

Interpretive Approaches to Concepts

Dr. Frederic Schaffer

May 12-13, 2016

9:00am – 4:30pm

Outline

Concepts are foundational to the social-science enterprise. This two-day workshop offers participants new ways to think about and work with them. In contrast to the more familiar positivist project of concept “reconstruction” – the formulation of a technical, purportedly neutral vocabulary for measuring, comparing, and generalizing – this workshop will introduce participants to an interpretivist approach that focuses on “elucidation.” Elucidation includes both an investigation into the language of daily life and a reflexive examination of social-science technical language. It is intended to illuminate both the worldviews of the people that social scientists wish to understand and the ways in which social scientists’ embeddedness in particular languages, historical eras, and power structures shapes the concepts with which they do their work.

The main goals of the workshop are threefold:

1. For participants to understand the difference between reconstructing and elucidating concepts and to see what is at stake in choosing to do one or the other.
2. For participants to learn the basics of elucidative strategies derived from ordinary language philosophy, Cambridge school historiography, and Foucauldian genealogy.
3. For participants to elucidate concepts that they themselves are interested in by doing hands-on interviewing and textual-analysis exercises.

Note for participants:

You will need to bring a wi-fi enabled computer to do the textual-analysis exercises. You will also need to identify one or two concepts of interest to you. It would be helpful if you could do that in advance of the workshop.

Schedule of Sessions and Reading List*

Thursday, May 12

Session 1: 9:00 am - 12:00 pm

Part A. Interpretivist elucidation vs. positivist reconstruction

In this introductory session, participants will learn what it means to adopt an interpretivist rather than a positivist approach to concepts and contemplate the value that an interpretivist approach might hold for their own research interests.

Recommended readings

- Sartori, Giovanni. 1970. "Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics." *American Political Science Review* 64,4: 1033-46.
- Collier, David, and Steven Levitsky. 1997. "Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research." *World Politics* 49,3: 430-51.
- Bevir, Mark, and Asaf Kedar. 2008. "Concept Formation in Political Science: An Anti-Naturalist Critique of Qualitative Methodology." *Perspectives on Politics* 6,3: 503-17.
- Taylor, Charles. 1971. "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man." *Review of Metaphysics* 25,1: 3-51.

Part B. Investigating ordinary use: ordinary language interviewing

Ordinary language interviewing is a tool for uncovering the meaning of words in everyday talk. By studying the meaning of words (in English or other languages), the promise is to gain insight into the various social realities these words name, evoke, or realize. This session covers some basic questions about ordinary language interviewing: what it is and what can be discovered through it.

Recommended readings

- Pitkin, Hanna Fenichel. 1972. "Context, Sense, and Concepts." In *Wittgenstein and Justice: On the Significance of Ludwig Wittgenstein for Social and Political Thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press: 71-98.
- Austin, J. L. 1970. "A Plea for Excuses." In *Philosophical Papers* 2nd edition. New York: Oxford University Press: 175-204.

Session 2: 1:30 pm - 4:30 pm

Conducting an ordinary language interview

In this session participants will first learn how to conduct an ordinary language interview and practice different strategies for approaching people to interview. Participants will next go out and conduct their own ordinary language interviews. We will then reconvene for a debriefing.

Recommended reading

- Schaffer, Frederic Charles. 2014. "Thin Descriptions: The Limits of Survey Research on the Meaning of Democracy." *Polity* 46,3: 303-30.

Friday, May 13

Session 3: 9:00 am - 12:00 pm

Investigating ordinary use historically: Skinnerian excavation

Because words do not necessarily have stable or fixed sets of meanings across time, in this session participants will learn how to elucidate the situated uses of terms in particular historical ages. Analytic tools developed by Quentin Skinner, a leading practitioner and theoretician of the "Cambridge School" of political thought, are especially well suited for this task of excavation.

Recommended Readings

- Skinner, Quentin. 2002. "Seeing Things Their Way." In *Visions of Politics, Volume I*. New York: Cambridge University Press: 1-7.

- Skinner, Quentin. 2002. "The Idea of a Cultural Lexicon." In *Visions of Politics*, Volume I. New York: Cambridge University Press: 158-74.
- Dixon, Thomas. 2008. "Introduction." In *The Invention of Altruism: Making Moral Meanings in Victorian Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1-12.
- Wallech, Steven. 1986. "'Class Versus Rank': The Transformation of Eighteenth-Century English Social Terms and Theories of Production." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 47,3: 409-31.

Session 4: 1:30 pm - 4:30 pm

Examining reflexively the language of social science: Foucauldian genealogy

The language of social science contains many concepts that have become stabilized, naturalized, or neutralized in ways that obscure from view their histories of contingency and contestation. In this session, participants will learn to use Foucauldian genealogy to denaturalize the natural, destabilize the stable, and thus make space for new ways of conceptualizing the world.

Recommended readings

- Bevir, Mark. 2008. "What is Genealogy?" *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 2: 263-75.
- Foucault, Michel. 1977. "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." In *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* edited by D. F. Bouchard. Ithaca: Cornell University Press: 139-64.
- Mitchell, Timothy. 1998. "Fixing the Economy." *Cultural Studies* 12,1: 82-101.
- Oren, Ido. 1995. "The Subjectivity of the 'Democratic' Peace: Changing U.S. Perceptions of Imperial Germany." *International Security* 20,2: 147-84.

*If you are registered for credit, you can find these readings on course reserve: <http://reserves.concordia.ca/>

*If you are registered for non-credit and are unable to locate the readings, please contact us at wssr@concordia.ca