



# The Archaeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language

*Michel Foucault, A.M. Sheridan Smith (Translator)*

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*Librarian note: an alternate cover for this edition can be found here.*

Madness, sexuality, power, knowledge—are these facts of life or simply parts of speech? In a series of works of astonishing brilliance, historian Michel Foucault excavated the hidden assumptions that govern the way we live and the way we think.

*The Archaeology of Knowledge* begins at the level of “things aid” and moves quickly to illuminate the connections between knowledge, language, and action in a style at once profound and personal. A summing up of Foucault’s own methodological assumptions, this book is also a first step toward a genealogy of the way we live now.

Challenging, at times infuriating, it is an absolutely indispensable guide to one of the most innovative thinkers of our time.

## **The Archaeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language Details**

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## Dusty says

I think it's helpful to think of this book, which I admit I struggled through, as something of the introduction to the methodology that would later result in relative page-turners like *Discipline and Punish* and the three volumes of *The History of Sexuality*. Of course, Foucault himself would hate this: One of his arguments is that scholars remain committed to the antiquated notion that authors repeat themselves across their texts. Ultimately, the point is that in excavating history we should seek "relations" that enable discursive practices -- rather than search for transcendental "truths" beneath repetitions. While reading, I put as much thought into Foucault's arguments as into why I find his books beasts. I decided it's the combination of two factors: (1) After several decades influencing scholarship, he has become somewhat "obvious." In 2013, I don't think there's anybody left who needs to be awakened from boring structuralism. And yet, (2) despite the obviousness of his arguments, they're still incredibly hard to extract from his abstract (and repetitive) prose. Recommended, but more because it's hard to avoid than because it's a joy.

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## Luís C. says

*More than explaining a horizon of intelligibility, Foucault is simply describing a logical open space in which there is a certain discourse. To open this logical space, Foucault restores exegesis of significant monuments left by mankind, who had been the concern of traditional humanism, by quasi-structuralist development sets of insignificant elements. The notion of rarity, by Foucault, allows precisely identify what is rigorous and meaningful for a time, without thereby archaeologist shall have to accept that must be for him too.*

## Presentation Note

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## Mark Bowles says

### A Theory of Discourse

1. The archaeological analysis of the human sciences was meant to reveal the rules of formation, and modes of organization of thought which eluded the consciousness of the scientist yet were fundamental to scientific discourse
2. Archaeology then permitted Foucault to discuss the transformations in the field of historical knowledge
3. Two ways to construct a history of thought
  - a) To preserve the sovereignty of the subject. To see an uninterrupted continuity
  - b) Foucault's way. Decenters the sovereign subject. Emphasis on the analysis of the rules of formation through which groups of statements achieve unity as a science, text, or theory. The history of thought is a series of discontinuities.
4. Intent of book: To uncover the principles and consequences of an autochthonous transformation that is taking place in the field of historical knowledge [15].
  - a) It is a text which formulates descriptions about a neglected field, namely the relation between statements
  - b) This is not structuralism [16] (use cultural signs to reconstruct systems of relationships)
  - c) Main theme: To discuss an alternative mode of investigation (archaeology) appropriate for a neglected

domain of objects (statements)

5. Four ways to determine if a group of statements form a unity

- a) Reference to a common object of analysis
- b) Presence of a certain manner of reference or mode of statement
- c) Deployment of a system of permanent and coherent concepts
- d) Evidence of an identity and persistence of a theoretical theme

C. Archaeology

1. It is the description of the archive, literally what may be spoken in a discourse

2. The ultimate objective of archaeological analysis is to document the conditions of existence and the practical field in which it is deployed

3. Archaeological analysis represents an abandonment of the history of ideas. 4 areas of difference

- a) The attribution of innovation [151]: Archaeology is not concerned with innovation but a regularity among statements
- b) The analysis of contradictions: Archaeology looks for contradictions because this is what is to be analyzes
- c) Comparative descriptions: The history of ideas uses this to find unity. Archaeology looks for disunity
- d) The mapping of transformations: Archaeology does. No event succession

D. Archaeology and Science

1. Archaeology has been confined to the field of human sciences

2. Science is merely one region of archaeology, one field of knowledge

3. What is sciences role in the field of knowledge?

a) Archaeology attempts to demonstrate in a positive manner how science functions as an element of knowledge

4. Four types of threshold from which a discursive formation might emerge

a) Threshold of positivity: When a single system for the formation of statements emerges [186]

b) Threshold of epistemologization: When a model for describing norms is established

c) Threshold of Scientificity: When the epistemological conforms to laws

d) Threshold of Formilization: When a scientific discourse defines its own axioms

5. One conclusion to be drawn from this is that the emergence of science is not the result of the linear accumulation of truths, or an evolution of reason

6. Three types of historical analysis

a) Formilization: Mathematics and the process of retrieval of past events as an integral part of its own development

b) Scientificity: The trajectory with which science emerges from a prescientific foundation

c) Epistemologization: The level of archaeology where an attempt is made to reveal discursive practices giving rise to knowledge

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### **Rachel Smalter Hall says**

One of my dear friends told me that she believed Foucault had made feminism possible for women. He also made me want to put a stick in my eye, while I was reading this book. *Really*, Foucault? Do you really *have* to be so damned inscrutable??

The rewards for making it to the end of *Archaeology of Knowledge* are so worth it, though. In his own way, Foucault pokes and prods until he completely convinces you that disciplines are little more than arbitrary, fragile, man-made constructions--artificial borders used by institutions to police subversive voices and perpetuate coercive social hierarchies. Wow. I just hope you get there before you put a stick in your eye.

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### **Avie Flanagan Vaughan says**

Another author whose entire oeuvre, essentially, changed the course of my life as a critical thinker. When I read this, I had been in a sort of Jane Austen / the Romantic poets phase for quite some time, and I was utterly bored with literature, with studying literature, with repeatedly canvassing the same tired books. Then I found Garcia Marquez and Foucault, I discovered the genuine critical theory of literature, and I embarked upon an infatuation with semiotics, (post)structuralist, and postmodernism that has continued into the present and influenced the way I consider literature, writing, language and, by extension, the world.

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### **Chris Radjenovich says**

I will not lie when I say this is a book I will be going back to for a long time to come. Despite coming out of it understanding the generality of the topic, the language used is dense, frustrating, and at times extremely redundant. There are times where I read the same chapter three times in a row just to grasp the essence of what Foucault was saying. And despite it, I know I will have to return to this book many times in the future.

But the fact that I'm willing to come back to it proves the how breathtaking Foucault lays out the possibility of his analysis of knowledge, discourse, and specificity. He is not proposing a model of analysis to be applied everywhere, and does not get rid of the idea that his own analysis will be analysed by another one in the future. He does not criticize a discourse and act as an independent subject; in fact, he has knowledge that the language he is using traps him in a discursive formation looking at others. This may come to some people as "absurd" or "useless" because in the end, no "end", no "truth", or no "continuity" in Foucault's thought is established. Yet the essence of his book is the disappointment of the remainder of "modernist" or "Enlightened" thinkers of today; he is not trying to disprove systems of truth or science, but on the contrary is trying to get rid of their self-evidence. This in part explains the complexity of the language used by Foucault, because he does not want to fall into the same trap by assuming the supposed self-evidence of his own analysis. Hence, what he proposes is a means, and not an end, to looking at fields of knowledge. What he proposes is not breaking out of the barriers that language constrains on us, since to do that is impossible. What he is prepossessing is to be aware of those barriers.

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### **Lance says**

This is no doubt one of the most important methodological texts written for the humanities. The applications are endless. Foucault's apparatus is somewhat bulky and almost unusable in places. I do not think that the entire book could be applied to one specific project. I see this as more a tool bag from which a scholar might take out particular tools to help see histories and discourses in different ways. In this way, *The Archeology of Knowledge* is not so much a work of theory, as it is a method of invention.

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### **LunaBel says**

This is the sort of book that you feel that is brilliant, that brings something substantial to the humanities, a

book which was read and reread and continues to amaze, yet you can't wait to finish it and go back to critics, who had enough patience to depict it sentence by sentence, because you are bored with the actual book.

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## David says

I might as well admit it up front. The reason I bought this book last week was that the cover was hot. Hot as in attractive. It wooed me. (~~No, it's not this 1980s green and purple nightmare you see on your computer monitor now. As usual, most of the Goodreads librarians are too busy playing hall monitor and tossing Otis's salad in the Goodreads Feedback group to attend to cover design updates. So we're left with this cover. An unusually competent librarian has since added the cover and it appears on this page.~~) (Did Patrick Nagel dabble in pomo?)

So apparently I am a cheap graphic design slut who can be had by any well-dressed taker. I'll just go ahead and own my shallowness. But imagine my surprise (won't you) when I got home, Foucault-in-hand, so to speak, and came eye-to-eye with the ugly yet totally tubular 80s edition from Pantheon already on my shelf! It was actually bookmarked with a Target receipt (for cat food, cheap wine, cottage cheese, et al) from December 2004... on page 14! I never even made it out of the introduction before I reshelfed this ugly fucker!

What was the reason? Too dense? Too boring? Distracted maybe? Whatever the case, I'm going to assume that if the cover had at least made an effort (aesthetically) I would have zipped right through it as if V.C. Andrews wrote it. Didn't I finish *Discipline and Punish* and *Madness and Civilization*? You bet your ass I did. Because *those* covers, while not boner-inducing, were more appealing than this one. At least in a bargain-basement-Magritte-becomes-a-Scientologist kind of way.

So while I was defecating just now, I read the first two pages in the new Vintage edition, and I can already tell you that it's greatly benefited by Peter Mendelsund's cover design. I mean, the cover made reading it totally not horrible this time! Admittedly, I haven't made it to the upper limit of my first attempt (Page 14), so it still has time to tank. But I already enjoy holding the book much more.

Alright. I admitted that I'm a shallow design bimbo, so I guess I should lay it all out there now... There's really very little chance I'll finish this thing, is there? Maybe if I do two pages a day on the crapper. Baby steps, right? I just don't have the mind for this kind of thing anymore. Plus, whenever I think of Foucault in my head (because where else would I think of him really?), I picture Telly Savalas -- because they were both bald and most often photographed in the 1970s. I even picture the lollipop. But in my head, he has the voice of the black bald guy who was on the 7UP commercials in the 1980s ('The uncola!'). How am I supposed to take this amalgamated human being seriously when he's telling me that my assumptions about knowledge are dumb?

Wow. I'm really setting myself up for failure here. Did I ever mention that when I was young, my vocational ambition was to be one of the people who dressed up like characters at Disney World? Yeah, that didn't work out either... So why should this? {Despairing sigh.}

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### **Sayeed Mohd says**

Among other things I like the book for the way it traverses meanings to reveal newer sense in words, and that in almost every sentence.

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### **Jonathan Lyons says**

The Ur text, especially the appended text of Foucault's inaugural lecture at the College de France. Essential for understanding the divide between our discursive selves and the non-discursive reality that silently surrounds us.

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### **Dave says**

Dense. Dense. Dense. Also pretty brilliant. I had to slog through this one just to make sure the main ideas I'm building off of for my thesis aren't being misrepresented (a recurring nightmare of mine...[at my thesis defense] 'So, did you actually read Foucault?'). This man's mind works so differently from others', and because he's so crazy smart, he spends most of his time justifying the possibility of his ideas. I have a hunch that an abridged version of this one would be all of 50-odd pages, though the journey through all the justification is all part of the fun, right? 40 years later, I think Foucault's thinking has trickled down enough through higher education to make his main premises seem almost self-evident to the modern student. I fear the translator may have represented too faithfully some of Foucault's ranting tendencies and penchants for sentence fragments, but I hesitate to blame too much of the reading difficulty on the translator. What more can I say? Foundational, paradigm-changing, and one of the hardest things I've ever read.

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### **Ellen says**

i am to-read this book because i like to be simultaneously amazed and kind of bored.

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### **Karen says**

I hate to say that the Emperor has no clothes and perhaps this wasn't the best book to begin my Foucault journey with; however... I found it to be completely ridiculous, meticulous, superfluous, and unnecessary. Certainly there are nuggets of lucid and intriguing points buried in his winding and verbose prose. The reality is that no one should have to take the time currently required to make sense of what he is attempting to say (language and words have power). Even for a frenchman in translation, this work flies past the line of acceptable loquaciousness

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### **sologdin says**

Pre-genealogical Foucault. Labor intensive, but very much worth it.

A professor recommended it to me in the early 90s, along with Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* and Jane Flax's *Thinking Fragments* as the essential texts to read for literary theory. (Another professor with a different theoretical background recommended concurrently therewith Eagleton's *Ideology*, Brantlinger's *Crusoe's Footprints*, and Belsey's *Critical Practice*; I dutifully read all that stuff, and be advised that the second set is both more Marx-oriented and more introductory).

I didn't get around to really understanding the Foucault text until my second crack at it, right after tropical storm Cindy in July 2005, a brief little hiccup that shut down the power everywhere in New Orleans for a long weekend, as preparation for our long Katrina durance. The only place that I found with electricity right after Cindy was a little tavern in uptown NOLA, Le Bon Temps Roule, a joint well known around these parts. (Everyone needs to have a good hurricane reading list for when the electricity fails.)

How the Bon Temps still had air conditioning and whatnot I do not know, but the place was packed, with everyone sharing tables and booths. I ended up sitting with several different groups, and the cat next to me one time ignored my book shield (the Foucault) in order to explain how 'some punks thwew twash on my wesidence last night,' about which he was very disturbed. (Hello, tropical storm? Bueller?) He then transitioned from that into noticing my wedding band (recently then rendered null by divorce) and buggered off, as he had been hitting on a 'mawwied man.' FFS. Thing is, I had basically the same response when reading volume one of the History of Sexuality, so obviously there's just something about reading Foucault in public, no matter how difficult or abstract the writing may be.

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### **Lily says**

I mean, it's amazing, but it is also kind of boring.

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### **Bookfreak says**

Αρκετ? απαιτητικ? αν?γνωσμα που σκιαγραφε? τους δρ?μους που θα ακολουθ?σει η σκ?ψη του Φουκ? στα επ?μενα ?ργα του.

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### **Jessica says**

This book is great. Someone called it boring. Fool! It's the clearest thing Foucault has ever written, while still dipping into the occasional grammatically-challenged (albeit poetic) run-on sentences and drama I have always known and loved. It's best read as the closing of a series of books in which Foucault is analyzing (while trying to formulate a way of analyzing) institutions. It works well on its own but if you really want to see where Foucault is coming from read, in order: Madness and Civilization, The Birth of the Clinic, The Order of Things, Archaeology of Knowledge. The Discourse on Language (in the appendix of this copy) was a bonus, and more clearly demonstrates Foucault's critical orientation. Foucault's approach to scholarship has

always been conversational, but that comes across most explicitly in Archaeology. The short, snappy chapters make it a quick read and key terms are helpfully italicized. One suspects Foucault actually listened to an editor! Seriously though, read it.

????? ???? says

**Seth Pierce says**

My three stars has nothing to do with Foucault's brilliant deconstruction of language, but rather the achievement of maximum verbosity. I think this book represents a lifetime of commas and semicolons which make the text difficult to follow at times. While the level of critique is impressive, I can't help but think an appendix or twelve may have done this work a service in ensuring the reader tracked with all the micro-arguments and not just the macro-argument.

That being said, this work reveals how our categories and unities in various disciplines are social constructs and not self-evident realities. This isn't to deny reality or truth, but it does help the reader appreciate all the nuances that go into subjects like history or science, as well as the various forces that shape them.

If you are patient, then proceed with a read.