Discourse analysis: theory and method for understanding policy-making in urban governance

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FUTURE CLIMATE FOR AFRICA

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The Future Resilience for African Cities and Lands (FRACTAL) project aims to address the challenge of providing accessible, timely, applicable and defensible climate information that is needed by decision makers operating at the city-region scale in southern Africa. FRACTAL has been running since June 2015. It is part of the Future Climate for Africa (FCFA) multi-consortia programme. FCFA's major objective is to generate fundamentally new climate science focused on Africa, and to ensure that this science has an impact on human development across the continent. FCFA is funded by the Department for International Development (DFID) and the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC).

These knowledge products have been developed to share findings from the research in the hope of fostering dialogue and eliciting feedback to strengthen the research. The opinions expressed are therefore the author(s) and are not necessarily shared by DFID, NERC or other programme partners.

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1. Introduction

This concept note is a document produced for the FRACTAL Research Programme as part of a suite of concept notes which together outline the theory and methods used to understand urban governance arrangements[1] in selected southern African cities. The concept note introduces the method and theory of discourse analysis. The specific theory of discourse analysis outlined here is '*argumentative discourse analysis*'. The concept note draws on a wide variety of literature predominantly from political science and geography, and has an accompanying reference list[2]. Discourse analysis is used in FRACTAL as a method to interpret policies as it provides evidence of the 'meanings' embedded in the language used in policies and policy-making processes (Yanow, 2014). Discourse analysis can therefore be classified as a 'qualitative methodology'. Discourse analysis is one of a range of theories/methods that involved the interpretation of the language used in texts, whether it is language used in policy documents, or the language used to debate issues in decision-making processes and meetings (Tierney et al, 2006; Nerlich et al., 2010; Fløttum and Gjerstad, 2013; 2017; Epstein, et al., 2014; Dryzek and Lo, 2015).

The policies we are interested in are policies relevant to urban governance that have been formulated at both national and municipal level. The concept note has been produced within the Decision-Making Cluster, and has been written for general consumption by FRACTAL members including the City Partners[3], to demonstrate its use in FRACTAL. It falls under Task 2.2.

In the FRACTAL Project, a discourse analysis will be undertaken of a range of *texts* (policy documents) and *dialogues* (speech acts) to tease out the dominant discourses, counter discourses and marginalised discourses which have a direct influence on climate change, water and energy decision making processes and policy making in these cities. The discourse analysis will also point to the powerful actors who have the power to produce dominant discourses which influence policy making.

In the contemporary world today, the 'policy problems' facing governments are more uncertain, ambiguous, complex and 'messier' that in earlier decades, and they often present greater risk for society (Fischer and Gottweiss, 2012, 3). Fischer and Gottweiss (2012) argue that the new 'argumentative turn' in policy analysis shows the importance of critically reflecting on discourses and processes of argumentation taking place in the decision and policy making arenas. From such analyses, it is then possible to draw out the implications of current discourses as frameworks for urban development. Importantly, this will show the gaps with regards to urban water, energy and climate change issues, and how these discourses can be potentially reframed to cater for addressing future uncertainties, particularly in relation to climate change.

The concept note is structured as follows: it provides an outline of argumentative discourse analysis; definitions of terms; the theory and method of discourse analysis; and the use of discourse analysis in FRACTAL policy making and governance to understand the overarching patterns of thought in policy-making.

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1   See FRACTAL Concept Note #1 on urban governance theory (Scott, 2017).
2   The writings of Maarten Hajer (1995; 2005) and Jorgensen and Phillips (2002) are particularly acknowledged.
3   The Universities and City Councils in the sampled cities, specifically Lusaka, Windhoek and Maputo.

2.   Argumentative discourse analysis

The theory of discourse analysis proposed here is derived from the field of 'interpretive policy analysis' in political science. This theory proposes that in policy making, *argumentative processes* take place in discussions and meeting as actors position themselves and argue about controversial 'burning issues'. In this way, the discussions can be seen to be 'political' as one actor or a group of actors seeks 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' (Hajer, 1995). Discourse analysis allows for the analysis of policymaking in order "to establish a dominant political 'truth' that in turn legitimizes societal intervention strategies by means of policies and policy instruments" (Winkel et al 2016). Public policy conceived in this way is a product of argumentation.

This theory assumes that there is linguistic regularity in the policy debates and discussions that take place, or in the policy text. The linguistic regularities are evidence of lines of argument that exist and are produced as actors put forward their interests in the issue. To represent complex issues a discourse might contain storylines which are abbreviations used to stand for a more complex reality.

The 'argumentative interaction' between actors is the 'key moment of discourse formation'[4] 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). It must be noted that when texts are analysed, the 'arguments' will have been resolved and dominant discourses established.

3.   Definition of terms

In popular texts, the word **discourse** is commonly used to denote 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 'planning 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 way of talking about and understanding the world, or an aspect of it"*, however, our ways of talking do not neutrally reflect our identities, and social relations, but rather, play an active role in creating them and reframing them (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002, 1-2).

Hajer (1995, 44) provides a somewhat more complex definition: 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"*.

This definition notes that the coherence of a discourse is a product of the 'routinised practices' through which a specific discourse is produced which give it certain 'criteria of credibility'. In

4   Hajer, see: www.maartenhajer.nl

the context of policy, coherence is dependent on the institutional environment which would give a policy discourse credibility. The literature shows that there is an 'extraordinary discursive complexity' in the way an issue can be understood. For example, a typical environmental problem like climate change may include discourses from the natural and social sciences, ecology, economics, philosophy and so on.

Since this concept note focusses on argumentative discourse analysis, it is useful to reflect on the process of argumentation. In their book, 'The Argumentative Turn Revisited', Fischer and Gottweiss (2012, 9) propose that public policy, constructed through language, is the product of argumentation and so policy making is an "ongoing discursive struggle over the definition and framing of problems".

Argumentation is defined by them as "a process through which people seek to reach conclusions using, formal and informal logical and practical reason" and "engage in persuasive dialogue and negotiations …to reach and justify mutually acceptable decisions" (Fischer and Gottweiss, 2012, 9). Discourse, they define as, a "body of concepts and ideas that circumscribe, influence and shape argumentation…they are systems of meanings" (Fischer and Gottweiss, 2012, 11).

Discourses usually operate at a macro level in society, and there are political, economic, cultural, social and environmental discourses. In relatively stable societies, changes in discourses come about gradually, while when there is a 'revolutionary situation' rapid changes can take place (Fischer and Gottweiss, 2012, 1). Dryzek (1997, 12-15) notes that the concept of 'the environment' did not emerge until the early 1960s and only then did a range of environmental discourses emerge to challenge industrialism, some overlapping and others competing. Examples are: 'limits to growth', 'sustainable development',' ecological modernisation' and 'green racialism'.

In addition to the macro societal discourses, there are subordinate discourses that provide structure in specific domains. Because society is complex, each of the various sectors has its own structuring discourses. For example, in the water sector there are numerous water policy discourses that provide the frameworks for legislation in water management (See Sutherland et al, 2015, for a study of water discourses in the eThekwini Municipality).

Other important concepts used in argumentative discourse analysis are.

Storylines are a common way for actors to attempt to ensure their discourse is heard and understood. Storylines are described as "a condensed sort of narrative that connects different discourses" (Hajer, 2005, 448). A storyline is a subtle mechanism of creating and maintaining discursive order. The function of storylines is that they suggest unity in the bewildering variety of separate discursive component parts of a problem such as climate change. The storyline evokes a more complex issue and so they are simplifications that allow people to understand the larger and more complicated issue (Hajer, 1995, 56).

For example, in the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA) press releases about the impacts of industrial pollution caused by industries and two refineries on the health of residents in South Durban, the emblem of 'Cancer Valley' is used. In this text, this is shorthand for the high levels of cancer in South Durban, a valley in which winter temperature inversions trap the smog in the valley increasing the exposure of residents to industrial pollution.

Storylines play a key role in the positioning of subjects in a debate or discussion (spoken discourse) around a problem. Political change may take place through the emergence of new storylines that re-order understandings. Finding the appropriate storyline to represent a specific perspective on an issue is thus an important form of agency (Hajer, 1995, 56). In the context of a debate, speakers can always deny the terms set by the initial speaker and emphasise the availability of alternative discourses. It is always assumed by the initial speaker that subsequent speakers will answer within the same discursive frame. Even if people challenge the dominant storyline, people are expected to position their contribution in terms of known categories (Hajer, 1995, 56). Argumentative discourse analysis is often more evident in the context of debate in a public meeting for example, than in written text because you can see different and opposing discourses and their storylines at play. In written policy documents, you are more likely to see similar or aligned discourses, or one dominant discourse.

Metaphors are also used in storylines. For example, the environmental discourse of 'survivalism' has the following storyline: "human demands on the carrying capacity of ecosystems threaten to explode out of control and draconian action needs to be taken to curb these demands" (Dryzek, 1997, 34). This discourse makes much use of metaphors, for example, the famous metaphor of 'spaceship earth' where the earth is a spaceship with humans on board, as well as metaphors of collapsing and crashing, and of doom.

Discourse coalitions emerge in policy-making arenas 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 Hajer, 2005). When actors can relate to each other's 'storylines' there is a tendency to collaborate to give a particular view added weight in policy-making circles. Hajer (1995, 65) defines a discourse coalition as: "an ensemble of (1) a set of storylines; (2) the actors who utter these storylines; and (3) the practices in which this discursive activity is based" all in relation to a specific policy discourse (Hajer, 1995:65). 'Discourse coalitions' can profoundly influence the policy-making process by making it difficult for a particular discourse to be ignored. A strong or large enough 'discourse coalition' can potentially become so dominant that the discourse its actors subscribe to can become hegemonic (dominant). 'Hegemonic discourses' can, over time, exert such influence that they become institutionalised (Brosius, 1999).

Discourse institutionalisation takes place when discourse is reproduced in practices which become routinized. For example, climate change discourse becomes institutionalised when a municipal department changes its name from an 'environmental department' to an 'environmental and climate change department', or when a whole new climate change section is established in a municipality. In this way, the discourse stabilises and becomes entrenched in policy and decision-making processes (Hajer, 1995, 57). Institutions function as they are constantly reproduced in actual routinised practices.

For example, the discourse of sustainable development has been constructed by linking the environmental and development discourses (Brosius, 1999). This discourse, according to Escobar (cited in Brosius, 1999), has entrenched the perception that scientific knowledge is the only knowledge domain with authority to speak for the environment. Furthermore, the adoption of this discourse globally by national states in their policies, and the proliferation of environmental Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), each subscribing, in some way or another, to the discourse of 'sustainable development', have profoundly influenced the way in which the environment and of nature have been institutionalised in policies. This has led to these institutions naturalising this discourse which provides only certain possibilities for dealing with

environmental degradation; as well as placing certain actors centre stage and marginalising or precluding others (Brosius, 1999: 38). This shows how discourses define the realm of possibility with regard to policy-making (Dryzek, 1997).

4. Theory and method of discourse analysis: 'a complete package'

It is not possible to apply a discourse analysis without understanding the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of the method. Jorgenson and Phillip (2002) refer to the 'complete package' of theory/ philosophy and method of discourse analysis. There are many approaches to discourse analysis. As stated, this concept note focuses on 'argumentative discourse analysis' as the most appropriate approach and argues that the use of this approach can be fruitful in trying to understand policy-making. It is, however, important to understand the 'theory' underlying this method of discourse analysis.

Lees (2004) classifies this strand of discourse analysis, which draws on the work of Michel Foucault, as a constructionist approach. All approaches to discourse analysis which are based on the post-positivist social constructivist (or interpretive) approaches to knowledge have the following *assumptions* in common (Jorgenson and Phillips, 2002, 5-6):

1. The constructionist approach refutes the natural science search for causality and the uncovering of universal generalisations. Rather it aims to *show the meaning of certain social processes in society* which are contingent and dependent on the context (Hajer, 1995, 44, 43).
2. Knowledge of the world cannot be assumed to be the 'objective truth'. So, it is assumed here that knowledge and understanding of the world is a product of our way of categorising the world (i.e. producing discourses), which are not a 'reflection of reality' (Jorgensen and Philip, 2002, 5). However, no language is permanently stable and so meaning can never be fixed. So, discourse analysts talk about '*discursive struggle*'. Each discourse provides a different way of understanding the social world and they are in a constant struggle against each other in the policy domain to achieve dominance and provide meaning. We talk of 'hegemonic discourses' as those which provide the dominant perspective (Hajer, 1995; Jorgenson and Phillip, 2002). Our knowledge of the world is historically and culturally specific and contingent. Knowledge is constructed through social action and is therefore situated in a context.
3. Although our identities and knowledge are always contingent and dependent on our context, they are always however 'relatively inflexible' since "specific situations place restrictions on the identities which an individual can assume and on the statement which can be accepted as meaningful" (Jorgenson and Phillips, 2002, 7).

Lees (2004) classifies this strand of discourse analysis, which draws on the work of Michel Foucault as the most dominant in human geography. In FRACTAL, we aim to undertake a discourse analysis of policy documents to reveal the patterns of meaning, the discourses, and how they are used argumentatively by different actors as they attempt to dominate in the policy making process.

5. Discourse analysis in policy making and governance

In FRACTAL, we are interested in undertaking a discourse analysis of both:

a)   the *policy documents (texts)* of the cities of Lusaka, Maputo and Windhoek which reveal the underlying discourses which dominate policy, and

b)   the discourses that are evident in the *oral discussions of institutional and civil society actors* (speech acts) in city meetings, or in FRACTAL dialogues.

Left: Oral discussions and debates: Maputo Learning Lab, March 2017
Right: Policy documents from FRACTAL cities, Lusaka, Windhoek and Maputo

This will provide: a set of actors which government must take into consideration; issues of concern; actionable items; and a set of dominant or preferred discourses which make sense of the problems faced at the time by government. It will also make evident the absent agendas, issues and actors, and the counter-discourses (Stenson and Watt, 1999, cited in Lees, 2004, 103).

6. The influence of global discourses

Global discourses are influential 'meta-discourses' that are "shared by a very large number of local, national and international actors and have a significant influence on all levels of governance (Leipold, 2014, 16). Dominant discourses 'travel' globally, often from the North, as part of global conventions (e.g. the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the International Panel for Climate Change (IPCC), and Habitat lll), attending academic conferences, influential global NGOs (e.g. ICLEI, WWF) and donors (e.g. Rockefeller 100 Resilient Cities, and the World Bank). Examples of influential global discourses and some discussion on the process with which they become embedded in local policy discourse are discussed below:

a)   The discourse of the 'green economy' is shown to be just the latest version of neoliberal capitalism where nature is being privatised, marketised and commodified,

claiming to be a form of 'sustainable development'. Wanner's (2015) critique of the 'green economy' discourse highlights how the social and environmental dimensions of sustainability are being further neglected in this discourse and its outcomes in policy making.

b) Leipold cites several examples of the meta-discourses in the forestry sector, such as sustainable development (development discourse), neo-liberalism (economic discourse), ecological modernisation (regulatory discourse), green governmentality (regulatory discourse) and civic environmentalism (economic and governance discourse) (Arts and Buizer, 2009, and Arts et al. 2010, cited in Leipold, 2014, 16).

c) The UN-Habitat's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to end poverty, fight inequality and injustice, and tackle climate change by 2030. This global agenda, with its embedded economic, development, poverty, climate change and urban and governance discourses will have a significant impact on framing of African policies in cities and the framing of solutions over the next decades especially with the inclusion of the new Urban Sustainability Goal with its pro-urban discourse (Parnell, 2016).

d) African cities are also not immune to the influence of global climate change discourses. The IPCC has become the central site to produce meaning about climate change. The actors, their work and assessment activities create authoritative knowledge which then becomes included in discourses which enter the policy-making arena to structure the framing of problems and their solutions. The IPCC has constructed the *discourse of vulnerability* to be a condition resulting from "exposure, sensitivity and adaptation" (O'Brien et al, 2007). O'Brien et al. (2007, 73) however, argue that in the literature there are two main interpretations of vulnerability to climate change, namely, 'outcome vulnerability' and 'contextual vulnerability', the former framed by science, and the second by a 'human-security framing of climate change". They demonstrate how these different framings have significant implications for climate change policy as they "influence the questions asked, the knowledge produced, and the policies and responses that are prioritized".

e) The global *discourse of resilience* has spread globally to being a dominant discourse in climate adaptation literature (Coaffee, 2013a, 2013b; Brown, 2014; Welsh, 2015), particularly in the urban sphere. Large influential institutions such as the Rockefeller Foundation's with its 100 Resilient Cities project which is being implemented in 100 cities world-wide serve to embed the resilience discourse in a wide range of cities. This discourse argues that urban resilience is: "the capacities 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". Furthermore, resilience discourse is embedded throughout the UN-Habitat Sustainable Development Goals (Ziervogel et al, 2017).

An 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 (Groesser, 2013, 1).

7. Discourse analysis in FRACTAL

Discourse analysis is a method to analyse the role of language in the debates over the politics of meaning, the way in which it affects people's understandings and cognitions, and the way in which it distributes power to some and less to others. The task of the analyst in the FRACTAL will be to explain how some different actors (organisations or persons) secure the reproduction of their discursive position (or manage to alter this) in the context of a controversy (Hajer, 1995, 51) and in this way, uncover the dominant discourses and their embedding in policies in these southern African cities.

The overall goal of FRACTAL is to insert appropriate climate information into southern African cities in order that development decision making is climate resilient. *This means that FRACTAL aims to influence and shift municipal and maybe national policy discourse to be more reflective of climate concerns.* To be able to do this we must understand the urban governance arrangements, particularly in the domain of water, energy and climate change: the multi-scalar actors involved and their discourses and policy mandates; the policies for governing the city, decision-making processes; the projects and programmes that have emerged, and the outcomes of this policy making processes on the ground.

An understanding of the *dominant discourses in the city*, particularly around the nexus of water, energy and development, will provide a macro framework within which city policy making is situated. These will structure the debates that are used in each domain, such as water and sanitation, energy, infrastructure development and so on. The dominant policy discourses will also reveal a group of dominant actors. This information will form part of understanding the overarching governance framework for decision-making, how problems are defined and the solutions that are possible. In addition, knowledge of the discourses will contribute to defining the governance arrangements in each city which will potentially provide an understanding of where climate information is best inserted.

In FRACTAL, we are interested in undertaking a discourse analysis of both:

a)   the *policy documents (texts)* of the cities of Lusaka, Maputo and Windhoek and other related texts which reveal the underlying water, energy, climate change or planning discourses which dominate policy, and

b)   the discourses that are evident in relevant 'speech acts', namely *oral discussions between councillors and officials in institutional* city council and sub-committee meetings; multi-stakeholder meeting with the City Council and non-state actors; and in FRACTAL Learning Lab and Dialogues, amongst others.

This exercise will provide an ensemble of actors which government must take into consideration; their main issues of concern and actionable items. This will draw out the dominant or preferred discourses which are currently being expressed to make sense of the problems faced at the time by municipal government. It will also make evident the absent agendas, issues and actors and the counter-discourses which are not being reflected in government policy discourse (Stenson and Watt, 1999, cited in Lees, 2004, 103).

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