Discourse Analysis as a method for understanding the framing of urban governance

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Context and purpose

The FRACTAL project aims to advance scientific knowledge about regional climate responses to greenhouse gas emissions, enhance the integration of this knowledge into decision making, and thus enable climate-resilient development pathways. Focusing on urban areas in Southern Africa, the project is working with academics and decision-makers across nine cities in the region through a co-exploration process. One component of the project is directed at increasing understanding of the diversity of urban governance arrangements across Southern Africa, particularly in the domains of water, energy and food security, in order to understand decision-making processes. This work includes: the various actors involved, their discourses and their policy mandates; the policies for governing the city; decision-making processes; the resources available; the projects and programmes that have emerged; and, the outcomes of these policy-making processes on the ground.

Discourse analysis is an analytical approach applied by social scientists as part of the FRACTAL urban governance research, and includes both analysis of verbal engagements and analysis of policies and related documents. In practical terms, this implies unpacking how language is used, when people speak as well as in documents, in order to better understand how problems and solutions are framed. Such insights build an understanding of current planning and implementation patterns, with the aim of enhancing the integration of climate information into decision making. This briefing note is an introduction into the definition and method of discourse analysis, with particular focus on argumentative discourse analysis, and outlines its application as a method to better understand urban governance within the FRACTAL focal cities.

Left: Engagements at the Maputo Learning Lab March 2017; Right: Policy documents from FRACTAL cities

Defining Discourse and Discourse Analysis

In popular texts, the word discourse is commonly used to show that "language is structured according to different *patterns* that people's utterances follow when they take part in different domains of social life, familiar examples being 'medical discourse' and 'political discourse'" (Jorgensen and Philips, 2002, 1).

There are many definitions of discourse and it means different things in different disciplines. However, a simple definition of discourse might be: Discourse is *"a particular way of talking about and understanding the world, or an aspect of it"* (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002, 1-2).

A somewhat more complex definition is provided by Hajer (1995:44): *Discourse is "an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categorisations that are produced, reproduced and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities".*

A number of discourses generally exist in any given context. For example, a discussion related to the formulation of climate change policy could include discourses from the natural and social sciences, ecology, economics, philosophy and so on. There is complexity, in terms of language used and meanings thereof, in the way in which an issue can be understood.

Global Discourses

Global discourses are influential 'meta-discourses' that are shared among actors at various scales from local to international, and which influence on the various levels of governance. An example of a global discourse is that of *resilience,* which has spread globally to being a dominant discourse in climate adaptation literature (Brown, 2014), particularly in the urban sphere. This discourse argues that urban resilience is: "the capacity of individuals, communities, institutions, businesses, and systems within a city to survive, adapt, and grow no matter what kinds of chronic stresses and acute shocks they experience". Large influential institutions, such as the Rockefeller Foundation which leads the 100 Resilient Cities project, serve to embed the resilience discourse in 100 cities world-wide. Furthermore, resilience discourse is embedded throughout the UN-Habitat Sustainable Development Goals. A specific example of the uptake of the resilience discourse is in the *Joburg Growth and Development Strategy* (GDS) 2040 released by the City of Johannesburg in 2011, which identified resilience as one of its key development principles.

There are discourses operating at a macro level in society, and there are political, economic, cultural, social and environmental discourses. Because society is complex, each of the various sectors have their own structuring discourses. For example, in the water sector there are numerous water discourses that provide the frameworks for legislation in water management, such as the discourse of 'water security' and 'water as a common good'.

Argumentative discourse can be seen as one of several types of discourse analysis, and relates to settings and contexts where reasoning is used by stakeholders to motivate for their interests. *Argumentative processes* take place in discussions and meetings as actors position themselves and argue about a particular controversial issue. In this way the discussions can be seen to be 'political' as one actor or a group of actors seek to be dominant so that the discourse they are proposing will dominate the decision making and hence policy-making. Hajer (1995) calls this 'argumentative discourse analysis'. The 'argumentative interaction' between actors is the 'key moment of discourse formation' where actors reproduce their 'discursive positions' (what they are arguing for) in the context of a controversy (Hajer, 1995, 54). In doing so they will provide claims for the legitimacy of the knowledge on which their discourses are based. There will be a 'struggle' over different knowledge claims which underlie the opposing discourses which represent different ways of understanding the issue at hand. The struggle will also construct different positions and identities for the actors (e.g. an actor which is more radical or conservative). Dominant discourses make a significant impact on the outcomes of policy on the ground when it is implemented.

Important Concepts

Storylines can be described as "a condensed sort of narrative that connects different discourses" (Hajer, 2005: 448) or abbreviations used to stand for a more complex reality. For example, the term 'Cancer Valley' became a storyline shared amongst a wide diversity of actors concerned with the high levels of cancer in the South Durban valley, related to industrial pollution trapped in the valley due to atmospheric winter temperature inversions.

Metaphors, words or phrases that are representative or symbolic of something else, are often used in discourses. The environmental discourse of 'survivalism' for example makes use of the famous metaphor of 'spaceship earth,' where the earth is a spaceship with humans on board.

Discourse coalitions, or alliances, emerge when actors share similar views and understand or at least are able to relate to each other's 'storylines', although their main interests may be very different.

Discourse institutionalisation occurs when a particular discourse stabilizes and the discourse becomes entrenched in policy and decision-making processes (Hajer, 1995, 57). For example, the institutionalisation of environment and nature in policies at a variety of scales relates to the adoption of the sustainable development discourse globally by national states in their policies, and the proliferation of environmental Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs).

Discourse Analysis as a method in the FRACTAL project

Discourse analysis is a method to analyse what language does: the politics of meaning that arises through the use of language, the way in which it affects people's understanding and cognition, and the way in which it distributes power to some and less to others. The task of the discourse analysis in the FRACTAL project, applied with a focus on argumentative discourse analysis, is to explain how a given actor (organisation or person) secures the reproduction of his/her discursive position (or manages to alter this) in the context of a disagreement or debate (Hajer, 1995, 51) and to uncover the dominant discourses and their embedding in policies in the southern African cities. The FRACTAL discourse analysis includes both the analysis of: the discourses that are evident in the *oral discussions of institutional and civil society actors (speech act*s) in city meetings, or in FRACTAL dialogues; and of *policy documents* (*texts*) of the cities of Lusaka, Maputo and Windhoek which reveal the underlying discourses which dominate policy.

The oral analysis involves observing the verbal engagement of actors in a dialogue, workshop or meeting through a discourse analysis lens. In FRACTAL, this will include the City Learning Labs and

> *For **ethical code of conduct**, if observing a verbal engagement through a discourse analysis lens the researcher will need to reveal to the group that he or she will be recording (taking notes) as part of an information gathering process for research purposes*

Dialogues organised as part of the project, as well as other relevant dialogues and meetings where possible. The analysis requires one to be present to observe the verbal engagement through a discourse analysis lens, prompted by a pre-established framework and related categories, such as: dominant/counter discourses; storylines; actors; rules and conventions; positioning; method of arguing; strategic strategies; style of argument; and social effect. More specifically, aspects that the observer may be looking for would include:

- What is the *dominant discourse – there may be many?* e.g. economic, environmental, social, planning, policy discourses? They may be entangled?
- How are actors *positioning themselves* in relation to other actors with regard to the debate e.g. officials having to deal with polluting industries. Who is 'conservative', 'unresponsive' etc.

The policy document analysis involves a process that starts with the selection of documents for analysis, and for FRACTAL these will be documents relating to 'burning issues' that emerge and are prioritised by stakeholders in each of the cities. These documents will be read and analysed (coded) according to a set of themes, sub-themes and related keywords. A theme could for example be 'water', with sub-themes and keywords emerging around how water is framed in one or several documents. This could involve whether water is described as a basic human right, with keywords such as 'safety', 'human rights and dignity', or as a scarce resource, with keywords such as 'scarcity', 'limited' and 'crisis'.

An understanding of the dominant discourses in the city, both those applied orally through current speech acts and those already institutionalised through text in policy documents, provides a macro framework within which city policy-making is situated. This information will form part of understanding the overarching framework for decision-making, how problems are defined and the solutions that are possible. Unpacking discourses, and how language is used, will build understanding of the planning and implementation discourses into which climate change is and will be integrated. Knowledge of the discourses will contribute to defining the governance arrangements in each city, which will potentially provide an understanding of where and how climate information is best introduced.

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