

WHICH ROUTE TO DISCOURSE ANALYSIS?: AN INTERVIEW WITH JEAN-JACQUES COURTINE¹

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- **ABSTRACT:** It's commonly known among researchers the importance of Jean-Jacques Courtine's route in the Discourse Analysis of French tradition and his contributions to the theory. As it is common to the great thinkers, the thought of this scholar of the humanities has not remained the same, nor the spaces through which he circulated academically (France, USA and currently New Zealand). From the work done about the communist discourse addressed to Christians to the recent work *History of virility*, Courtine has faced many problems. In this unprecedented interview, the author tells us about his story in the field of Discourse Analysis of French tradition; aspirations, expectations and common perspectives from the 1960s that influenced Discourse Analysis; he tells about aspects of his relationship with Pêcheux and the paths that their work has taken from the 1980s on. All this leads us to reflect upon the complexity, importance and relevance of the discourse as an object of investigation.
- **KEYWORDS:** Discourse analysis. Historical anthropology. Epistemology. Historical semiology.

João Kogawa: We can consider *Automatic Discourse Analysis*, published in 1969, as the inaugural mark of Discourse Analysis (hereafter AD) in France. However, there are other texts by M. Pêcheux in which he does not seem to have the same concern. Here I draw on *Ideology and the history of sciences*, in collaboration with M. Fichant, and the articles published under the pseudonym of Thomas Herbert ("*Reflections about theoretical situation of the social sciences, especially Social Psychology*" and "*Notes for a general theory of ideologies*"). What is the relationship between these texts?

J-J. Courtine: To answer this question we need to consider the following fact: in what is still left of Pêcheux's work, which is valid not only for France but probably also for Brazil, his activity as discourse analyst somehow smashed the rest of his bibliography. Thus I am impressed with the extensive and

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¹ This interview was carried out with Jean-Jacques Courtine at the Sorbonne in December 2010, upon completion of my PDEE stage. Initially, I recorded audiovisual material. After that, I did the transcript of the French audiovisual material. All this work was monitored and reviewed by professor Courtine. This English version was based on the Portuguese version.

intensive use made in Brazil of all the texts dealing with DA, rather than the philosophical work itself. Well, Pêcheux was a philosopher and that is what we must remember. He had two faces: while part of him was a philosopher, he had this other side to him that loved to fabricate and mix machines with linguistics and computing. Then, he performed the critical work of the philosopher from a Marxist perspective – as a student of Althusser he had been and continued to be; he also held another job that entailed certain forms of linguistic-computing mixing that led to conceiving the Automatic Discourse Analysis. For him, the two activities were linked. The ADA was the practical extension – the method and the armed wing – somehow, of the philosophical work. Well, it's this second activity that remained, it seems, as his essential legacy. We must not forget that he was an Althusserian Marxist philosopher and that is why, evidently, he wrote his critical works on the history of science reinterpreting some historians or philosophers of science – in particular Bachelard. That is why the notion of “epistemological break” gained a particular place. Pêcheux seeks to show that the works of Saussure, first, and Chomsky's have also operated in such manner. Apart from linguistics itself, he fought, as a Marxist philosopher, for what was then called a “class struggle in theory” and it is in this context that his work with Fichant – his comrade of Normal School and philosopher – fits in. The memory of the use of this expression, expired today, explains the erasing of the philosophical work of Pêcheux: the work of the Marxism itself in the world of ideas. Pêcheux did not work, as we tend to believe, only with linguists and computer scientists. This idea – which omits the philosophical dimension of his job – serves to give more meaning to his engagement in DA. He produced at that time an entire critical activity in the field of humanities and social sciences, which attacked what was being done at the university on behalf of disciplines such as Social Psychology, for example: Pêcheux saw in that particular aspect the foremost point of capitalism in the humanities. The writings of “Thomas Herbert” fall under this perspective. However, as he should at the same time join in as a researcher at CNRS – and appearing as a Marxist philosopher was not a royal road to get there – he used that nickname - which comes from a family story – to sign his texts. Thomas Herbert was, if I remember correctly, a friend of the family and a memory that had to do with the war. Literally, “Thomas Herbert” was, at the same time, a name of war and a “pen name”. That says a lot about the environment that reigned in the University political confrontations. Either way, it is necessary – in this kind of posthumous biography that was constituted about Pêcheux – that this part of DA does not have full precedence over his philosophical, critical and political work to the point of deleting it. It is important to remember that Pêcheux had, at any given time, to choose to rename “Thomas Herbert” and to understand why.

João Kogawa: What is the conception of discourse that seems most appropriate for an understanding of your current work?

J-J. Courtine: This question concerns the nature of the work we can do when we undertake a historical perspective – which has been the case for a long time – as much as it concerns the things that I could learn throughout the period in which I practiced DA. I can say in this regard that there is no absolute continuity between these two moments, but also that there is no radical discontinuity. It seems to me that what I learned while doing discourse analysis prepared me for the critical work of texts to which the historian must, of course, be open. In other words, when I studied issues concerning the medical and physiognomic tradition of expression of emotions between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, the reading of all this vast corpus of texts benefited, I believe, from what I learned by doing discourse analysis. When we have to establish genealogies of statements, designing an archeology of large sets of discourses and we are confronted with masses of documents, we recognize the importance of concepts such as pre-built or inter-discourse. However, this is only part of the work to be carried out. That is, the work of the historian must make full use of the material in history. And in all of this, of course, there is not just text, not discourse alone. My perspective is very close to that of Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (2004), on the condition that we understand well that the term “discourse” which he employs does not mean, at best, “text”. He respects the historical materials in general. This implies that the historical work I could do in the long term, whether it is about emotions and facial expressions, the deformed body, or virility, was only partial. It is necessary to figure out the texts, understand the pictures, play lists and tables, rebuild and give new life to gestures and practices. In sum, one has to make sense of everything that constitutes the diversity of the materials of history. Thus, my old discursive concerns are to engage in a historical and genealogical perspective that, it seems to me, is much closer to what I learned to do by reading *The Archaeology of Knowledge* than to the DA itself, in the strictly linguistic sense of the term.

João Kogawa: In *Mitologias* (BARTHES, 1980), a bit like what you say in *Metamorfoses do discurso político* (COURTINE, 2006) (with texts chosen and translated by Carlos Piovezani and Nilton Milanez), there is the idea that, with the emergence of the big media, it was essential to build a science of semiology. How do you see your work in relation to Barthes?

J-J. Courtine: I am not sure that I truly understand that it was “essential to build a science of semiology”. And I only made use of the term semiology, when I did it, accompanied by the adjective “historic” because, in my view, the objects of semiology, the signs with which it is concerned have, above all, a historical existence. However, if you ask me about the semiological project as formulated by

Roland Barthes, particularly in the view of the semiology of the image – because that is what interested me in the first place – what strikes me is that the birth of semiology is a kind of historical mystery. How can a project dating from the late nineteenth century, which was formulated in the early twentieth century in the *Course of General Linguistics* by Saussure, without attracting any interest worthy of being noticed for about half a century, suddenly reappears after a long silence in 1960, i.e., at the beginning of what the cultural historians consider the “second twentieth century”? What is certain is that this rebirth has only partly to do with the internal genesis of the history of linguistics and structuralism so often evoked. It depends on other factors; in particular, the way through which society was suddenly flooded by the media’s more massive scale than it had been before. It was necessary to think and forge tools to understand it. I think the semiology of images, especially as it appears at this time, can only be explained in this way. Why did the development of the semiology of images start in the 1960s? Because we became aware, initially in a vague and then in an increasingly precise way, that advertising invades everything; advertising messages spread across the corner; television penetrates the homes and in our homes, in private life, we are confronted with what previously was restricted to the public sphere. So, there are two reasons that, in my view, explain the emergence of semiology. There is the need of structuralism itself and its development (that we see in Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* (1999) in particular, and in his inaugural texts), and the fact that new objects are imposed on the analysis, especially advertising in all forms. Indeed, it is the same reason that, at the same time, gives birth to an analysis of textual form of ideologies, i.e., a discourse analysis. All these things are connected. We see that his genealogy, in part, takes matters concerning the disciplines themselves – the way the disciplines are “conquered” by structuralism – but also factors that are outside the realm of science and that most commonly concern the ideological context and the profound transformations in the 1960s.

João Kogawa: Nilton Milanez does studies under your supervision in 2003 and, since then, in Brazil, he uses the concept of intericonicity. I know it is a part of your work and one of your concerns. Would it be possible to assimilate this concept of “interdiscourse” in Pêcheux?

J-J. Courtine: The idea comes from here, yes. But intericonicity cannot be directly superimposed on what we mean by “interdiscourse.” When I started working on this issue in 2003-2004, I had for a long time been skeptical about the possibility of applying linguistic models to the image. I realized that a semiology of image could not be linguistic inspiration; that the attempts made in the perspective of a rhetorical image, as Barthes thought, did not work and was not suitable; that the definition of the linguistic sign does not conform to the nature of iconic materiality and could only be applied in this domain with considerable distortions. Then I

wondered if, in the background, the image would not combine better with the discourse than with the model of the language, as conceived by semiology at the time. It is from here that, trying to understand the image from a discursive model, I wondered, of course, if the concept of interdiscourse, i.e., the fact that there are always words under the words, discourse under the discourse – there is “always one already-there of the discourse”, as we then said– could not be applied to the image. Undoubtedly, there is “always one already-there of the image” and there are images under the images. And it is from this moment on that I began to consider images in the genealogical and memorial dimension. This means that every image resurrect other images. That would be true for exterior subject images – images that we can document as they have material existence, they were seen and realized on the external media to the subject itself – or mental images, those which inhabit the subject’s imaginary in question. It is in these terms that I conceived the intericonicity. Every image is a relationship of images; it subscribes to network with other images, whether external or internal images to the subject. Others, who developed that independently and in their own way, shared this intuition: in a recent book by Clément Chéroux (2009), entitled *Diplopie*, we find a very similar use of the same notion. However, Chéroux considers that it is among the external images – whose trail he strives to document as an art historian – that we can see intericonicity relations being produced. Under the images of September 11, he caught a glimpse of those of Pearl Harbor. That seems fair to me, but, in my view, we need to provide the place of internal images, the place where the images come to mind in the imaginary of the subject. There is, in the mental landscape of each subject, in the memory of the images of which each one has, an individual and a collective part – something of the order of intericonicity. In the same way that in order to read texts we need to resurrect the memory of the texts – this is what we call interdiscourse; little does it matter if we make these texts appear in its documentary form or as simple memory trace – there is a memory of the images; images that can be simultaneously on the wall here before you, and in your head.

João Kogawa: Pêcheux, in *The role of memory* (1999), proposed, somehow, different perspectives for this question. In Brazil, [with the discussions made in some groups such as GEADA, LABOR and Nilton Milanez studies (LABEDISCO)] we see his research as a pathway to AD. How do you see these Brazilian studies that consider your research as a possibility of changing DA?

J-J. Courtine: I’ve already partially answered this question on another occasion, but I will approach it differently. For the Brazilian DA, I would say I am probably one bad example, because my journey was to stop doing DA. So, if DA or some Brazilian discourse analysts want to be inspired by my example, I strongly believe they run the risk, like me, of stopping being discourse analysts. Unless we take, which seems to be the case in Brazil, a very broad meaning to the term discourse

analysis. I understand that we want to give the DA a broader sense than it had and continues to have; we want to bring into our field materials that are not purely textual. In this case, if these concerns strongly enter the field of history, the materials on which it works are not strictly and solely linguistic documents; then yes, why not? Perhaps the perspective that I develop can engage in the field of DA. But we must see what this implies: there are heavy conditions that can distance us considerably from a reduced linguistic discourse analysis. At the same time, I answered this issue otherwise, saying that in historical work – what Foucault calls genealogy or archeology – there is a place for linguistic work. There is probably, punctually and occasionally a place for it in terms of objects, objectives, corpus of research, but not systematically. I do not think the bulk of the work should focus on linguistic methods when the object of history largely surpasses that approach. I think that Linguistics may possibly act as a tool. Why not? It is similar to when we do documentarian work in history. We criticize sources; we do it for the image, for practices, for statistical series, and then, of course, for the textual materials of history. However, this makes strictly linguistic questions secondary or auxiliary methods among others. The choice is then, right there. If we truly want to make history, if we consider that the object is primarily historical, we cannot attach it only to the linguistic considerations. Because the materiality that we have to account for largely surpasses the question of the text and this forces us to think, on the contrary, about the relationship between different types of materiality. Lists, tables, images, photographs, texts, but also practical, gestures, expressions... That is, it seems to me, the answer we can give. So, I fear that those who are ready to follow this route will give to the DA content that is very close to cultural history or historical anthropology.

João Kogawa: You often say, in your course *The anthropology of images*, “we can not be afraid to move on”, i.e., we should not radically enclose ourselves in disciplinary boundaries. Why, after Pêcheux’s death we watched a kind of “redisciplinarization” of DA in which nomadism does not seem to take place?

J-J. Courtine: Both answers lay in DA. There was originally a strong air of interdisciplinary freedom that Pêcheux – Marxist philosopher and curious man, passionate for Linguistics and by computers – largely embodied. That is why I insisted earlier on the philosophical work in which Pêcheux was fully involved. We should not think that he was, above all, concerned with founding a discipline that was called “Discourse Analysis.” It was not the case; this was only one aspect of his work; perhaps one of his additional work, being even one of the important elements. But that was not all. As a philosopher, he was extremely open to many areas and the exchanges involving philosophy, politics, linguistics, mathematics, computing and history. You need not erase

it, any more than the political project that crossed this conception of DA that I highlighted before. So I was professionally a linguist at the time, and he was professionally a philosopher. Claudine Haroche did social psychology at the CNRS. Marandin was a linguist and worked with formal languages; Françoise Gadet was also a linguist and was interested in sociolinguistics. There were also computer scientists and logicians working with us. But these specializations, these professionals' reasons did not outweigh the need to find common and unprecedented ground. And there was, of course, historical issues that were placed, and performed works of historical nature. In my case, for example, the work I did about the discourse of the French Communist Party was a way to put in historical issues. So everything that coexisted in the same project and interdisciplinarity was central in founding something new. We were in a context, as Deleuze would say, of "deterritorialization" of forms of circulation that reshaped the roles and redistributed the boundaries of disciplines. Then, very quickly, everything ceased to be like that: the DA quickly became a discipline and the movement itself made use of Pêcheux's life. There were also those whose concern was disciplinarization of DA and who were not part of the group that I have spoken about. They were, moreover, fully occupied with writing manuals introductions, and with dreaming up dictionaries... There was then a pedagogical and disciplinary project developed in parallel to this initial foundation. That was not my purpose, nor the original purpose of Pêcheux, yet he, in my view, little by little – especially in the spring – subsided, somehow, to this. However, we would need to see the issue closely because he tried to get to the end of his critical work as a philosopher. What is clear, however, is that for some, the DA interested only as a linguistic component, like a discipline inside Linguistics. I think that since things are re-territorialized effectively, this interdisciplinary spirit stopped breathing. This is the reason why I distanced myself. I believe, indeed, that nomadism, on an intellectual level, is something precious. Michel de Certeau, who I was close to, would say, "Thinking is to go beyond". This seems to be to me an essential truth. In other words, the work of thinking is to move. I interpreted this as well as in the realm of the geographic space. This is the reason why I reply to this interview. Since what is happening in Brazil leaves me not indifferent. In fact, I could find there a deep mark left by DA and Pêcheux's works. I believe in the theoretical virtue of travel and displacement, and I have spent fifteen years of my life – almost half of my career – in the United States for this reason. This allowed me to think, work, search, and change. But we can be a great traveler staying at home, as Montaigne in his tower... we can travel without ever leaving Paris, this office, the Sorbonne. There are forms of displacement, flexibility, intellectual plasticity, that make us move without moving... It is a mark that the ideas cannot stay in one place, but that they exist in movement. People who believe that they own their ideas are always wrong.

João Kogawa: On September 30 2010, at the Sorbonne, in a cocktail opening the school year, you made me a very interesting point when I talked to you about my research. This happened when you introduced me to one of your department colleagues. I told you that I was interested in the history of DA and Pêcheux's early texts. You told me at the time that I was looking for "dinosaur bones". In your view, does the DA as conceived by Pêcheux have enough analytical device to understand the domination forms in our present?

J-J. Courtine: This is a good question, João. Firstly, my joke was unjust with the dinosaurs: it is not because they are very ancient that they are not interesting. However, would it be fair to discourse analysis? Probably not as well. After all, it is part of the history of Linguistics and also part of the history of Marxism and structuralism in the humanities. It raises the same interest as any other object of our intellectual history of the last fifty years. But the question is quite another: would the tools developed by the DA at the time bring understanding of what is happening today? I tend to answer this question both affirmatively and negatively. We can certainly find in the analysis of linguistic forms some evidence to partially understand the forms of discursive domination in contemporary history. However, I think we need to go much further. The discursivities against which we are confronted today do not have such characteristics anymore – or very rarely present themselves well – as purely linguistic discursivities from. We see very well that the forms of domination are exerted through mixed communication modes where images, speeches, writings discourses and spectacular effects are interwoven. So I do not think the statistical word counts, as it still operates on political discourse, or, the exclusive attention to syntax or lexical analyses clarifies what is produced actually.

These mixed discursivities are also "liquid", as Zygmunt Bauman suggests; they present themselves in streaming and they are characterized by their speed, instantaneity and obsolescence. This implies that the collective memory of words and images is today an essential political game. The DA would have a role in deciphering the contemporary forms of domination firstly, if the theory insists on taking on the critical original role that it first had; if, secondly, it is open to the diversity of verbal materiality, whether oral or written, and image, which are woven forms of communication that traverse and organize the public sphere; finally, if its historical anchor allows for DA to maintain the filiation of pictures and words, i.e., if it can restore the memory of the collective representations, ever more fleeting. Thus, DA will contribute to the present of our societies not to delete their history by making them unintelligible.

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Quelle voie pour l'analyse du discours: un entretien avec Jean-Jacques Courtine

- **RÉSUMÉ** : *Le parcours de Jean- Jacques Courtine dans le domaine de l'analyse française du discours ainsi que les contributions de l'auteur à la théorie sont bien connus par les chercheurs de ce domaine. Comme il est courant pour les grands penseurs, la pensée de ce savant des sciences humaines n'est pas restée la même, ni les espaces dans lesquels il fit le tour académique (France, USA et actuellement Nouvelle Zélande). De L'Analyse du discours politique: le discours communiste adressé aux chrétiens jusqu'à L'histoire de la virilité, de nombreux problématiques ont été rencontrés par Courtine. Dans cette interview inédite, l'auteur nous raconte son histoire dans le domaine de l'analyse française du discours; sur les aspirations, les attentes et les perspectives communes du structuralisme des 1960 qui ont influencé l'analyse du discours; sur les aspects de leur relation avec Pêcheux et les chemins qui ont eu leur travail après les années 1980. Tout cela nous amène à réfléchir sur la complexité, l'importance et la pertinence du discours comme objet d'investigation.*

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