

at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, Wissler arranged collections and exhibits according to this spatial classification.

An important difference with the German diffusionists is that in Wissler's culture area concept the distribution of cultural traits is primarily seen as the result of an adaptation to environmental conditions. This idea became important to much subsequent anthropological and archaeological research in America, especially the New Archaeology founded in the 1960s by Lewis Binford (1931–2011). At the same time, Binford and his school criticized diffusionists for their atomistic view of culture—the idea of diffusion was replaced in European archaeology by systems thinking as represented, for example, in Colin Renfrew's "culture process model." Despite an interest in spatial patterns, the emphasis of the culture process model was on local evolution in explaining cultural change. In the 1990s, scholars like Andrew Sherratt (1946–2006) developed the idea of "punctuation," or rapid, revolutionary change, and the associated notion of "centricity," a concept that includes the idea of diffusion. More recently, the poststructuralist rediscovery of the significance of materiality and interculturality has opened up new perspectives for dealing with such issues, without repeating the earlier mistakes.

The flaws of the diffusionist approaches consisted, above all, in the object-like approach toward culture, an obsession with origins, and the concentration on abstract "influences" and "flows" of cultural traits. But combined with the more recent concepts of agency and of practice, these flaws may be overcome. They may help direct our interest to the actual contextualization of cultural forms and to possible shifts of meaning.

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*See also* Binford, Lewis R.; Cultural Transmission; Culture Area Approach; Ethnohistory; Frobenius, Leo; Graebner, Fritz; Historical Particularism; Kroeber, Alfred L.; Lowie, Robert; Smith, Grafton Elliot; Wallerstein, Immanuel

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## DISCOURSE THEORY

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Discourse theory denotes broadly the study of aspects of language and communication distinct from linguistic structure. Most theories of discourse nonetheless examine the relation of language to structure. In fact, during the 20th century, many debates in anthropology, and the social and human sciences more generally, centered on the relation between the discursive and structural aspects of social life. Through these debates, and especially through the scholarship that critiqued structural anthropology and linguistics, poststructural approaches to discourse have taken root in anthropological theory and methodology. Poststructuralist approaches continue to influence the trajectories of anthropological thinking about discourse. This entry first describes the structuralist account of signs, associated especially with Ferdinand de Saussure, and then recaps some poststructuralist critiques. The critiques reviewed are from influential French theorists, and

then from the linguistic anthropological tradition that maintains closer ties to linguistic structuralism.

### Discourse in Structural Linguistic Theory

Until the 1980s, the term *discourse* was used in anthropology with the same meaning common in structural linguistic analysis. Linguistic theory takes the sentence as the limit of grammatical relations and, in contrast, uses discourse to denote the manner in which words, expressions, and sentences are put to use in a particular context to produce meaningful communicative behavior. “Sentences” here are understood as abstracted from their context, while the use of linguistic units in context is generally called an “utterance.” The utterance can be a single word or a sentence long, or a very long, complex communicative form, like a whole book. Discourse utterances are understood to have principles of coherence that are distinct from the grammatical coherence of sentences. Understanding how an utterance coheres involves considering how the parts of an utterance relate to each other and the context. In linguistics, the terms *discourse analysis* or *discourse function* are generally used for these issues.

The distinction between grammatical sentence and discourse utterance is based on the highly influential work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure’s final courses were published posthumously by his students in 1916 as the *Cours de linguistique générale* (*Course in General Linguistics*). These lectures are still considered essential for understanding language as an abstract structure (*langue* in French), including the symbolic quality of producing meaning. Saussure distinguished the study of linguistic structure from speaking in context that uses the signs of language (*parole* in French). The theoretical dualism of *langue* and *parole* (or structure and use) is one of many dualisms that were then incorporated into anthropology’s interpretation of structuralism. Another of Saussure’s important dualisms is the idea that, when abstracted from contexts of use, a language can be described as a stable and closed system, a state that exists at a single point in time or “synchrony.” Synchrony is opposed to “diachrony”—that is, the changes that happen to that language between different synchronic states. For Saussure, modeling a language’s structure as a synchronic system is an

analytic construct. He characterized this construct as “virtual,” meaning this state does not exist in sociohistorical reality, where change and variation are constant.

A final important dualism for Saussure was that linguistic structure is a bipartite system of differences, with basic units he called signs. Each sign involves a form, or signifier, and a related concept, or signified. The English phonic form *tree* is an example of a signifier, while its signified is found by seeing how this form functions in sentences (not in utterances). In linguistic analysis, the signified is very different from a dictionary definition of a word. In fact, in this abstract analysis, the signified is discovered by finding the difference marked by the sign, in its ability to combine with other forms. For instance, the signified of “tree” might be roughly expressed as “common noun, count noun, inanimate,” and so on. Saussure was interested in debunking various theories that posited that signifiers were somehow naturally related or determined by what they signified, which led him to emphasize that the relation between signifier and signified is “arbitrary.” By “arbitrary,” he meant that the system of differences between signifier and signified is entirely a social convention, one that works because there is a group of speakers that continue to use it in their daily discourse. Due to the complexity of the system, Saussure doubted that the group of speakers could actually gain awareness of it in such a way as to change it intentionally. In his analytical construct, human intentionality and agency, like concrete events of interaction (*parole*), remained outside the description of linguistic structure proper. This way of constructing the object of linguistics meant that discourse remained a residual or external phenomenon.

In anthropology, the question has been whether these dualistic assumptions for modeling a synchronic structure can be applied to the study of other salient cultural patterns, including discursive ones. Saussure himself thought that his theory of abstract *langue* could be a model for studying utterances. Most famously, in the mid-20th century, Claude Lévi-Strauss applied some of Saussure’s methodology to analyze myth (as well as to analyze kinship). With myth, Lévi-Strauss recognized that he was dealing with an object distinct from *langue*, and yet he sought to set out the basic units of myth as a system of differences. Such studies became a touchstone for structural anthropology. An early

critic of this structural anthropology was Clifford Geertz, who sought to consider “symbols” and their signification within a thicker description of action in context. Although Geertz did not explicitly theorize “discourse,” in a famous article on the Balinese cockfight, he argued for interpreting cultural performances like scholars view a text (like a work of literature). This symbolic anthropology came just as the poststructural notion of discourse was to introduce a wholesale critique of how structuralism posited the relation between *langue* and *parole*. Geertz’s arguments about symbols were themselves critiqued by others using French poststructural theories of discourse, notably Talal Asad, for insufficient attention to power and for circumscribing the symbolic realm of culture to a limited set of phenomena. Geertz’s approach to text was also critiqued by linguistic anthropologists, notably in a book called *Natural Histories of Discourse* (1996), for ignoring cultural notions of how texts are constituted and how such notions are related to discursive interaction and language.

### Poststructuralist Approaches to Discourse

Part of the goal of poststructuralist critiques and the turn to writing about “discourse” instead of “language” (as a structure) is to develop an approach to communicative practice that does not assume that the speaker, or speaking subject, is autonomous and self-constituting. In discourse theory, attributing many voices to social groups and even individuals, and arguing that these voices are constituted socially, seeks to replace the premise that speakers have an interior self from which they draw their intentions, and that this self is fully constituted prior to the act of communication. This premise is often traced back to philosophical traditions associated with René Descartes and Immanuel Kant, among others. In such philosophies, language could provide a model of the rationality (or *logos*) that distinguishes humanity from other beings.

Structuralism, including its linguistic and anthropological versions, already moved away from some of these assumptions by suggesting that communication is shaped by a social rather than an individual phenomenon, namely, the system of *langue*. However, structuralism also reiterates other assumptions, by treating an abstract system as the key rationality to understanding the discursive production of

meaning. Furthermore, structuralism tends to depict this abstract system as homogeneous across the social or cultural group under study.

In the 20th century, several critiques of these structuralist assumptions took root. Poststructuralist critiques generally question what allows sign systems to exist, and emphasize a greater degree of heterogeneity in how meaning is produced. They promote a view of speakers or participants not solely as initiators but also as the results of discourse. Such a change in analytic perspective has led to new theories of power and polity, as well as to new discussions of how various social categories, like gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and class, become palpable in and through discourse. In anthropology, French poststructuralism and linguistic anthropology have both been used to tap into such changes in the study of discourse.

Perhaps the scholar with the greatest influence on anthropological theories of discourse is the French poststructuralist philosopher and historian Michel Foucault. Foucault’s work explores how discourse is embedded in sites of knowledge production and helps produce subjects. He argues against conceiving of the history of knowledge-production as a result of the actions of scientists and scholars. He insists instead that subjects are an effect of discourse and that they are produced in a set of historically coalescing sites, or discursive formations. This approach underlies Foucault’s concept of power. He moves away from stating that power is in the hands of a sociological group (e.g., economic or political elites) or a social organization (e.g., the police). Instead, he understands power as diffuse, stabilized through the discursive formation of knowing subjects and their known objects. Probably his most famous example is the confession, a discursive practice where a person must tell all his or her transgressions to a confessor; both confessor and confessing subject are formed in the act of giving the confession. The confession as a type of communicative act is very important to Foucault’s theory of contemporary sexuality. Although the confession started as a religious institution, according to Foucault, it was dispersed, and now versions are found in psychological and medical institutions, as well as at other powerful sites. This dispersion creates ever more situations where speakers must produce such knowledge of themselves. Foucault posited that the increasing discourse about sexuality in the 19th century was part of this

process of disseminating the confession as a way of knowing ourselves as sexual subjects.

The confession is an example of what Foucault calls, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (*L'Archéologie du Savoir*, 1969, in French), a “statement.” In explaining the statement, Foucault shows that his concept of discourse is developed under a structuralist influence. Just as Saussure sought to produce the concept of *langue* by setting out certain methodological premises (like the abstraction from context and synchrony), Foucault also seeks to describe discourse as an analytic construct. Roughly, a statement is a repeated kind of act that relates subjects and objects, and it can be detected (not unlike *langue*) by looking for regularities in discourse across multiple kinds of powerful institutions. In *The Order of Things* (*Les Mots et les Choses: Une Archéologie des Sciences Humaines*, 1966, in French), for example, he finds such regularities in the way three fields of knowledge—(1) grammar, (2) natural history, and (3) political economy—describe and classify their objects in the emergence of the human sciences. Even though these fields of knowledge do not necessarily refer to each other explicitly, the forms of the statements made within them are comparable. Foucault is then interested to show the rules that allow for the formation of a statement—that is, what can be said, what cannot be said, who can and cannot do the saying, and so forth. Eschewing narrating history as cause and effect, his description produces the effect of making his object seem outside specific events, in ways that are analogous to the description of *langue*.

Another influential French poststructuralist, whose impact on anthropology is more muted, is the philosopher Jacques Derrida. He critiques Saussure's structuralism by questioning the stability of the meaning of a sign, given that it is always available for use in another event of communication. Derrida calls the signifier's unstable quality *iterability*, by which he refers to the impossibility of establishing what is both unique about a singular use of a sign and the potential for its repetition. His methodology for producing an analysis of the inherent instability of signs is called deconstruction, and it is widely influential in arguments about why a text can never achieve a truly stable meaning. Derrida is also influential in debates about *performativity*—that is, the theory associated with the philosopher John Austin that an utterance does not simply reflect a preexisting world but actually helps create social worlds.

A final influential French poststructuralist is the anthropologist and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. He famously critiqued the structuralist emphasis on communicative behavior that can be described by formal rules, which he felt gave way to a misrecognition of the social fields that regulate discursive practice. Preferring to speak of embodied dispositions rather than rules, Bourdieu emphasized the social process by which a standard language arises, conferring legitimacy on the actors who can speak it, while excluding others. Despite this social process of producing legitimacy, Bourdieu described how many powerful social institutions, and especially educational institutions, misrecognize the standard as the “correct” or “efficient” way of speaking rather than a variety of speaking that is associated with powerful speakers.

The work of Foucault, Derrida, and Bourdieu—and others of their time—has affected the work of many anthropologists interested in discourse. This work helps anchor anthropological approaches to discursive phenomena and enables an examination of shifting and complex signifiers in their fields of communicative practice.

Another tradition of studying discourse in anthropology is linguistic anthropology, which generally maintains a much closer dialogue with linguistic structuralism. Sometimes also engaging with French theories, linguistic anthropology has produced its own version of poststructuralism, attempting to both integrate and question the assumptions of Saussure's theory of *langue*. Much of this critique has been developed through a careful reinterpretation of the writings of the Russian literary critic and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, as well as a reevaluation of sign relations in light of the work of the American philosopher Charles S. Peirce.

Prior to the Second World War, in American cultural anthropology, linguistics was seen as a key but separate area of the study of humanity. The program for the study of language was initiated by Franz Boas and his students, who developed ideas about structure similar to Saussure's. Boas's students were generally occupied with the description of lesser studied languages, especially those of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. In these investigations, the Boasians also contributed to the question of how linguistic structure can bias perception of the world. Such a bias was linked to what Boas called “secondary rationalizations”—that is, native explanations that

are insufficient to account for linguistic (or other) facts. Apart from this, they attended to discourse mostly through producing collections of texts, such as myths.

After World War II, criticism of the basic assumptions of linguistics led to new directions within linguistic anthropology. Quantitative sociolinguistics, associated especially with William Labov, an American linguist, studied the demographic variation in speaking across populations, especially in industrialized and postindustrialized societies. This school continues to challenge the idea of a unified grammar within a “language,” by showing the complex heterogeneity of social and regional dialects that direct structural change. At the border of sociology and anthropology, Erving Goffman helped initiate the study of the small-scale dynamics of interpersonal interaction. His work explores how participants produce particular social identities, and even shift between identities, as they interact with one another. From within anthropology, Dell Hymes and John Gumperz spearheaded a cross-cultural examination of how utterances are shaped by rules different from those of grammar, a project that focused attention on the relation of discourse to its context. In this vein, Michael Silverstein introduced the tripartite sign theory of Peirce as the basis for the study of language, which folds into it insights developed under Saussure’s bipartite theory of signs, which points or shows contiguity to its object. This theory has been enormously influential in reframing the study of how signifiers relate to one another and to their context. The study initiated by these postwar figures has led to a careful analysis of transcripts of discursive interaction, both everyday and ritual, as a means to deepening our understanding of how signs function.

These traditions point to the difficulty of theorizing discourse due to the variation found in language use, and in the social and cultural conditions that inform context. Once linguistic structure or analogous theories are shown to be insufficient to account for the “structures” found in the empirical analysis of discourse, the questions that emerge are what stabilizes the sign relation and how to account for the social variation in the use of signs. Two significant trends in linguistic anthropology seek to answer these questions and undermine basic structuralist dualisms. First, linguistic anthropologists consider how rationalizations about language,

called language ideologies, constitute one means by which conscious, directed social projects affect sign relations. No group of speakers is without ideologies about how they and others speak, and these ideas mediate social relations that are crystallized and transformed through language use. This reflexive attention to signs can lead to attempts by powerful organizations to control the parameters of meaning, as (to draw on the above example from Bourdieu) in the dissemination of a prestigious linguistic standard through schooling. Linguistic anthropological studies of nationalism, gender, race, and other social categories consistently show the importance of language ideologies in the functioning of institutions. Structuralist dualisms like *langue* and *parole*, or language structure and use, are thus shown to be in relation with a third dimension, ideology. These studies also challenge Saussure’s notion that structure remains out of the realm of conscious social action. Many have shown, for example, that grammatical elements of languages—although imperfectly understood by speakers—have nonetheless changed along grooves that are shaped by consciousness. A brief example is the elimination of the informal “thou”/formal “ye” distinction for singular referents that once was found in England, which functioned in parallel ways to the French *tul/vous* or, to a lesser extent, the Spanish *tú/Usted*. As Silverstein discusses, this distinction was ended in part due to 17th-century religious movements that emphasized equality, including in forms of address. The leaders of these movements argued that using the plural form “ye” for a single referent was a category mistake. This argument can be shown to be a language ideology that misinterprets the grammatical categories of person as well as person address in discourse. Yet partially under influence of this ideology, and the shifts in practices undertaken by its adherents, the distinction was eliminated.

A second trend in linguistic anthropology is the broadening use of Bakhtin’s framework for studying sociolinguistic variation, interdiscursive relations between utterances, and the social qualities of discursive coherence (or textuality). Bakhtin criticizes Saussure for starting the analysis of language with the abstract sentence rather than with the concrete event of interaction, the utterance. By reversing this starting point, Bakhtin moves toward a social analysis of form and function. For Bakhtin, what enables an utterance to appear coherent is not only the

structural aspect (as with grammar) but also the way in which the utterance brings together participants in an activity. A second important contribution from Bakhtin is that participants never only speak as a single unique self; rather, they always draw on, invoke, and position their discourse in terms of sociolinguistic variation. For example, to speak in highly formal English (using “big words”) in the middle of a casual conversation with friends might be construed as being pretentious, because the varieties of formal English bring to mind the stuffy contexts where that register is typically used (e.g., in the university or in law courts). Participants perceive and respond to discourse as signaling certain types of people from the sociolinguistic world of “voices” with which they are familiar, and this allows them to make sense of the discourse. This approach frames current research on register, style, genre, and textuality.

The past 100 years have seen a decided shift in anthropological theories of language and communication, from frameworks that produce a formal analysis of linguistic structure to an emphasis on social analysis of the participants or subjects that are constituted through discourse. Many of the insights generated in this shift are a product of the wide-ranging critique about the extent to which structuralist models could account for the regular patterns or norms of discourse in social life. Debates still continue on how best to integrate structuralist insights, if at all, and how best to describe the many ways discourse can index and thus produce the categories of subjects and objects that make up our shifting social worlds.

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*See also* Bakhtin, Mikhail M.; Bourdieu, Pierre; Derrida, Jacques; Foucault, Michel; Goffman, Erving; Gumperz, John J.; Hymes, Dell; Labov, William; Lévi-Strauss, Claude; Poststructuralism; Saussure, Ferdinand de; Structuralism

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## DOUGLAS, MARY

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Mary Tew Douglas (1921–2007), the well-known British social anthropologist, contributed widely to 20th-century anthropology, the social sciences, and the humanities, including African ethnology, the anthropology of diverse social/religious rituals, symbols and food taboos, and social-moral solidarity-oriented critiques of modern economics, politics, and risk-blame issues in mass societies. While her “cultural theory” tackled such concerns, Douglas also offered distinct anthropological interpretations of Old Testament texts.

### Early Influences and Education

Margaret Mary Tew at birth, Douglas was born on March 25, 1921, in San Remo, Italy, as the first child of Phyllis Margaret Twomey and Gilbert Charles Tew, employed in the Indian Civil Service in Burma. Closer to her mother and maternal grandfather, Douglas, an English Catholic of part-Irish descent, attended the Sacred Heart Convent in Roehampton (southwest London) for secondary education as a boarder on scholarship. Douglas was an outstanding student, and her Catholic convent girlhood was to have a deep, lifelong influence on the anthropologist’s intellectual convictions and scholarly trajectories. The convent life, hierarchical, committed, and closely rule governed, had awarded the teenage girl a sense of belonging and security, albeit within a secluded women’s world. Familiar with both the quick rewards and the censures from the church authorities in a minutely ordered daily life, Douglas grew up mostly protected from the harsher surrounding world.

After leaving the convent at her grandmother’s suggestion, Douglas spent 6 months in Paris getting a *Diplôme de civilisation française* at the Sorbonne