itself almost naturally as one of the most popular concepts. Early influential constructivist writings that summarized the constructivist “credo” that “social constructivism rests on an irreducibly intersubjective dimension of human action” (Ruggie 1998:856) have implicitly supported the claim that intersubjectivity is, before all, constituted through language, communication, and discourse (Onuf 1989; Wendt 1999). As a result, the consolidation of a constructivist school moved language, communication, and discourse closer to the core of IR theory. Within constructivism, discourse has been used to explore the creation and effect of human rights norms (Risse 1999; Brysk 2004); to investigate the powerful conjunction of knowledge and discourse in environmental politics (Litfin 1994; Hajer 1995; Payne 1996); or to understand processes of identity-building and its transformation (Fierke 1996; Neumann 1996; Bially-Mattern 2005; Hansen 2006). In the beginning, constructivists were reluctant to fully acknowledge that seeing intersubjectivity as constituted through language and discourse necessitates a methodological focus on language, communication, and discourse (Kratochwil 1989; Onuf 1989; Wendt 1999; for a critique see Fierke 2002). Today, more often than not, constructivists turn to the notion of discourse when they envisage to identify and operationalize social facts such as ideas, identities, or norms and when they try to demonstrate that these facts are not natural but are both a result of discursive practices and constituted by socially shared meaning-structures (for example, nuclear danger as constructed through discourse).<sup>4</sup>

*The Social Ontology of Discourse in Constructivist Approaches to International Politics*

Elaborating on the role of language in constructivist theory, Alexander Wendt and Friedrich Kratochwil suggest distinguishing between thin and thick constructivism, whereby a thick notion of constructivism sees language as the constitutive element of reality and communication as the constitutive element of intersubjectively created realities, rather than taking language and communication as additional facets of social life (Kratochwil 2001:23). Thin constructivists by contrast assume that social facts can also exist independently of the “minds and discourses of the individuals who want to explain them” (Wendt 1999:75). Following this reasoning, this paper suggests drawing a line of differentiation between thick discourse approaches that perceive discourse to be the precondition for social and political life and its analysis as the only way to access and observe social reality and thin ones that treat discourse as one social *logic* among others. The latter assumption can be roughly associated with certain constructivist works on communicative rationality who by and large belong to the “middle ground” (Adler 1997) between rationalism and constructivism (Müller 2004; Panke 2006; Kornprobst 2007; Krebs and Jackson 2007).

When the first tentative “rapprochements” were made between rationalism and constructivism, the linguistic and discursive facets of international politics emerged as the focal point in a debate about different “logics of action” in social encounters: on the one hand, rational strategic interest-driven action (“bargaining”) following a logic of consequences, on the other norm-guided exchange of arguments (“arguing”) following a logic of appropriateness. The Habermasian distinction between strategic use (rational, instrumental, self-interest) of

<sup>4</sup>See for example Rublee (2009) and Jasper (2012).

language and communicative use (rational, dialogical, communitarian) has been frequently employed as a theoretical basis for these deliberations (Habermas 1984, 1985, 1996). Harald Müller claimed in 2004: “Arguing and bargaining, at face value, belong to two different social theories—rationalism and communicative action theory” (Müller 2004:396). By the mid-1990s, approximately, one could witness the birth of a whole new approach to international cooperation and norm-creation that emphasized the role of communicative interaction in international diplomacy and underlined the value of close observation of such interaction for a deeper understanding of cooperation and socialization in international politics.

This debate evidences that a specific notion of discourse has also emerged in more traditional schools of IR and that discourse has proven to be of added value to the academic debate among constructivists and rationalists.<sup>5</sup> Here, discourse as institutionalized communicative exchange has come to be seen as the terrain where different logics of action can actually be observed and analyzed and where argumentative justifications for behavior manifest themselves. The significance of discourse understood as communicative interaction is mainly epistemological in that it allows explaining how, when, and under which circumstances different social logics come to bear. Rationalists and constructivists convinced of the overlapping terrain between the two social theories often emphasize that discourse as communicative exchange can be seen as a precondition for rational interest-driven behavior: Thus, the social construction of reality *via* discourse comes to bear particularly in social situations where little common knowledge, uncertainty about other’s perspectives and interests and conflicts of norms prevail. Discourse as the exchange of arguments is temporally prior to rational decision making. Within this discursive middle ground between rationalism and constructivism, actors are being seen as positioned in an institutionalized context that partly constrains how and what they can argue. Yet, they are still free to pursue a range of options in social interaction (Risse 2000, 2002; Müller 2004; Krebs and Jackson 2007).

On the other hand, thick constructivist approaches posit that all social relations constitute discourse and are, in turn, constituted by discourse (see for example Price 1995; Weldes 1996; Diez 2001; Hansen 2006). Here, it is assumed that nothing can be meaningfully understood outside discourse, that is, even the material outside can only be comprehended in and through language and discourse. For thick constructivists, discursive practices of representation (for example, a cookbook) cannot be dissociated from non-discursive practices (for example, the act of cooking, the tools we use for cooking). When this latter group of researchers investigates discourse, they “study how the world is ‘talked into existence’” (Adler 2002:101) and how the representations of cooking shape what we perceive as cooking. This thick constructivism assumes that “social facts are constituted by the structures of language and that, accordingly, consciousness can be studied only as mediated by language” (Adler 2002:97).

*Agents and Structure: Micro-Interaction and Macro-Structure Discourse Approaches*

Table 1 shows the ontological line of division between particular discursive approaches to international politics with regard to the relationship between discourse and social reality. On an epistemological level, this line of division can also be portrayed as a differentiation between those approaches emphasizing the processes through which “subjects create meaning” and those that are primarily interested in understanding how “meaning creates subjects.” Thin constructivists’

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<sup>5</sup>For seminal discussions of the rationalism-constructivism divide see Adler (1997); Fearon and Wendt (2002); and Risse (2002).

TABLE 1. The Role of Discourse in Thin and Thick Constructivism

	<i>Thin Constructivism</i>	<i>Thick Constructivism</i>
Discourse and Reality	Some forms of communication mirror the “world out there” (bargaining by coercion) while others construct that world (arguing by discourse)	Material reality can never exist independently of discourse—the world is always “talked into existence”
Definition of Discourse	Discourse as a specific form of social interaction Discourse defined as a particular logic of action that depends on institutional and normative setting within which communicative interaction takes place	No social reality conceivable outside discourse Discourse as meaning-structure influences how individuals perceive the world and act toward it; it is constitutive of social reality

interest in understanding the different logics of action that agents engage in results in an emphasis of actors as speaking agents. Even though they see these agents and their communicative practice as embedded in institutional structures, their analysis of communicative interaction presumes that agents can purposefully choose from a range of possible articulations and speech-acts in these settings. The core bone of contention among thin constructivists is the degree to which the performativity and success of communicative strategies varies according to the social/institutional setting and the extent to which the difference between arguing and bargaining can be empirically established (Krebs and Jackson 2007; Deitelhoff 2009). Thick constructivists, by contrast, presume that all speech-acts are instances of larger systems of signification, that is, expressions of discursive formations from which speaking subjects cannot escape and which constrain not only possibilities for articulation but also for cognition.

Generally speaking, it is thus possible to cluster discourse-focused work in IR alongside a continuum that places agents (or speakers producing text and talk) on one side, and structures (or context) on the other. This continuum allows for a labeling of discourse approaches as either predominantly macro-structural or micro-interactional. The latter cluster of discourse approaches comprises pragmatic, actor-based, and action-oriented approaches to discourse that privilege the “in use” dimension of the basic working definition developed in the section “Discourse and Reality—A Working Definition of Discourse” of this paper. Owing to their belief in agency and intentionality, their analytical emphasis is on the real-time communicative processes in which agents actively construct, re-negotiate, and transform intersubjectively shared interpretations of reality. By contrast, macro-structural discourse approaches focus on discourse as all-embracing structures that govern actors’ behavior and thoughts (thereby stressing the *meaning*-dimension of the basic working definition given in the section “Discourse and Reality—A Working Definition of Discourse”). Take the example of genocide: emphasizing the communicative dimension of discourse would imply to seek to account for how actors construct the material reality of mass killings in order to justify or delegitimize humanitarian intervention (Orford 2003; Hansen 2006). Emphasizing the structural facets of discourse would require to look at the genesis and history of the term “genocide,” highlight the meaning-structures that have come to surround the term and, from there, show *how* these structures precondition actors’ choice of responses to these incidents.

While both macro-structure and micro-interaction discourse approaches share the basic presupposition that discourse is always more than text, that it is *text in*

*context*, they nevertheless privilege either text or context in their exploration of discourse. As a consequence, there is considerable variation in their definition of “text” (as the materialization of discourse) and in what discourse approaches consider to be the relevant context within which this text must be embedded. Differentiating along these parameters allows grouping together those works revolving around synchronic analysis of textual practices in very small contextual settings (micro-context), often taken from only one specific discursive genre (for example, media reporting, protocols of international negotiations, foreign policy speeches, policy papers, etc.). These analyses can be distinguished from others investigating large amounts of text (diachronic) in broad historical or sociopolitical contexts (macro-contexts) often exploring a wide variety of textual genres and simultaneous contexts. Scholars who promote a micro-interaction understanding of discourse tend to confine their empirical interest to small, clearly demarcated communicative events, the properties of the setting, and the quality of the argumentative exchange—the speaking events they choose to analyze are typically embedded in smaller institutional settings such as multilateral treaty negotiations in international politics (Ulbert and Risse 2005; Deitelhoff 2009). Scholars subscribing to the macro-structure notion of discourse, by contrast, usually collect their evidence from a wide range of texts and events, covering larger historical spans. Discourses as coherent aggregations of single speech-acts are presented in a rather detached manner, as floating ideas existing at specific points in time and being both condition and resource for political action. Accordingly, the notion of context these scholars adopt is very large. As shall be seen, these various lines of differentiation neither present themselves as exclusive nor are they incommensurable. Rather, the following table serves to identify larger trends in discourse scholarships and different types of discourse analyses that logically follow from the epistemological accentuation of either language use in real-time communication or the structures of signification that enable and texture social interaction, reality and relations. Scholars aim to answer the same broad research questions and underline similar political dynamics with regard to the role of discourse in social and political life but, as the various studies presented later in this article will evidence, may chose to study quite diverse aggregations of social life and to employ a broad range of methodologies (Table 2).

TABLE 2. Ontological Differences

	<i>Micro-Interaction Approach</i>	<i>Macro-Structure Approach</i>
Discourse Definition	Discourse as text in context but emphasis on discourse as communicative exchange	Discourse as text in context but emphasis on historically grown structures of signification
Predominant Level of Analysis	Agents/Individual—“Subjects make meaning”	Structure/Holistic—“Meaning makes Subjects”
Text/Context	Text: Small instances of everyday communication Context: Institutional Setting for Communicative Exchange	Text: Texts as aggregated evidence for large meaning-structures Context: Broad historical or sociopolitical context

*Discourse and Power—Deliberative and Productive Approaches to Discourse*

The broad lines of differentiation identified and systematized above do not only relate to the relationship between language and (social) reality that is expressed in the term “discourse,” they also reflect on one of the most central dimensions of international politics that discursive approaches emphasize: power. Discourse in the social science has always been intimately linked to a notion of power that departs from rationalist-instrumentalist theories on power. Critics of realist

notions of power routinely distance themselves from a world politics simply driven by actors' utilitarian desire to realize self-interests and maximize power and, instead, emphasize the "causal significance of normative structures and processes of learning and persuasion" (Barnett and Duvall 2005b:41). While some have confronted constructivist thinking as being strangely devoid of power considerations, others have pointed to the fact that different kinds of social power, among them the power displayed in discourse and communication, have come to prevail here (Guzzini 2000; Barnett and Duvall 2005a). In this regard, discourse has emerged as an invaluable concept to establish that the power asymmetries posited by materialist power theory often work, in fact, in the opposite direction; where actors that are materially inferior successfully deploy discursive rather than material capabilities (Holzscheiter 2005). A number of groundbreaking studies have worked with the notion of discourse in order to conceptualize the specific power of advocacy coalitions, individual NGOs or small island states and the discursive strategies they pursue, such as reflexive discourse (Steele 2007, 2011); rhetorical coercion (Krebs and Jackson 2007); or shaming, blaming, and moral persuasion (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999).

The overall acknowledgment that power and discourse are inseparable and co-constitutive is owed before all to Michel Foucault and Jürgen Habermas who have arguably formulated the most influential discourse theories of the twentieth century. To the present day, theoretical engagement, with their notion of discourse and its empirical translation, represents a challenge and unbroken inspiration to social scientists. Both authors merged the premises of the linguistic turn with a critical program that regarded language as a central parameter in power relations and discourse as a fundamental dimension of society. Discourse, thus, was primarily a sociological concept, intended to grasp specific power dimensions in social life.

Authors reverting to Habermasian discourse theory stress the value of discourse as a counterfactual type of communication, which is truth-seeking exchange of arguments. Habermas formulates a deliberative concept of discourse in which discourse denotes the place where, theoretically, the use of instrumental power could be replaced by the "power of the better argument" (Habermas 1984, 1985, 1996). Essentially, his notion of discourse sees meaningful, consensus-oriented communication following rules of equality (of access, speaking rights, and introduction of issues) as the epitome of a truly deliberative forum: If all participants, he claims, can participate in the debate on an equal footing, if they all listen to each other carefully and weigh each other's arguments, and if they are all prepared to be potentially convinced by a better argument, the result should be the best possible consensus on normatively contentious matters.

Foucault's notion of discourse fundamentally revolves around the structural force of specific, historically situated discourses—using the notion of discourse bolstered his principal aim to critically re-examine the production of knowledge under specific historical circumstances and within specific cultural contexts (Foucault 1970, 1972, 1981). Discourse is defined as a system of representation which manifests itself through particular institutionalized practices in social life and which is made up of rules of conduct—these systems or discursive formations, he posits, are "governing" human life inasmuch as they establish an exclusionary brink beyond which speaking and thinking is not possible. Foucault presumes that power relations are all-pervasive and only shift throughout history but do not disappear. As such, his discourse theory is at the same time a theory of productive power. A Foucauldian notion of power underlies discourse approaches that elucidate the silent workings of power hidden in moral institutions and social practices that have become both the dominant and the natural ways of perceiving reality and reacting toward it.

Fierce academic disputes have raged over the so-called Foucault/Habermas debate (Kelly 1994). Those in the Foucauldian tradition have treated the Habermasian idea of the possibility of true deliberation among human beings guided by communicative rationality as being part of the very discursive formations of modernity and rationality that Foucault himself sought to unveil, deconstruct, and criticize (Ashenden and Owen 1999). Habermasians, in turn, sought to show the determinism of Foucault's idea of discourse as an all-pervasive structure of power, knowledge, and regimes of truth, incarcerating subjects rather than pointing to possibilities for emancipation, agency, and change. While for Foucault any project of critique would always be situated and caught within the confines of forceful regimes of truth, Habermas sought to define a universal principle—truth-seeking discourse—that would allow human beings to reconsider and eventually transcend these regimes of truth.

International relations scholars working with Habermasian or Foucauldian theory largely adhere to the critical programs lying behind these theories to different degrees and with different emphasis on social progress. The Habermasian concept of discourse serves to exhibit the transformative/deliberative potential of international politics, whereas Foucault's notion of discourse underlies intellectual projects of deconstruction/reconstruction of the power structures inherent to historically dominant, institutionalized discourses. The Foucauldian and the Habermasian understanding of discourse therefore stand in for different theoretical standpoints as regards power—Foucault maintains that discourses are *always* places of power and domination and serve to perpetuate, institutionalize, and legitimize asymmetries of power between individuals in society. While this understanding of discourse shares a common ground with the *realist* understanding of international politics as essentially power driven, it represents a fundamental departure from behaviourist understandings of power as interpersonal relationships shifting the focus to the historical, institutional, and linguistic structures of domination that foreground and give meaning to social relationships.<sup>6</sup> Habermas, by contrast, formulates a deliberative theory of discourse in which discourse comes to represent an ideal-type speech situation in which rational individuals reach agreement through the force of the better argument. Combining these two power perspectives with the levels-of-analysis differentiation established below leads to the following classification scheme for discourse approaches to international politics. How these theories on power and discourse have been applied to the study of world politics will be discussed in the following section (Table 3).<sup>7</sup>

TABLE 3. Levels of Discourse-Analysis (*L*) and Discourse-Power Relationship (*P*)

	<i>L</i> <sub>1</sub> : Agent	<i>L</i> <sub>2</sub> : Structure
<i>P</i> <sub>1</sub> : Deliberative	Discourse as communicative rationality—discourse as the place where “power of the better argument” comes to bear	Deliberative design of international institutions allows redressing power asymmetries in global politics through discourse
<i>P</i> <sub>2</sub> : Productive	Discourse as knowledge–power nexus: Actors strive to impose their view of reality on others in discourse	Discourses as institutionalized meaning-structures inevitably produce and perpetuate power asymmetries

<sup>6</sup>For an innovative discussion of the overlapping terrain between a realist and a postmodern notion of power see Sterling-Folker and Shinko (2005).

<sup>7</sup>For recent and particularly thorough discussions of the (im)possibility of applying the Habermasian concept of discourse to IR see Deitelhoff and Müller (2005); Diez and Steans (2005); and Deitelhoff (2009).

### One Concept, Different Methodological Frameworks—Studying Power Through Discourse

The ensuing discussion of methodological frameworks and their empirical application illustrates how IR scholars have exploited the concept of discourse in order to understand the intimate relationship between communication, meaning, and power. The four studies discussed below have been selected (i) because they stand in for particular types of discourse analysis in IR that reflects ongoing expansion of the discourse-analytical agenda in IR, and (ii) because their theoretical approach substantiates the core position that discourse occupies in the constructivist quest for understanding the social construction of identities, knowledge, and norms. In addition, all four studies are notable for their conceptual clarity and methodological rigor. Yet, despite the ambitious nature of these attempts to apply discourse analysis to “puzzles” in world politics, this section will identify problematic aspects related to the study of discourse in international politics and, from there, will sketch a future research agenda.

#### *The Deliberative Discourse–Power Relationship from a Micro-Interaction and Macro-Structure Perspective*

Among studies that investigate deliberation and argumentation in international politics, Ian Johnstone’s studies on interpretive communities in international politics (and more specifically his empirical research on legal discourse within the Security Council) range among the most widely noted (Johnstone 2003, 2005, 2011).<sup>8</sup> In one of his studies, agents’ capacity to shape international politics by using the “power of the better argument” (in his case of legal arguments) rather than strategies of coercion or non-deliberative behavior<sup>9</sup> is investigated by choosing an unlikely case for deliberation, both in terms of the social setting (the Security Council) and in terms of the issue at stake (the Kosovo crisis in 1998/1999) (Johnstone 2003, 2011). By examining the semantics and structure of arguments put forward in the Security Council’s debates on Kosovo, Johnstone seeks to provide evidence that the practice of deliberation understood as the employment of legal discourse is a recurrent feature of debates within the UN Security Council. He concludes that (i) the Security Council can be portrayed as an interpretive community sharing common norms in the form of “legal discourse” (rather than merely as a forum for the display of hard power and bargaining for control) and (ii) that during the discussions of the Kosovo crisis specific Security Council members were justifying their standpoints by reverting to international law rather than individual preferences, thereby displaying the motivation to argue rather than bargain.

Johnstone’s work focuses on discourse as language use, as concrete communicative interaction on specific issues in international politics, such as the Kosovo crisis or nuclear non-proliferation. As a consequence, he investigates a mixture of documentation (official UN reports, specific politicians’ statements, background reports to the event in question, and interview material with stakeholders) that relates to a specific debate within a specific social setting (for example, the Security Council). Johnstone’s research on the logic of communicative action and its impact on Security Council negotiations also exemplifies how, methodologically, it is possible to evidence the mutual constitution between

<sup>8</sup>Crawford’s (2002) *Argument and Change in World Politics* must also be considered a key contribution to this field of social inquiry. However, I have chosen to discuss Johnstone’s approach to discourse in detail, for the sake of its theoretical and analytical clarity.

<sup>9</sup>For example, when states “remain silent, cast votes without explanation, or stomp their shoes on the table” (Johnstone 2011:204).

agents' logics of action and the institutional structures that constrain or enable specific practices of these actors. His analysis aims to capture the influence of a specific institutional culture within the Security Council (the prevalence of legal discourse) and, at the same time, demonstrates how this culture needs constant re-enacting through consensus-oriented discursive practices of members of this institution. Even though the force of the better argument can be attributed to specific agents, it is intertwined with the characteristics of the institutional setting—following the assumption that the institutional context predisposes yet does not entirely determine what type and structure of arguments are considered convincing or normatively acceptable.

The deliberative quality of international and transnational structures has also been seized from a more structural perspective. In Payne and Samhat's "Democratising Global Politics," for example, the emphasis is clearly placed on the structural features of international and transnational institutions as preconditions for enhancing the democratic quality of global politics (Payne and Samhat 2004). Their study compares the deliberative qualities of different institutional settings in order to make inferences on how the democratic potential of international regimes could eventually be enhanced. Payne and Samhat also take the Habermasian concept of discourse as a theoretical starting point for their deliberations about a new global order, characterized by greater inclusion and openness toward weaker actors, and a plurality of interests and ideas. At the heart of their critical normative project lies the belief that certain international regimes already hint at the existence of a global public sphere which shows traces of the Habermasian ideal speech situation inasmuch as its opinion-building and decision-making rules are exceptionally open and transparent. By analyzing the transparency of decision-making structures, hierarchical/horizontal relationships of power, and rules for participation and communication within a range of international and transnational organizations such as the "Global Environmental Facility" (GEF) and the World Trade Organization, Payne and Samhat aim to evaluate the democratic character of such international regimes. Even though the authors acknowledge that "a truly deliberative world society, for many obvious reasons, seems impractical and utopian" (Payne and Samhat 2004:23), their empirical case studies suggest that there are "immanent possibilities of discursive democracy in world politics" (Payne and Samhat 2004:24). The value of a discourse-theoretical framework, thus, is seen primarily in its potential to assess international institutions and the forums in which norms are debated, created or rejected in terms of their democratic character—democratic, above all, with regard to particular contextual parameters: Who (which groups, individuals) is allowed to participate? Who is considered a legitimate speaker? How are opinions exchanged and decisions taken? To what extent are marginalized voices represented in discourse (NGOs, grassroots organizations, people affected by the norms and policies)?

Comparing Johnstone's and Payne/Samhat's deliberative versions of discourse analysis shows that in both accounts of the deliberative quality of influential international institutions, the mutual constitution between agents (as potentially open to deliberation) and structures (as social institutions potentially engendering deliberation) plays an important role. However, the studies differ in the emphasis they attribute to single speech-acts: Whereas Johnstone and Payne/Samhat share a similar perspective on the relationship between discourse and power, they seek to study the reality or possibility of deliberation from different levels of analysis. Johnstone's discourse-analytical framework focuses on communicative interaction and the composition and content of single speech-acts, whereas in Payne/Samhat's discourse analysis, the deliberative discourse-power nexus is operationalized through the structural prerequisites for deliberation and public reasoning. On a methodological level, the difference between these

two discourse approaches can, thus, be also portrayed as one between micro-interaction and macro-structure approaches.

*Micro-Interaction and Macro-Structure Perspectives on the Productive Discourse–Power Relationship*

Among newer approaches to power and representation, Bially-Mattern's (2005) analysis of representational force during the Suez crisis stands out as a particularly original attempt to observe the role of identity narratives in (re)constructing international order in times of crisis.<sup>10</sup> Bially-Mattern conceptualizes identities as "power-laden narrative constructs" which are, nevertheless, "under the control of their authors" who decide "what and how to narrate" (12-13). Thus, power is in the first place, "language-power," that is, the control over narratives and over narrative strategies deployed to exert representational force. Using such a post-constructivist model of identity, she explores how international order—the "Special Relationship" (17)—between the United States and Britain has been rebuilt after its initial breakdown during the Suez Crisis in 1956. Her analysis epitomizes a productive micro-interaction approach, since it sees agents as the authors of narratives and, consequently, as active and deliberative constructors of social reality (in this case the social reality of identity). As such, she grants considerable power to individual actors in the sense that actors can choose how to represent events and subjectivities and, accordingly, may wield considerable representational power. For her empirical analysis of representational force during the Suez Crisis, Bially-Mattern uses a discourse-analytical method that focuses on the structure of arguments employed by politicians and statesmen in the two countries. Ultimately, the analysis of the linguistic composition of phrases uttered by political stakeholders during the Suez Crisis aims to show how representational force in the construction of identities prevented a violent outcome by quickly restoring the security community between the United States and Britain.<sup>11</sup> By examining how British and American decision makers communicated their relationship during the crisis, Bially-Mattern concludes that decision makers purposefully reinforced the narrative of the security community in their communication and, consequently, reconstructed the foundation for ordered and peaceful relations between the two states.

Bially-Mattern's methodology takes its inspiration from the poststructuralist theory of Lyotard with its emphasis on the analysis of narratives as the fundament of representational force. Her method is linguistic inasmuch as it entails the investigation of ensembles of phrases taken from memoranda, telegrams, communiqués, and letters that have been exchanged between British and US ambassadors, heads of state, and foreign policy advisers during the Suez crisis. These phrases are then searched for particular structures within and between the phrases defining the identity of Britain vis-à-vis the United States and vice versa. The representational force of the speaker is deduced from a particular type of argument that dismisses alternative visions of this relationship and attempts to force the addressee to yield to the force of the argument. Bially-Mattern reduces the analysis to a synchronic "snapshot" of the discursive universe. However, her interest lies not so much in the motivation of the individual speakers but rather in the *effects* of the narratives they construct, thereby creating a particular social reality (identity, order). For Bially-Mattern, the power of representation still rests with the agents who engage in communicative practices and effectively influence larger narratives—discursive orders such as identity narratives, thus, are the production of the articulators of such narratives. However,

<sup>10</sup>Steele (2007) adopts a similar approach toward the relationship between representation and identity albeit with less emphasis on the intersubjective moment in representational practices.

<sup>11</sup>See Bially-Mattern (2005), chapter 4 discussing her discourse-analytical framework.

the productive force of meaning-structures has also, and more commonly, been explored from a macro-structure perspective. Charlotte Epstein's *The Power of Words in International Relations* and her thorough analysis of the history of anti-whaling discourses represents a convincing Foucault-inspired analysis of how narratives influence the normative beliefs of actors and, as a consequence, predispose political practice (that is, the condemnation of whaling as an inhuman action threatening to extinct a whole species) (Epstein 2008). Epstein explicitly borrows Foucault's notion of power as productive and defines a discourse as "a cohesive ensemble of ideas, concepts, categorizations about a specific object that frame that object in a certain way and therefore delimit the possibilities for action in relation to it" (2). For her, powerful discourses are discourses "that make[s] a difference" (2)—these discourses, however, are seen as grounded in social relations which are both the source of hegemonic discourses *and* the outcome of discursive power. The productive power of discourses is first and foremost evidenced by the fabrication of specific subject positions, such as the subject position of environmental NGOs which were becoming increasingly influential the more an anti-whaling discourse occupied center stage globally. Epstein's diachronic analysis of data spans approximately 100 years of history and comprises historical studies on whaling from a variety of perspectives and sources: her evidence for dominant discourses on whaling is taken primarily from academic literature on various aspects of whale hunting and the emergence of a dominant global save-the-whale (and save-the-planet) discourse, and a range of interviews with pro- and anti-whaling campaigners and activists. These sources are complemented by newspaper reports, reports of environmental NGOs, etc. The historiographic exercise serves to identify patterns of meaning attached to the hunting of whales that, even though being constantly subject to contestation, have remained particularly influential as a "moral system" disciplining international political practice and defining the boundaries of ethical behavior in this field throughout the twentieth century.

The analysis of linguistic facets of international politics provided by Bially-Mattern and Epstein takes place on very different levels, even though they both converge on the assumption that discourse has productive and, as such, constitutive effects on the identities and beliefs of decision makers. In terms of methodology, scholars such as Bially-Mattern or Johnstone, whose methodological focus lies on the semantic structure and logic of individual speech-acts, mostly choose single, or comparative, case studies. These are then subjected to a combination of ethno-methodological (for example, thick description); quantitative (for example, content-analysis); linguistic or conversation analytical;<sup>12</sup> and process-tracing methods. Since discourse stands for a sequence of communicative events, the data is taken to evidence different lines of argumentation; micro-processes of discursive persuasion; or the role of particular ideas, knowledge resources and identity constructions in individual argumentative moves. Such micro-approaches, thus, study discourse as a discrete social event and often share an interest in the "trivial" details of interpersonal encounters between actors.

### **Thinking Beyond Interactionist and Structural Discourse-Analytical Frameworks**

The above overview of contemporary discourse studies makes it clear that discourse research does not present itself as a completely new route in constructivist research. Rather, a discourse lens serves to accentuate the linguistic and communicative facets of the social construction of reality. The various research frameworks and methodologies presented here demonstrate that to classify them in terms of micro-interaction and macro-structure approaches by no means

<sup>12</sup>On the method of conversation analysis see most importantly Drew and Heritage (1992) and Linell (1998).

implies that agency-centered discourse approaches neglect the structures within which communication takes place or that structural discourse approaches ignore individual speech-acts. It is the methodological accentuation of one or the other dimension of discourse (that is, “meaning” or “in-use”) that allows differentiation of contemporary discourse scholarship according to this scheme. All of the above-mentioned studies must be considered exemplary and cutting-edge in the way they apply discourse-analytical frameworks to the empirical study of the presence or absence of power in interpersonal communication and structures of signification. That said, probably their most fundamental dilemma lies in the desire to marry a constructivist ontology based on the co-constitution between speaking agents and structures of signification on the one hand, with a positivist epistemology that seeks to identify causal relationships on the other. This quandary plays out both in their operationalization of power through discourse as well as in their desire to account for the origins of change in norms and identities in international politics.

*Co-Constitution or Causality? Sitting Uncomfortably Between  
Positivist and Constructivist Epistemology*

While discourse approaches are strong on the co-constitutive relationship between agents and structures, articulators and articulations, text and context, their prescriptive value is naturally limited in terms of extrapolating causal relationships between discourse and political action. Epstein’s analysis of how the anti-whaling discourse produced specific subject positions, particularly for anti-whaling NGOs, is a case in point. While adopting a Foucauldian understanding of discourse as a forceful historically specific structure of power, knowledge, and truth—thus embracing a *thick* constructivist perspective on the relationship between language and reality—Epstein still adheres to an understanding of articulation as “speech-acts,” that is, of social actors as “speaking actors” who pursue “powerful articulatory practices” in order to make discourses powerful (113). Epstein’s analysis of the history of whaling norms in international politics exhibits the difficulties that arise as soon as one seeks to weigh the power of structures of signification against the influence of human articulation. In her study, Epstein comes to the conclusion that the “anti-whaling discourse was produced by a specific set of actors, environmental activists” (248). This discourse, in turn, was productive in bringing with it specific subject positions, which, again, increased the positive moral reputation of environmental NGOs and, as a consequence, their influence on global politics. Epstein’s account of the history of an anti-whaling discourse is deeply ambivalent with regard to the extent to which actors can step outside powerful discourses and strategically “mobilize” discourse for their interests or reject them altogether—as a consequence she cannot resolve the tension between strangely personified discourses that “successfully impose [themselves] as dominant global discourses” (112) and actors who had “produced the discourse in the first place” (114).<sup>13</sup>

Even though Epstein’s analysis of the processes and events that gave rise to an anti-whaling discourse is impressive, her desire to point to moments of causation between discursive formations and social actors would have required her to adopt a more decisive standpoint in terms of the origins of discourse, falling back onto the well-known agent-structure problematique (Doty 1997). Or to put it more simply, if she had intended to demonstrate genuine co-constitution, she should have made do with a *how*-account of the emergence of whaling norms in

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<sup>13</sup>Epstein (2008:249) concludes from her analysis: “If science speaks to us in a discourse that is completely at odds with our own—with the one we have chosen to speak, because it marks us in certain ways—then it is likely we will simply not listen.”

international politics. To show traces of causation and proceed to answer *why* questions, she should have dared to adopt a more rigorous ontological standpoint on the extent to which structures of signification enable or constrain discursive practices and mediate between material and social reality. It is less Epstein's empirical analysis itself than her choice of wording and logic of reasoning that renders her conclusions tautological—she suggests in many places that the same actors whose identities were being produced by powerful, hegemonic discourses were, at the same time, strategically exploiting these discourses in order to increase their leverage in IR.<sup>14</sup>

Both micro-interaction and macro-structure productive discourse approaches struggle to “detach” the constitutive quality of discourse from an agent-centered realist notion of power—thus, more often than not the power of meaning-structures (as the power of discourse) is inferred from the discourses of the materially powerful, and particularly state actors. Individual actors that are considered to be authoritative because of their material, positional, or representational authority are, in analogy, taken to be in a privileged position to shape, sustain, and eventually transform discourses and the structures of signification they represent. Bially-Mattern's empirical analysis shows that, when the capabilities for representational and coercive power are confounded, it is difficult to demonstrate that the power to *represent* reality in a certain way could exist independently of material power in a given course of action. In light of this, the explanatory potential of Bially-Mattern's case study appears weak, since both parties involved in the diplomatic crisis she investigates (the United States and Britain) were considered to be powerful agents fighting “to claim leadership of the West” (Bially-Mattern 2005:21) *and*, according to her analysis, wielded considerable representational force over each other. If both parties are successful in using representational force as she claims, it is no longer clear who had power over whom and how exactly order was restored in the relationship between the United States and the UK. How can we attribute any explanatory force to representational power if, as Bially-Mattern concludes, both parties shared, from the onset, the same narrative of identity? To study their discursive behavior gives an important insight into *how* during the Suez crisis the United States and Britain constructed their identity vis-à-vis each other and, as a consequence, reconstructed their Special (that is, friendly) Relationship. The study's capacity to *explain* the outcome of the crisis by referring to the effects of representational force, however, remains limited.

Indeed, discourse analysts interested in the productive facet of discourse use and deconstruct powerful speech-acts for the purpose of showing how specific representations of the world acquire the quality of natural rather than social facts, and as such, have an effective ordering function in social relations. Yet, the narrow focus on classical speaking agents in IR, such as heads of state, diplomats, and ministers of foreign affairs, in the analysis of who sustains or transforms powerful discourses needs broadening. It is essential to expand the discourse research agenda by showing how such discourses shape the everyday realities of larger constituencies and populations, that is, those not directly involved in politics or those positioned most weakly in global politics (for example, local communities, women, etc.) and by extending the range of potentially powerful speaking agents—particularly those considered to be without the means to coerce or threaten (Holzscheiter 2005). Since from a discourse perspective the boundaries of what is considered political discourse are constantly shifting and disputed, defined by the extent to which political institutions are produced, reproduced and reflected in communicative interaction among human beings (no matter how “ordinary”), the range of subjects/agents/speech-acts to be

<sup>14</sup>For a recent argument along these lines see Lebow's paper on, Constitutive causality (Lebow 2009).

considered relevant to discourse analysis is potentially infinite. The productive power of discourse then entails discursive regimes that diffuse from a specific discursive event or process of communication to other social spheres and contexts: for whaling regulations to become publicly accepted, normatively “naturalized” and successfully globalized beyond the realm of environmental activism and state concern; for the post-Suez special relationship between Britain and the United States to forge their identity vis-à-vis other actors in IR, across time and in different contexts; or for legal discourse within the United Nations to become effective beyond the confines of that specific international organization. In short, for discursive practices in the first place to crystallize, once more, into institutionalized structures of signification that shape and give meaning to social and political practices beyond the narrow realm of diplomacy between states. This leads me directly to my second point of criticism: the ambition of discourse scholars to provide detailed accounts of transformation and change in international politics.

*The Quest to Understand Drivers of Change: Privileging Agents over Structures*

Discourse approaches are very strong in accounting for the ordering functions of structures of signification as well as for the transformative potential of human interaction understood as real-time communication processes. To be more precise, they are strong in exploring how structures of signification and discursive formations shape social life and to account for how patterns of meaning and discursive practices change through communicative interaction. However, in seeking to do more than that, IR discourse analysts, again, seem to sit uncomfortably between positivist epistemology and constructivist ontology. As soon as processes of discursive transition and lasting change (of identities, norms, and knowledge) are at play, the desire to account for factors responsible for such transition and transformation seems to drive discourse analysts to fall back onto privileging agents over structures, the processes of text production over their contextual parameters. In fact, Bially-Mattern’s analysis of representational power is a clear example for a discourse-analytical framework that rests on a strong and convincing theory on linguistic practice, power, and identity construction—what is lacking in her study is a corresponding substantial theory on the context in which representational power becomes effective. For her, identity speech-acts simply become powerful because “of the manner in which they are structured” (Bially-Mattern 2005:94).

By nature of its underlying assumption that argumentation and deliberation are a considerable driving-force behind normative change in international politics, discourse analysis that is grounded in the deliberative power–discourse nexus is also focused on processes of normative transformation. Deliberative discourse approaches still face the challenge of establishing a direct link between particular types of communication and communicative behavior and the impact of these practices on their social environment. Thus, micro-interaction deliberative approaches struggle to attribute the power of persuasion and arguing to specific actors in discourse—the inability of deliberative micro-interaction studies to clearly differentiate between arguing and bargaining as different logics of action in empirical observations testifies to this challenge (Deitelhoff and Müller 2005). Identifying a social setting as engendering deliberative reasoning through truth-seeking dialogue still seems to be a rather intricate endeavor. By analyzing the communicative procedures and argumentative moves made during a specific international social encounter, those operationalizing a deliberative notion of discourse (both on micro- and macro-levels) might be able to show *that* arguing (or legal reasoning as in Johnstone’s study) as a specific form of communication was present, but pointing to the “real motives” that underlie specific communica-

tive moves (such as persuasion and “arguing”) has been repeatedly dismissed as an impossible endeavor (Krebs and Jackson 2007). Johnstone for his part contends himself with showing the mere existence of deliberation and legal argumentation in international politics rather than seeking to explain when and why deliberation is powerful. He concludes at the end of his study, “power and short-term calculations of interests count more, but the impact of these factors is mitigated by norms and discourse” (Johnstone 2003:477).

*The Way Forward: What the Practice Turn Can Do for Discourse Research and Vice Versa*

Considering the above discussion of the limitations of extant discourse analyses, progress on issues of power and change seems to depend on a creative coalescence of the methodological strengths of both micro-interaction and macro-structure approaches. Discourse research focusing on structures of signification has produced pioneering studies that show how patterns of representation and meaning have changed over longer periods of time. However, as soon as it is interested in accounting for the discursive practices that brought about such changes in the first place, it needs to theorize on the contextual parameters within which the perlocutionary force of individual speech-acts can be traced and the contexts in which transformative discursive moves are observable. That said, the overall conclusion drawn from the above overview of discourse approaches is that discourse analysis in IR is not so much in need of further theorizing on the role of “text” (that is, representation) as it needs a theory on context (that is, the situatedness of text production). Micro-interaction approaches working with the concept of discourse have made an exceptional contribution to a more refined understanding of the social, interpersonal dynamics that constitute IR, allowing us to see communicative exchange as a “struggle over meaning,” especially in times of crisis when new norms are created or already existing ones readjusted and reformulated. However, discourse approaches that focus on micro-interaction still need to address the question of how, when, and where the communicative action of discursive agents has a transformational, perlocutionary effect not only within the confines of specific social contexts (for example, negotiation settings, international organizations), but also on the larger constitutional discourses and “narratives” that support particular normative and symbolic orders in international politics.

Bearing in mind these contentious issues in contemporary discourse research in IR, it is the recent wave of studies on practices in IR that promises to take discourse analysis a significant step forward in its quest to contextualize and situate the dynamic relationship between structures of signification, discursive practices, and other types of practices.<sup>15</sup> In fact, in my view the “practice turn”<sup>16</sup> that is so often conjured up nowadays, in essence denotes the fundamental move from linguistic to discursive constructivism: from the recognition of the central position of language in IR to the recognition that linguistic practices and other forms of practice in IR cannot be separated. In international practice theory, practices are the observable *performances* that “embody, act out, and possibly reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world” (Adler and Pouliot 2012:6). Going beyond textual and discursive practices as the only practices relevant to IR, the theory of practice urges us to think about how different practices (discursive, social, esthetic, corporate, etc.) simultaneously evoke “processes of stability and change” (Adler and Pouliot 2011a:2). By conceiving of practices as

<sup>15</sup>For seminal contributions to practice theory and analysis in IR see Pouliot (2010); Adler and Pouliot (2011a, b); Steele (2011); and Neumann (2012).

<sup>16</sup>The work that inspires much of the theoretical debate on practices is Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, and Von Savigny (2001), *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*.

actions that are “embedded in particularly organized contexts” (Adler and Pouliot 2011a:5), the notion of practice serves to underscore the relevance of studying discourse *in situ*, i.e. embedded in social and institutional structures, routines and inarticulate, tacit knowledges that give meaning to a particular communicative action as a recognizable, patterned practice (Pouliot 2008:271).

What is most remarkable about practice research, however, are its methodologies, particularly its combination of discourse-analytical and ethnographic research that I deem to be most relevant in terms of the challenges for discourse research identified above (Neumann 2012). By linking the contextualized study of practices to the larger representational “scripts” they reflect, practice research incorporates the meticulous analysis of micro-interaction in specific social encounters into larger “communities of practice” (Adler 2008). International diplomacy or security therefore are seen as ensembles of competent performances that constitute the specific social field in which that practice is taking place. At the same time, the close observation of the tacit practices and everyday, trivial, unquestioned organizational routines of specific events is taken to evidence the small instances of subversion that may gouge from the contingent “play of practice” and transform the structures of signification that order a social field. In sum, it is here that I see tremendous potential for a significant leap forward in the methodological translation of the thick constructivist program.

### Conclusion

The contemporary landscape of discourse scholarship in IR still validates Milliken’s claim that there is no agreement on any best way to analyze discourse (Milliken 1999:226). However, the observations made in this paper also support the argument that, due to quite distinct intellectual traditions and analytical frameworks, discourse scholarship *cannot* agree on any “best way” to study international politics from a discourse perspective. Rather than finding a consensual understanding of how to conceptualize and practically employ discourse, the heterogeneous field of discourse approaches inspires a lively intra- and interdisciplinary debate in the present study of international politics. This is both risk and opportunity—on the one hand, the relative openness of the term allows accommodation of a whole range of philosophical and intellectual traditions, neighboring concepts, and methodological frameworks; on the other, a weakly reflected employment of discourse might result in its selling-off as a hollow phrase rather than a theoretically and analytically profound concept. In fact, any overview of the field must come to the conclusion that there are probably as many methodological frameworks as there are case studies. At first sight, this finding corresponds with a frequent argument of sociolinguistic discourse analysts who contend that discourse-analytical methods should be tailored to the empirical subjects studied rather than vice versa (Wodak and Meyer 2001).

An idiosyncratic way of doing discourse analysis is legitimate but does not imply that the analyst should not be bothered with uncovering his or her analytical procedures. All discourse studies should, in theory, be replicable and, ultimately, through comparison between different cases achieve a greater potential for generalization. To do discourse analysis of any kind thus requires a rigorously chosen methodological framework as well as a meticulous justification for the data chosen as empirical evidence. It is this point in particular that has, in the past, turned many innovative theoretical frameworks into rather underdeveloped and unsystematic empirical analyses of discourse. The empirical studies chosen for this paper are proxies for the, to date, most thoroughly grounded explorations of the discursive facets of IR. Yet, the studies also reveal that IR scholars are still very much concerned with intra-disciplinary debates on the value of discourse and the various theoretical and conceptual origins of the concept. Look-

ing beyond the theoretical and methodological horizons of IR could contribute to a stronger anchoring of discourse in the IR curriculum and, through even more refined and systematic empirical studies, could convince skeptics that the concept and analysis of discourse is not synonymous with obscure and woolly ways of conducting social science research.

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