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**Order of discourse...**

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## Order of discourse...<sup>1</sup>

Alain Brossat

### *Abstract*

*This article stages a comparison between two famous books — LTI — The Language of the Third Reich by Victor Klemperer and The Order of Discourses by Michel Foucault. In the former, Klemperer, a Jewish philologist who survived the Nazi regime in the most distressing and perilous conditions, Klemperer meticulously describes the transformation of German language into a propagandistic tool. He observes how violence can be done to a language by a totalitarian regime. In the latter, Foucault reflects on the relationship between discourse, power and the manufacturing of statements. In spite of their distinctly different perspectives, these two essays intersect in many ways — this is what this article intends to suggest.*

*Keywords: language, discourse, power, violence, statements, Nazis, Nazism*

Can we detect converging points between two apparently widely different books: Michel Foucault's *The Order of Discourse* and Victor Klemperer's *Language of the Third Reich: LTI*<sup>2</sup>? Under which conditions can we intertwine the thoughts of these authors regarding the relations between discourse, power and truth, knowing that both authors can enlighten us in their own specific way on these matters?

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1 Letter "O" in Brossat Alain, *Abécédaire Foucault*, Demopolis, Paris, 2014.

2 French editions used here: Foucault Michel, *L'ordre du discours*, Gallimard, Paris, 1971 ; Klemperer Victor, *LTI(Lingua Tertii Imperii): la langue IIIème Reich*, translated from German by Elisabeth Guillot, Albin Michel, Paris, 1996.

Actually, the inaugural lesson at the Collège de France on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of September 1970 abounds in formulations which seem to perfectly fit in with the object of Klemperer's work, at least superficially — the language of the Third Reich, Nazi jargon: “discursive police”, “discourses' constraints”, “ritualization of speech”, “systems of discourse's subjugation”, etc.

However, if we take a closer look at Foucault's text, we realize that an alignment based only on such expressive formulations would be fundamentally misleading. The “order” Foucault is drawing our attention to is the order of discourse, or discourses, in general, within modern societies. It is an order which includes discontinuous and heterogeneous types of discourses. What's more, the discontinuities are registered within the actual principle of this general order: “Discourses should be analyzed as discontinuous practices which intersect, sometimes adjoin, but just as well ignore or exclude each other”<sup>3</sup>.

Foucault never proposes to isolate one type of discourse, “a language” (une langue) in Klemperer's terminology, by differentiating it from the others, by underscoring a specific feature of violence, of rigidity, a principle of “police”, authoritarian and fanatical, which would be inherent to this discourse and would mark it with the seal of exception (as “totalitarian” language in that case, though it is the vocabulary of Jean-Pierre Faye, not Klemperer's).<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, Foucault intends to show that every discursive formation, in all circumstances, requires a “police” — the implementation of a principle of exclusion of other types of discourses, of other rules of formation, as well as entanglements with power issues and a specific regime of truth. Foucault insists in *The Order of Discourse* that all discursive formations are in relation with a “will to truth”.

Therefore, we could say that the entanglement of discourse in general, whatever its form, with an element of violence is a kind of general principle. Discourses do violence to things, for they

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3 Foucault M., *Op. Cit.*, pp.54-55.

4 Faye Jean-Pierre, *Langages totalitaires*, Hermann, Paris, 1972.

are “a practice that we impose on them”.<sup>5</sup> They are violent towards other discourses, by repressing or excluding them. They violently operate irresolute divisions. They potentially exert violence towards the speaker by imposing their “police”... Here, one can see the difference between Foucault’s and Klemperer’s analysis. By becoming the ethnographer of the LTI, Klemperer implicitly locates his reflection in a regime of exception, with a discursive machine which was entirely subjugated to exceptional conditions, a monstrous machine characterized by its capacity to poison, to corrupt, to deflect and divert, to suppress and exterminate the “true” language or, in other words, the “normal” one. Klemperer is certainly concerned with the way the LTI disease diffuses its poison — it is so insidious and inexorable that even the victims and the enemies of Nazism have been contaminated by it. He is haunted also by the nightmare within which an unchecked perpetuation of this disease of language continues beyond the fall of Hitler’s Reich. It would consist in an opportunist continuation taking a viral form. But at the same time, the “fieldwork” he is doing day by day, in the midst of darkness, sheds light on the properly delirious agitations brought on by the capture of language by a general apparatus of terror and propaganda — when the discursive machine turns insane, and having escaped from any kind of control, starts to look like the machine in Jacques Tati’s film,<sup>6</sup> which after being wrongly operated, starts to produce kilometers of multicolored and far-fetched forms of plastic tubes... Quirky and wicked objects are manufactured by this machine. In LTI’s vernacular, the linguistic equivalents of these tubes would be monstrous neologisms such as Laufjude and Fahrjude (a Jew condemned to walk because he is not allowed in public transports, and a Jew authorized to use tram...), Zahnjude (dentist of Jewish origins) and so many others...<sup>7</sup>

It becomes obvious to Klemperer, as he sees day after day how the houses where Jews were gathered were being deserted, that the wrong inflicted upon language is closely interwoven with the outbursts of violence against bodies — those persecuted within, those subdued by the Reich. This state of things becomes so unbearable and paralyzing for Klemperer that his classical training of philologist (today we would say linguist) draws him towards an idea of

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5 Foucault M., *Op. Cit.* p.55.

6 *Mon Oncle* by Jacques Tati (1958).

7 Klemperer V., *Op. Cit.*, p.219.

language as conservatoire or haven of culture, as the living fabric of common life, the medium itself of civilized life. What he experiences with the viral proliferation of the LTI strikes him as constant profanation, something like an onslaught by a herd of barbarian riders, but this time in a city of words, of phrases, syntax and grammar.

This is certainly not the approach of the discursive issue proposed by Foucault during his inaugural lesson. For him, the problem is not so much that a language can be enslaved and used as a war machine, or rather a machine of death, but rather that we can notice, from the side of powers, of “order”, a structural intolerance towards the notion of the free proliferation of discourses itself. Therefore, the question of the potential coercion of these discourses, of their manipulation, and of their corruption would not be the main issue. Foucault’s concern is for their subjugations (*assujettissements*), that is, not so much their seizure by external forces, but their shaping within a horizon of power and truth. At the very start of the lesson, Foucault asks the question, fainting innocence: “But what is so perilous in the fact that people talk and that their discourses indefinitely proliferate? Where is the danger?”<sup>8</sup>

The response, Nietzschean in tone, is obvious: discourse is inherently dangerous, whatever its form or type, because of “its link with desire and power”. Thus, any discursive production involves the formation of a normativity, what we would call a “police”: “I assume that in every society, the production of discourse is controlled, filtered, organized and redistributed by way of a certain number of practices whose role is to avert its powers and dangers, to master its unpredictability as event, to avoid facing its burdening and fearsome materiality”.<sup>9</sup> Such an “assumption” — more a kind of axiom — is open to a form of relativism: in that perspective, the distinction between more or less appropriate or inappropriate discourses, true or false discourses, tolerable or not, honorable or infamous, do not exist, except if they are considered as determined by normative systems and regimes of truth whose plurality excludes any universalizing condition. In that perspective, the LTI should not be looked at as the absolute and terrifying exception, but maybe studied as a singularity, a kind of “other space” (“*espace*

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8 Foucault M., *Op. Cit.* p.10.

9 *Ibid.*, pp.10-11.

autre” or heterotopia). This singularity would precisely be characterized by its capacity to show that any discursive machine imposes its own and strictly constraining horizon of truth (in close relationship with the constitution of a power field which traces the condition of its use) on its speakers, even when the violent divergences with other discursive productions might make it appear as absurd and the “discipline” imposed on its speakers as unbearable.

On the issue of relativism, in spite of all the differences, we could still acknowledge a “meeting point” between Klemperer and Foucault. Klemperer is indeed continuously emphasizing the massive and long-term effects of the German population attachment to the Reich and the Führer’s destiny, even when the most elementary principles of reality should have brought them back to their senses. It means that in the fabric of a language seized by a totalitarian power, a horizon of truth is established, more genuine than all the “real” certainties — what requires (or should do so) to be checked by direct experience, by observation or by the most basic modes of reasoning or logical deductions. Here, the enlightened man, or the very “classical” rationalist that Klemperer is, might concede some arguments to the relativism of a “genealogist” Foucault — something different from the anti-rationalist or irrationalist tendency suspected by Habermas...<sup>10</sup>

With the LTI, a lesson is surely embedded in the depth of language: the split between true and false, between the sensible and the absurd, can only work within a given regime or system of truth. All these years, Klemperer is overwhelmed by the terrible encounter with a figure of misery in language (maybe more so than by hunger, the fear of being beaten, humiliation, the possibility of deportation or the anxiety caused by allied bombings). He cannot but acknowledge that, in a given situation, there is nothing like a natural limit based on common sense or any kind of universality of the human capacity of judgment which would hinder the capture of a group, a people, a society by a discursive system or police fully integrated into a large-scale criminal enterprise. From within the space drawn by the triangle discourse-power-truth, a logical machine is set up, both logical and mad, a blind articulation of thought and

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<sup>10</sup> Habermas Jürgen, *Le discours philosophique de la modernité*, translated from German by Christian Bouchindhomme and Rainer Rochlitz, Gallimard, Paris, 1988.

language that nothing can stop — except a higher power which would destroy its substructure.

Thus, it seems that discursivity has its “reasons” that the (political, as well as moral) reason absolutely ignores. In that respect, the LTI as a totalitarian discourse, or language, would not represent the pure exception but a startling opportunity to ascertain this primordial feature of the order of discourse: its efficiency is not so much found in the scope of the verifiable, of the experimentable, of the universalizable, or even of the probable, but simply in the fact that it “meets certain requirements” as Foucault says. The order of discourse is notably characterized by the way it manages to assert its rules on the formation of statements and the divide between true and false.

A fundamental affinity would then be revealed between the approaches proposed by the philologist and the philosopher: in LTI, Klemperer time and again takes on the Schillerian pattern of a language which “thinks and poeticizes on our behalf”, which overthrows the illusion of the sovereign subject, substituting for it the figure of a speaker endowed with language and crossed by its flows. The LTI is certainly a kind of mud stream which flooded Germany between 1933 and 1945 and was regurgitated through the mouths of millions of stunned and anesthetized “speakers”. This language is first and foremost an uncontrollable “it speaks”. It undoubtedly owes its existence to a lot of spasmodic and cold “engineers” such as Goebbels and Himmler. But it is also emerging as the product of an abject process of continuous creation. I am thinking here of a staggering passage in Klemperer’s book, when he mentions the neologisms forged by the workers in the factory where he worked. Neologisms which were sometimes used by the victim themselves and which, as usual, were meant to separate. In that case, the *Waschjuden*, the Jews who take shower after work, and the *Saujuden*, which literally means “Jew pigs”, who wait and wash themselves back home...<sup>11</sup>

It turns out that this radical operation of destitution or decentering of the speaking subject is at the heart of Foucault’s inaugural lesson. He takes up the notion of the author-function (of the text or of discourse) developed in several other texts, of the “author” considered as a changeable

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11 Klemperer, *Op. Cit.*, p.251.



and provisional text attribute. He argues that the “foundational subject” is nothing but a way to “elide discourse reality”.<sup>12</sup> Yet, the discourse is constantly what “carries out the event” (fait événement), as he says, because of its eruptive faculty, and as it is able to arrange ruptures and discontinuities. By contrast, our (Western) will to master this random discursive proliferation (the subject playing sovereign over its own discourse) is essentially manifesting a deep logophobia rooted in our culture...

However, here is also the threshold where Foucault and Klemperer once again brutally split. On the one hand, Foucault summons Nietzsche, Bataille, Artaud... to provide coherence to the indeterminate but stubborn nostalgia of a discourse released from any kind of order, a free fleeing speech, at the margins of the dense networks of power and regimes of truth. On the other hand, Klemperer faces this Medusa-like monster: a language broken free from the codes of civilisation, a drunk and mad language, staggering and rambling, holding a beacon in the streets of the city — not any city in his case, Dresden, a city of culture with a rich history...

It seems that, by definition, Foucault’s approach of the order of discourse excludes the teratological perspective which would be applied on an object like the LTI. But if it does not, if such a discursive machine, an ideologically ridden jargon, may need a kind of medical gaze (Klemperer as diagnostician of the madness of the nazified German language), it is only on an explicit political level: provided that for Foucault, Nazism, like Stalinism, is a “disease of power”.<sup>13</sup>

On that last point, their analysis clearly converge: both seek to make noticeable the obscure place where the desires of the subjects are coupling with the Nazi’s machine of terror. Klemperer writes multiple times in his journal about his disbelief in the enduring phenomenon of popular support for an iconic figure, the Führer, and not for a program or an ideology, this up to the end of the Nazi regime. These forms of belief and identification (“I believe in him”

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12 Foucault M., *Op. Cit.*, p.30.

13 Foucault Michel, “La philosophie analytique du pouvoir”, *Dits et écrits (Tome 3)*, Gallimard, Paris, 1994, p.535.

is the title of one of the most striking texts of the LTI<sup>14</sup>) seemingly convey an obscure desire for authority and for mindlessness, a propensity and an affect assimilated by the philologist to religious fanaticism. The corrupted language of the Third Reich is the cement of this sectarian and blinded “enthusiasm”.<sup>15</sup>

Likewise, Foucault criticizes the analysis of Nazism which exclusively focus on economical and social determinations; he puts emphasis on the subjective constitution of individuals whose desires have been captured and re-implanted in the networks of power. For him, the Nazi or totalitarian disease is related to the extreme intensification of the link between people’s desire and power, between games of desire and of power. “Nazism never once provided a pound of butter for people, it never gave anything but power”.<sup>16</sup> It is essentially a power to harm, but diffused among all:

When we think back to the power that an individual could possess under the Nazi regime as soon as he becomes a S.S. or a party member! One could actually kill his neighbor, appropriate his wife, his house! (...) As a matter of fact, contrary to what we usually understand as dictatorship, that is as the power of one alone, we could say that in such a regime the most despicable part of power, which is in a sense also the most exhilarating, is given to a considerable number of people.<sup>17</sup>

Even though Klemperer’s analysis seems more balanced, more inclined to highlight the irresolute inconsistencies of the regime’s friends and followers, being based on immediate observation, it still gives ground to Foucault’s argument: the potential persecutor is everywhere — he has the face of a S.S. organizing raids, of the police officer controlling tram passengers,

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14 Klemperer V., *Op. Cit.*, p.143.

15 On the association of enthusiasm and fanaticism, see Shaftesbury, “A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm, to My Lord\*\*\*\*” in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, vol.I, London, 1711, p.3-55.

16 An assertion made in relation to Louis Malle’s film *Lacombe Lucien*, in Foucault M., “Anti-rétro”, *Dits et écrits (Tome 2)*, Gallimard, Paris, 1994, p.655.

17 *Ibid.*, p.654.

of the foreman in factories, of the subaltern public officer ruling, at his own discretion, the destiny of “quarter-Jews” married to “Aryan” women...

Power here is not the “magnificent beast” mentioned by Foucault but a machine of death distributed in the hands of the mass.<sup>18</sup> In the end, the position of the survivor keeping record of his survival and the one of the genealogist inaugurating his chair at the Collège de France ultimately cannot overlap...

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18 Foucault M., “Le pouvoir, une bête magnifique”, *Dits et écrits (Tome 3)*, p.212.