

**FRAGMEX – Fragmentation & Exclusion.**  
**Understanding & Overcoming the multiple Impacts of the European Crisis**

**Discourse Analysis: Theoretical remarks, comments on the methodical approach, results pertaining to European perceptions of the Greek crisis**

**Deliverable1-Supplement**

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**I. Discourse analysis and sociology of knowledge**

If it is not unreasonable to assume that all that we perceive and experience, intentionally refer to and judge, act and react upon, is in-formed and mediated by commitments and responsibilities resting upon and sustained by socially-constructed, typified knowledge claims displaying varying degrees of social acceptance and legitimacy, then it is equally obvious that these claims derive not from innate cognitive constants, but socially constituted symbolic systems. Such symbolic orders need in turn be considered as socially produced facticities constantly under communication, justification and transformation, whereby the latter can be subjected to analysis from a research perspective that seeks to display preconditions and consequences of the symbolic social construction in the various fields of belief systems, tacit knowledge stocks, institutional-functional orders, and knowledge politics. Cast in these terms the research objective of a discourse analysis based on the sociology of knowledge consists in *making explicit (reconstructing) processes of social construction, objectivation, communication and legitimation of those sense-making, reason-giving and action-guiding practices that underpin subjective and institutional understandings and actions*. Accordingly, the content of reconstructive analysis can refer to sense and meaning production, action practices, institutional contexts, or social effects.

Stating these rather general assumptions guiding the empirical-qualitative analysis does not of course, by the same means, intend to suggest that the notion of discourse deployed needs no further explanation. Against the background of a vast proliferation of discourse understandings and elaborations in the wake of the work of M. Foucault the *empirical approach based on the sociology of knowledge is rather a moderate one concentrated as it is on the interpretative task of viewing and demarcating discourse as a field of sense- and reference-dependent utterances or aggregates of propositions, grouped together by means of how they contribute to forming stable common structural patterns, practices, rules and resources of generating meaning, articulating argumentations and reasoning*. Thus, determining or delineating a discourse field means taking reference to situated practises of utterance production, reference dependent on a

specific subject. Viewed in this light, discourses as ruled practises produce and process interpretive patterns of constructing or constituting (social) reality, and the explanatory task of discourse analysis consists in providing reasonable accounts for answering such questions as to the kind *a*) of knowledge or understanding that governs the beliefs of the discourse participants, *b*) of objects, relations, properties, subject positions, etc. that thereby are asserted to ‘really’ be and obtain, *c*) of the means (i. e. explanatory schemes, story lines, normative arguments, rhetorical figures, etc.) deployed to supply reasons to support such assertive claims, and last but not least *d*) of rules that relate and coordinate the former three aspects of the discursive phenomenon. Leaving beside such rules as pertain only to specific “language games” one fundamental functional rule governing all sorts of discursive building as semantic-pragmatic reality construction can be made articulate by referring to relations of implication/consequence or incompatibility/difference. *Discourses are in this sense composed of lineages of incompatibility-and-consequence relations or inferences drawn according to the principle of (maximum or minimum) contrast, explicitly manifest in argumentative reasoning and justificatory practices, but also everywhere else implicitly at work in structuring perceptions and beliefs, knowledge stances, normative attitudes, (group) identities, motivational intentionalities and purposive actions.*

What renders all these inferential relations chaining utterances (with social-pragmatic purpose) together to aspects of a discursive whole is the methodological perspective of taking it that discourses constitute their references (‘subject matter’) by deploying various means to determine elements or dimensions of the content of the phenomenon referred to, whereby this semantic referential contentfulness comes in two flavours: the representation aspect, the semantic directedness at the ‘subject matter’ (i. e. talking *of* something *as*) and the expressive aspect (i. e. talking *about* something *that*). In this way, for example, crisis discourses as the European one under examination, constitute their reference content both in talking of the crisis *as* X, and talking *about* the crisis *that* X, as well.

Now, one of the assumptions of analysing discourses under the methodological auspices of the sociology of knowledge is that these both ways of intentional reference are equally valent, thereby rejecting that order of priority that accords prime significance to the expressive aspect: Assertive claims *that* things are thus-and-so carry as much weight as discursive ascriptions *of* things *as* something (determinable). With the ‘objectivist’ bias of taking reference as entailing sense-independent ‘substance’ qualities disregarded, one can then view the (*social-discursive*) construction of ‘subject matter’ (*as an issue of public concern and coordinated action, like the*

*crisis*) as revolving around sense-giving utterance productions such as argumentative reasoning, knowledge commitments, normative judgements, rhetorical communication, all co-producing subjective (discursive) positions, discourse alliances, formation of collective interests, self-understandings and other-perceptions, patterns of discursive inclusion/exclusion, etc. In this sense discourses are structured phenomena displaying both semantic and pragmatic antecedents and consequences, obvious in the ways they delineate fields of thematic ‘concern’, determine causes, causal dependencies and effects, draw up or demarcate spheres of responsibilities and competencies, project problem-solving strategies, effect actors positioning themselves in the discursive field and generate value-based justificatory practical reasonings.

Taking all this into account helps mapping up the background set of assumptions regulating the empirical research approach towards exploring the European consciousness of the recent crisis in terms of a discursive social construction entailing knowledge claims, institutional understandings, problem identifications, problem-solving strategies, group identity formations and normative justifications. All these components of discursively instituting the phenomenon of crisis can very well be observed in the context of the political deliberations in the European Parliament around the issue of coming to grips with what is perceived as the most serious drawback in the course of the European project, but also a stepping stone for laying deeper the foundations of integration. Taking those plenary debates in the EP related to what in the political deliberations and contests in this institutional framework is referred to as the economic, political, social and ethical effects of the crisis as a unit (of research and analysis) one can then cluster the aspects of this discursive phenomenon together in five dimensions:

**a)** *Explanatory understandings* of (causes and effects of) the crisis. Guiding the interpretative approach of grouping together the relevant argumentations are such questions as to what discursive means, knowledge beliefs and credentials the members of the parliamentary discourse community mobilise for explanatory purposes, what learn effects can be observed in the course of the actors’ trying to deal with the multivalence of the crisis, and what kind of perception and argumentation patterns they deploy in order to put forward casual explanations and concepts of feasible problem solutions;

**b)** The latter brings into the focus of analysis the question of what *institutional understandings* the discourse participants articulate in order to stake the field of *problem-solving capacities in terms of (self-) ascriptions of action commitments and responsibilities*. This is of course of particular pertinence to the European crisis discourse as the practical action inferences drawn by the political actors take recourse on what these latter perceive to at best provide those institutional resources and decision-making capacities called for to meet the challenges of the crisis.

No wonder, then, that the question of how to distribute responsibilities, authorities and competencies between Commission, Council and Parliament turns out to be a highly contested issue;

c) Questions of resources, capacities and responsibilities inferentially imply *perceptions of and understandings about how to deal with and fight against* the destabilising effects of the crisis in terms of deciding upon and implementing effective measures. This is also a discursive field partly riven with contestations between the political factions on such questions as extent and scope of anti-crisis management, effectivity and sustainability of measures to be applied, collateral social impacts of the proposed stability and budget discipline policies, and possible effects on the process of European integration;

d) Explanatory reasonings, ascriptions of responsibility and pragmatic action competence, and problem-solving understandings in a certain way build up a set of preconditions for *the formation of discursive group positions centred on particular constellations or patterns of self-understanding and other-perception*, that is, what every such discursive position perceives itself standing for or against. As in the case of the parliamentary crisis discourse under consideration the *discursive* ‘We’-groups as well as the corresponding other-perceptions or conceptions of that against which collective will formation efforts must be exercised need not coincide with what political affiliation and ideological leniency might otherwise prescribe. Nor for that matter need the perceptions of (‘inimical’) otherness display traits of irreconcilable opposition;

e) The fifth dimension of discourse as structured phenomenon relates to that layer of argumentative reasoning that can in a way be considered as a discursive substratum sustaining the edifice of explanatory efforts, responsibility assumptions, problem solution understandings, identity beliefs: In the *context of justificatory argumentations* these all are recast in terms of *normative propriety in the light of and in compliance with rules, principles and values*. In this sense the task responsibility of embedding perceptions and actions in a normative framework is no accessory to the discursive ‘core’ of expressive-assertive explanatory description and action prescription, but underpins them.

## **II. The interpretative work (working with atlas.ti)**

Structuring the research material in this way does not mean though applying a rigid explanatory scheme, nor does it necessarily imply the interpreter’s intentional attitude of seeking to find in the object under examination verification instances of received assumptions – neither are any hypotheses put to test, nor shall a pre-existing theory be validated. It rather reflects the expectation of the reference of analysis meeting certain demands of explanatory understanding. Since

the approach of the sociology of knowledge (and more particularly that of the Grounded Theory) constrains itself by holding on to a view of prejudging the observed social phenomena as little as possible, the choice of plenary sessions of the EP as research material is guided by the belief of it being a source out of which insights can be gained into to European mindset confronted with the task of coming to grips with certain ruptures caused by the crisis. All this applies *mutatis mutandis* to concepts the analysis lays down as founding the interpretive process of reconstructing out of the data material the physiognomy of the discourse as described above.

Speaking of interpretative concepts as generated in the course of the empirical qualitative research according to the Grounded-Theory-approach refers among others to such work as facilitated by computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, like the *atlas.ti*, which in cases as in the present one having to do with forty-one plenary protocols exceeding thousand and three hundred pages proves to be capable of providing considerable aid. Since the understanding of discourse, as summarily displayed here, sets out from the assumption that its structure contains conceptual means naming object-references, relations and sense-dependencies between concepts, explanatory schemes and normative argumentations, pragmatic considerations related to causal efficacy and legitimacy of action, etc., it is of course quite obvious that ‘coding’ (i.e. ordering the data according to categories) plays a key role in analytically processing content (of documents). Although it is also very generally certainly true that interpretative-qualitative analysis boils ultimately down to setting up criteria for bringing out those concepts around which content revolves, it is not advisable or even compelling to lay such criteria down in advance. The approach applied in examining the crisis discourse in the EP observes the following rule:

- *Lay down interpretation guiding concepts such as a) to be found in the material itself, either in a recurrent manner, or located in what may be thought of as key ‘passages’ (‘in vivo’ coding), and/or b) can reasonably be shown to carry greater explanatory force.* The latter can mean two things: Either the degree of generality these concepts display is such that circumscribes the whole semantic content of the relevant discourse context, or (more moderately) the concepts can (inductively) prove extensive enough as to function as generalisations, which (a considerable number of) propositions or a cluster of propositions in the analysed text can be shown to be instances of. In the discourse analysis carried out so far concepts such as regulation, European understandings, imbalances, solidarity, etc., derive from the application of both approach rules, with the emphasis put on codes/concepts that can be shown to display the greater consistency (for example, as regards frequency of application by the discourse participants) and (semantic) extension.

Coding concepts are not sacrosanct though, at least not in the sense that laying them down forecloses the possibility of revision: It is (in the most cases) quite probable either to disregard the initially chosen ones and deploy instead others displaying a greater degree of generality, or, conversely, to lower the level of abstraction by introducing sub-concepts that grasp more adequately the semantic content of the textual context under interpretation. In a way the relation between the general determination of a concept, on the one hand, and its various textual instantiations, on the other, reflects the relation between concepts exhibiting various scales of semantic extension. The ideal-type case of qualitative analysis in the spirit of Grounded Theory consists in a (relatively) open interpretation process concerned as much with following closely the course of concepts met in the material under examination as with offering a reconstructive account of how the data can exegetically be organised into cohesive whole.

To set such an objective implies of course going beyond analysis by means of laying out a set of interpretative concepts, codes and categories, which however instrumental in order to get a grasp on the content is just but a stepping stone for accomplishing the task of a sound reconstruction. What matters more is interpretative embedding these concepts in argumentation sets, thereby paying attention to the relations of incompatibility-and-consequence they stand in. Speaking of argumentation sets and patterns means among others working out the ways they can be seen to make explicit and articulate perception and belief types, mind-sets and principled stances. Thereby, this kind of interpretative bringing out argumentation patterns proves to be of particular valence for a discourse analysis purporting, as the one conducted in the framework of FRAGMEX does, to illuminate how social actors as discourse participants mobilise meaning and explanatory resources and use the pragmatic force of strategies of persuasion. To such resources and strategies as aspects of discursive production belong in particular tacit knowledge, but also professional expertise, argumentation skills, rhetorical dexterity, normative-justificatory reasoning, narrative schemes, and collective representations pertaining to cultural signs, social stereotypes und everyday mythologies.

Like concepts grouped together help demarcate the particular contexts of thematic reference as parts of a discursive whole, so do argumentations and reasoning types such as appeals to self-evident truths or commonly shared assumptions, causal explanations, contra-factual hypotheses, instrumental conceptions as to the effectiveness of means to given ends, value-based justifications, etc. Now, the question of the interpretative ordering of such argumentation types rests upon how to situate them in incompatibility-and-consequence relations. Though there are no blueprints for this situating activity of what counts as an argument, depending as it does on

the thematic content of the discursive context under scrutiny, the following rule could be of some pertinence:

- Having set out the outline of the discursive-thematic context one proceeds to *gather all those pieces of textual evidence (i. e. arguments) that can be lined up in consequential rows in terms of what are the premises of and what follows from these arguments – thereby making explicit the inferential articulation of their content*. Consider for example the argumentative deployment of the notion of regulation the political actors in the crisis discourse in the EP usually take recourse to: It functions both as premise or background assumption in reasonings appealing to the course of European integration and as (unavoidable) result of the malfunctioning of the banking sector. Or take the case of solidarity-based arguments: They pose the value concept both as motivational resource and condition of action, but they also take it that as a result of the crisis-management effectively reforming the institutional architecture of the Euro zone solidarity among the European member states will reappear strengthened. Grasping the way the discourse actors deploy arguments does not exhaust itself by making explicit such kinds of inference relations between arguments, their antecedents and consequences though, because even more important are those incompatibilities (i. e. contrasts, negations, refutations, exclusive differences, etc.), which in a sense build up the backbone of every discursive construction of (social) reality.
- Concerning such incompatibilities and given additionally the tenet of discourse analysis that the principle of *maximum contrast* should be observed as extensive as possible, the rule to follow regarding the task of bringing an interpretative order into the multiplicity of argumentations would be *to accentuate the (exclusive) differences as far as possible*. This means quite simply to spell out **a)** contrary understandings of the same concepts/representations/values, **b)** contrasting conclusions starting from the same or equivalent premises, and more generally **c)** to bring into play as many explanatory and justificatory reasons the discourse participants put forth arguing for or against the validity of their arguments as possible. This can be particularly exciting in such cases as those in which one observes that the formation of an argumentation strategy the validity of which is shared by the great majority of the discourse community rests upon assumptions that the ‘minority’ faction can easily show to lack legitimacy force. Consider for instance the justificatory value of European solidarity a great part of the discourse participants makes use of in arguing for distributing the costs resulting from the crisis as equally as possible: Although the normative force of such common values as solidarity and mutual aid is not an object of dispute, the premises upon which

the appeal to them rests can very well be – all the more so under the present circumstances, with the European common identity still lacking a clear profile.

Making use of the five-partite outline scheme as regards discourse considered as the unity of a phenomenal structure, thereby handling the issue of ordering concepts/codes and argumentations in the way described above, can be of some interpretative help in coming to grips with the discursive (social) construction of the European crisis. Since it goes without saying that these are not the only aspects of coping analytical-qualitatively with the material of discourse analysis, and in order to round up this cursory account, mention should be made of another methodical device that addresses the fact of both concepts and argument forms often being embedded in what can be seen as *larger units of discursive content, meaning by that those clusters of meaning production observable in interpretative schemes and frames the discourse actors can be shown to deploy in perceiving, understanding (and acting). These interpretative schemes (Deutungsmuster)* are crucial in discourse analysis for containing configurations of signs, symbols, sentences and utterances as they do they provide coherent ensembles of meaning, which in turn are of particular usefulness for the interpret trying to deliver as coherent a picture of the actors' perceptions and understandings as possible. Against the background of the work carried out in analysing the crisis discourse in the EP one can refer to such schemes as for example those underlying the understandings of the crisis as (reform) chance and regulation opportunity, of the financial crisis as war waged against the Union, and of the relations between politics and markets in spatial-temporal terms. Particular mention deserves of course the interpretative scheme underlying the European perception of the Greek crisis.

### **III. European perception patterns of the Greek crisis**

In a certain sense the Greek sovereign debt crisis comes to occupy pride of place in the deliberations of the EP owing to the fact that this type of crisis for a number of reasons is perceived as *exemplary* for the state in which the Union is considered to be in the wake of the world economic and financial crisis. The exemplary status conferred on to Greek predicament can be shown to be resting upon a perception scheme (or pattern of understanding), which displays three aspects depending on the thematic context:

- To begin with, as regards the European understandings of causes and effects of the crisis the prevailing perception pattern observed consists in the Greek crisis being considered *hot spot and symptom* of structural shortcomings in the makeup of the monetary architecture of the Union, but also in relation to the fact of economic performance imbalances, with the levels

of competition capacities diverging significantly. For the majority of the discursive community in the EP the Greek crisis signifies *in a pars pro toto manner* (as interpretative scheme) institutional, political and economic deficits that the crisis has laid bare. The scheme of perceiving the individual Greek case as exemplifying general grievances is of course also manifest in those argumentations that by focussing on financial speculation underscore the predicament of Greece as highly indicative of what are perceived to be concentrated attempts to destabilise the common currency space.

- Understanding the Greek case *as the part standing for the whole* can also be observed in the discursive context of deliberations on issues of crisis management and generally measures and strategies to overcome the crisis, this time Greece occupying an exemplary status regarding solutions and remedies. What in particular concerns the critical attitudes towards policies of resolute austerity to unwaveringly be carried through in all countries afflicted by the sovereign debt crisis, all the critical objections to and arguments against austerity (i. e. counter-productive, one-sided, causing the dismantling of the social state and provoking social upheavals, promoting the ‘break-up’ of Europe and fostering nationalism and Euroscepticism, etc.) seem to derive from perceptions and beliefs that the negative experiences of austerity policies in Greece and their reverberations across the Union can be generalised as to prove highly relevant for the course of the whole European project. Thus Greece offers an exemplary case of all those processes of fragmentation and exclusion that threaten the cohesion of the EU.
- Last but not least, the *exemplary significance* that the Greek crisis can be shown to have in the perceptions of the European political actors relates to those value-based argumentations revolving around such questions as to how the distribution of the costs resulting from managing the effects of the crisis can be justifiably accounted for, or on what normative grounds the European national spheres may be called to shoulder collectively these costs – then it all comes down to *solidarity*. Among the contested issues are such questions as under what conditions the Union is obliged to provide solidarity to states in need, or, conversely, to what extent the over-indebted member states are entitled to claim that being receivers of assistance is but an expression of the right they have on the solidarity of the community. Further related questions concern the forms this mutuality of rights and obligations should take in order to satisfy the demands of justice and community spirit based on responsibility. All of these questions bare of course (primarily) on the Greek case.

#### **IV. Literature**

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