Discourse Analysis of Ancient Religious Texts

Workshop of the ERC Advanced Grant 'Lived Ancient Religion: Questioning "cults" and "polis religion"'

in cooperation with the Department of Biblical Studies, Humboldt University Berlin

8 August 2014

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Max Weber Center of Advanced Social and Cultural Studies

Nordhäuser Str. 74

99089 Erfurt

Lived Ancient Religion is the program to study ancient religious practices and beliefs as they were 'lived', that is appropriated, modified or even invented in daily life and thus possibly beyond 'given' norms or dogmas as 'it ought to be' in the Imperial Period. The project analyses various social layers including family space, secondary spaces, temple religion, but also intellectual spaces, and aims at including all available sources, that is textual as well as material, epigraphic, and iconographical evidence. The analysis of textual evidence in such a research project obviously raises questions of authorship, historical context, as well as audience and purpose of a given text, but beside more 'traditional' text analysis, the interrelation of related texts, and questions of knowledge and power relations must not be neglected. Discourse analysis appears as an important research perspective to include questions beyond that what is more or less immediately obvious from content such as (tacit) knowledge needed to understand the content, addressees as well as (implicit or explicit) counter-discourses.

However, the role discourse analysis plays in the analysis of ancient religious texts as yet is surprisingly limited. Therefore Sonja Ammann and Lara Weiss joined forces and funds kindly provided by the ERC Advanced grant 'Lived Ancient Religion: 'Questioning 'cults' and 'polis religion''' (supervised by Prof. Jörg Rüpke) and the Department of Biblical Studies at Humboldt University Berlin (Prof. Bernd U. Schipper) and invited students, doctoral and postdoctoral scholars to the Max Weber Center at Erfurt University in order to familiarize the participants with the matter and discuss the applicability of different approaches. The format was explicitly not a conference, but a workshop in which after theoretical inputs by the organizers, the emphasis was on joint preparations in small groups and intensive plenum discussions that followed a the brief presentation on the examples of pre-circulated source texts chosen by the two PhD students of LAR project Christopher Degelmann and Maik Patzelt.

In spite of the somewhat inconvenient date in the middle of the German University term break we were happy to welcome participants from Amsterdam, Berlin, Erfurt, Göttingen, Leipzig, Marburg and Würzburg, whose expertize included Ancient History, Archaeology, Biblical Studies, Byzantine Studies, Coptology, Egyptology, Keltology, Linguistic Studies, Modern Greek, Religious Studies, Social Sciences, and Theology.

The workshop started with a keynote by Dr. Ewa Zakrzewska (University of Amsterdam, Linguistic Studies), who holds, among others, a MA in Egyptology and a PhD in linguistics and is currently employed by the University Library of Amsterdam as subject specialist in linguistics, archaeology, ancient history and Byzantine and Modern Greek studies, and is also an active researcher in the field of Bohairic Coptic and affiliated member of the Amsterdam Center for Language and Communication (ACLC) at the University of Amsterdam. In her linguistic research, Dr. Ewa Zakrzewska applies insights from functional-typological linguistics, text linguistics and contact linguistics and we were very happy she kindly accepted our invitation

to open the workshop with a stimulating keynote on *Sacred languages and religious discourse: past and present* in which she challenged two fundamental myths: 1) that sacred languages reflect actual speech and 2) that non-spoken languages are dead and ceased to exist. Contrary to prevailing views Ewa Zakrzewska could show that sacred languages (in the sense of languages used exclusively for liturgical purposes) are often deliberately constructed as written languages and—given for example restricted literacy in Antiquity— represent prestige rather than vernacular language. Looking at the function of sacred language as marker but also constructor of identity Ewa Zakrzewska presented an adaptation of earlier work by Roman Jacobson and Webb Keane. This discourse analytical approach distinguishes various roles of the 'addresser' such as the author who formulates sacred words and the animator who utters them, which is especially relevant to differentiate between revelation and prophetic speech. This is especially relevant for the difference between revelation and prophetic speech, because discourse analysis allows to distinguish between the author, who formulates sacred words, and the animator, who utters them. The contact channel used to reach the addressee (i.e. the supernatural) can vary greatly and involves multimodal interaction including writing, images, clothes, gestures, inner speech, but also silent meditation, all of which are crucial non-verbal elements of a given discourse that have to be carefully considered and scrutinized by the modern scholar. Texts written in sacred language, but also of course important messages within religious discourse, are persuasive discourse acts, like sermons, which Ewa Zakrzewska could show were not intended for information transfer but as a means to affect the addressee's behavior or attitude, akin to the following speech acts. In her model sacred language is thus understood as set apart, highly prestigious, formulaic and non-ordinary, which from Lived Ancient Religion perspective provoked a vivid discussion on how individuals and groups dealt with these regulations in everyday life, in how far deviation, appropriation, modification or even invention was possible and by whom, in what situation and where.

After lunch Ina Alber and Sonja Ammann presented a theoretical input on Reiner Keller's Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse Analysis (SKAD) and how it can be applied to the study of the role of idols in Biblical polemics against Babylonian gods. Ina Alber is especially interested in interpretative social research and the sociology of knowledge, which is the reason we were delighted she agreed to introduce us to the SKAD approach by Reiner Keller. The most important insight of this approach is to consider discourses "as historically situated real social practices, not representing external objects, but constituting them" (Keller 2012: 53). Therefore this research perspective is particularly fruitful when analyzing social phenomena like the popular term and practice of 'civil society' that functions as a discursive and powerful social construction in polity. Ina Alber explained this using the empirical example of post-socialist Poland and the process of creating of civil society through media and scientific discourses and the activists in a dialectical relation. SKAD links the principles of the interpretative paradigm in social sciences found especially in Alfred Schütz's, Peter L. Berger's and Thomas Luckmann's conceptualization of the "social construction of reality" with the power and knowledge relations as discussed by Michel Foucault. SKAD offers a research perspective that takes into account the interrelation between discourses and actors. This means discourses are characterized as institutionalized patterns of speaking/writing etc., which define what can be said in a particular context at a particular time and what cannot be said/performed thereby shaping and reshaping 'reality'. But it is not a method of social research per se, in order to analyze texts or pictures the researcher has to make use of other methods of text analysis.

How SKAD can be applied to Biblical religious polemics was demonstrated by Sonja Ammann, who wrote her PhD thesis on the relationship of polemics against other gods and wisdom literature in the Hebrew Bible. In her research SKAD proved particularly helpful in showing how the other gods were denigrated by identifying them with lifeless cult images. First, the SKAD model allowed Sonja Ammann to conceive the "other gods" as a phenomenon construed within a discourse. The term "idol" (as construed in this discourse) denotes a man-made, inanimate, useless object that is called "god" by its worshippers, but as such not known in other ancient Near Eastern discourses. A Babylonian person, for example, would probably not understand what the Biblical writers meant, because the concept of man-made powerless objects of worship would most likely be alien to him/her. By understanding "idols" as a phenomenon shaped in polemical discourse and hence not as the representation or misrepresentation of a "more real" entity, we can thus avoid a judgmental approach by not sharing the polemical perspective of the biblical texts. The discourse analytical perspective thus facilitates to take seriously the "idol" concept in its own right and investigate its functions without a need to "correct" the texts.

A second important insight provided with the help of discourse analysis is that discourse is about and created by people, and not about gods. Whereas most scholars read the idol polemics as theological texts that make statements about "wrong" and "true" gods, Sonja Ammann could demonstrate that the discourse constitutes not only the phenomenon of "idols" but also the phenomenon of the "idol worshippers", that is, the persons associated with the "idol". Since "idols" are described as powerless and their worship is presented as useless, it is the "idol worshippers", according to this discourse, that are unable to realize that their actions are useless and do not make any sense. They are hence presented as foolish and the worshippers of the "true god" as intellectually superior. From that perspective SKAD proved productive to pay attention to mechanisms of self-positioning and positioning of others, and to observe which arguments and lines of reasoning the texts draw on. In this case, for instance, it showed that "idol worship" is condemned as useless and absurd (rather than as transgressing a divine commandment), which then enables the discourse to construct the "idol worshippers" as stupid.

In the following section the participants were invited to put the methodology into practice in the analysis of a text by Seneca the Elder, in which mourning scenes in Republican Rome are described. The source was briefly introduced by Christopher Degelmann, from the Lived Ancient Religion project. The text chosen were juridical practice speeches for juridical settings, which opened questions as for the strategies used to claim authority or truthfulness such an actual case or to make it look like one, the potential authority of historical characters vs. the idea of generalized standards 'how things should be done'. Questions concerning the social/political context were raised as well as the (imagined) audience such as entertainment, scholarly use, as reference for court members, different spheres of society etc. The rhetorical pattern appeared as uniform the three topics discussed all followed the same form namely a general a statement followed by the arguments and then the division that exemplified which practices of mourning are mentioned and which attributes are applied, but also what values are referred to. One of the results was that mourning was conceptualized not only as involving feelings of sadness, but also of danger, and clearly politically instrumentalized.

In the second part of the workshop Lara Weiss continued with a theoretical input to introduce the hegemonial theory as proposed by Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau. Mouffe/Laclau's hegemonial discourse theory seemed fruitful to allow an even more comprehensive understanding of how the various options were created, or rather why certain appropriations might be more popular than others without every prevailing. Indeed, Mouffe/Laclau presented a discourse model, which is a social theory rather than a discourse model dealing very closely with textual analysis. They argue that society is not a self-evident totality, but that any historical formation of society can only be understood as a complex result of divergent political articulations, which themselves result from the hegemonial practices of diverse social forces. Identity is thus constructed through hegemonial practices of articulation and these identities are never stable, but can only temporarily be fixed even temporary fixation in hegemonial discourse is only possibly in relation to 'the other' (often to an empty signifier). In her case study Lara Weiss applied Mouffe/Laclau's hegemonial discourse theory to the Late Antique Egyptian writings by Apa Shenoute and his subsequent tradition in the *Life of Shenoute* a kind of "biography". Even though Shenoute's works remain largely unpublished and are indeed highly fragmentized, an interesting observation is that Shenoute's main opponent in his fight against paganism is never mentioned in contemporary sources such as Shenoute's sermons or codices, but that he was only named in retro-perspective in the *Life of Shenoute*. Mouffe/Laclau's model proves helpful not only scrutinize the *Life of Shenoute* as to whether or not it may serve as a 'valid' historical source, but also look for the strategies behind text and thereby understand how Shenoute and his followers created a hegemonial discourse against paganism and other heresies. By means of an anonymous anti-foil ("empty signifier") for establishing a strong Christian identity, which was elaborated—and named—by his later tradition. At the same time the principle of the hegemonial theory as never entirely stabilized explains why *the* pagan or *the* Christian identity could no longer than temporarily be fixed and yet is a discourse that still proves successful and highly influential today.

Hegemonial discourses and the concept of empty signifiers is highly relevant also for the work of Maik Patzelt, PhD researcher at the Lived Ancient Religion project. His research deals with the question of how

prayer was conceptualized by Latin and ancient Greek authors and how their works tied into discourses that constructed loud or silent praying as how praying should be done. At a closer view in the small groups into the source texts by Seneca and Juvenile it became clear that 'the other' is always the deviant behavior in these texts which adopt surprisingly similar repertoire of authorities such as quotes, names or *mos maiorum*, whereas not being consequent in their assessment of what is right and what is wrong. Especially Seneca sometimes favors the silent over the loud prayer or vice versa depending on the argument for which he uses the prayer as illustration *(exemplum).* Prayer thus serves not as an empty signifier *per se*, different from the case study from Late Antique Egypt, yet demonstrating how important it is to not only collect sources to find whatever is deemed standard behavior, but to look for the frictions, textual strategies and intended effects of given texts and their relation to each other. Discourse analysis hence proves significant in asking the right questions to distinguish between "documentation" and "fiction", as well as between the own perception of the group/self-etc. and those of others, but also to understand the strategies of how 'truth' of 'the right' claimed thereby keeping the scholar at a hopefully more objective distance.

Through the theoretical inputs and even more through the practical work on source texts, the participants explored what the three discourse analytical approaches presented in the workshop – linguistic discourse analysis, SKAD, and Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory – have in common and what are the differences between them. As a common denominator, discourse can be understood as a kind of frame for communication and also practices, thereby itself structuring and constituting said frame in an ongoing process. Differences between the approaches were experienced with regard to the theoretical presuppositions and the corresponding research strategy. Whereas Keller's model starts from the texts with a certain epistemological background and moves into theory, Mouffe/Laclau start from their theory as a particular lens into a given material. The participants agreed that all three approaches can be fruitfully applied in the study of ancient religious texts and that it depends on the nature of the source material and on the particular research interest which approach fits best the individual projects. Also the already established methods of (text) analysis could be adapted to the research perspective of discourse analysis.

All participants appreciated the workshop character of the meeting that gave much room to individual and group participation and interdisciplinary discussions, which helped to clarify and thereby also rethink concepts taken-for-granted in the respective fields. As discourse analysis is essentially about uncovering the construction of that which is taken for granted, this provided a perfect setting for an inspiring exploration of ancient religious discourses.