

CRITIQUES OF 'TRUTH'

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Session abstract: Understandings of 'truth' arrived at both within society and within academia provide a critical intersection worthy of careful analysis. 'Truth' in Western society has traditionally been viewed as the matching of knowledge with objectively verifiable facts about the world. Thus, to find 'truth' is to discover a reality simply waiting to be uncovered. Yet critical scholarship has drawn attention to the intricate social process that underlies claims to 'truth.' Myriad voices of social actors, variously constrained and imbued with power, interact with one another to construct and authorize notions of what is true or not. This session explores the boundaries drawn around 'truth' - drawn both by social actors and scholars - to arrive at new intersections of understanding.

One site of interest is American political discourse, where 'truth' is not so much discovered as enacted. In a critique of 'truth' in politics, the first paper examines the performative acts that bring 'truth' into circulation. Speeches and interviews of the Bush administration and its critics are used to illustrate how intertextuality contributes to the construction as well as subversion of 'truth' claims. The author argues that while political actors view 'truth' as an objective reality to be discovered, analysts are best served by viewing 'truth' as a process that involves action.

Another site where 'truth' takes center stage is the university classroom. The second paper provides a critique of how 'truth' develops within management and business lectures. Based upon an ethnographic study of classes at a large public university, the author looks at the content of management lectures from the perspective of Bourdieu's 'authorized language' and discusses the relationship between 'authorized language,' the transmission of ideology, and 'truth'; as well as, the implications for interpreting such lectures.

Within society, social actors encounter constraints and mobilize resources as they report and contest the authoritative 'truth' of recognized experts. The third paper analyzes the voicing across several speech events in which the same results from a French sociological study about Portuguese immigrants are reported and contested. At issue is the way different participants, including a journalist at the Portuguese magazine *O Expresso* and a group of second generation Portuguese in France, first decontextualize and then recontextualize the findings of the study.

The fourth paper takes a different perspective by examining secretive knowledge. Specifically, the author looks at how this knowledge is a primary social tender among magicians in Paris, France. Through ethnographic research, the paper explores the social life of secrets and the predictable crises in their life cycle, from manufacture through processes of innovation,

circulation in networks of exchange, display in contexts of performance, and expiration by means of exposure.

Finally, historical 'truth' is a site of frequent contestation and scholars have often noted that accounts of the past are contaminated by present perspectives. The last paper provides a critique of these ideas by problematizing the very notions of 'past' and 'present' presupposed in them. Drawing from anthropology, history and field research in Mexico, the author argues that the 'pastness' of the past is actually an idea that underpins not just history but much of our knowledge and orientation within the world.

'Truth' in Political Discourse: A Theoretical Critique against the Backdrop of the 'War on Terror' Era

Adam Hodges (University of Colorado)

In American political discourse, the traditional notion of 'truth' as the matching of knowledge with objectively verifiable facts about the world largely dominates public ideologies as social actors in the political arena vie to uncover the 'truth' and wield it over opponents (e.g., did pre-war Iraq possess WMD?, did Osama bin Laden have links to Saddam Hussein?, did they collaborate in 9/11?). Yet 'truth' in these debates is not so much discovered as enacted. This paper examines the performative acts that bring 'truth' into circulation. My data come from speeches and interviews of the Bush administration and opposing voices, such as those involved in the 2004 election and more recent events such as the funeral of Coretta Scott King. Specifically, I attempt to illustrate how intertextuality (Bakhtin 1981) contributes to the construction of 'truth' through references to previously accepted understandings, and acts as a tool of subversion in the challenging of truth claims-e.g., through the quoting of past statements in light of new evidence. I argue that while political actors view 'truth' as an objective reality to be discovered, analysts are best served by viewing 'truth' as "a process, which requires action to be realized" (Duranti 1993:236; cf. James 1963[1910]:89, Foucault 1980:131, Rosaldo 1982:227). The enactment of 'truth' associated with the 'war on terror' discourse, therefore, is implicitly built out of prior assumptions used by political actors variously positioned in the diagram of power to produce, circulate and subvert political claims qua 'truth.'

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Truth, Lies, Damned Lies and Management Lectures: 'Authorized Language' and the Problem of Truth

Kenneth N. Ehrensall (Kutztown University)

On any day across the United States, as well as in some parts of Europe and the Pacific Rim, tens of thousands of university students sit in classrooms and listen to lectures on Management and Business. But what is the nature of these lectures? Are they problematic when it comes to the issue of 'truth'? This paper, based upon a year long ethnographic study of three sections of Introduction to Management taught at a large public university, will look at the problem of "truth" in the lectures that took place. The paper begins by making the argument that lectures in Management courses mimic the form of a sermon. With this insight, the paper continues to look at the content of Management lectures from the perspective of Bourdieu's analysis of 'authorized language.' The paper concludes with a discussion of the relationship between 'authorized language,' the transmission of ideology, 'truth'; and the implications for interpreting management lectures.

Contesting What the "Experts" Say: Second-Generation Portuguese Responses to their Portrayal in Elite Discourse

Michele Koven (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)

This paper addresses how people report and contest the authoritative "truth" of "experts." I analyze the voicing across several speech events where the "same" results from a highly publicized French sociological study are presented by participants with different interests. Specifically, I examine how second-generation Portuguese in France are reported about-as the objects of sociological inquiry by French and Portuguese elites. I then also examine how SGP actively contest their portrayal by these elites.

The first two speech events involve French and Portuguese elites' reports about the lack of social mobility of Portuguese migrants in France-that of a French sociologist, and that of a Portuguese correspondent for a weekly magazine. The next two speech events involve outraged responses to the first two events by a group of SGP. In the local diasporic media, these SGP took issue with the original study and the correspondent's article about it. To them, both reinforced stereotypes about their status in Portugal and France.

SGPs challenged the elites' authoritative reports, by attempting to appropriate elite registers of French and Portuguese social science and journalistic speech. They thus not only argued the content of the original reports, but tried to enact personas whose speech presented them as overcoming stereotypes as socially unsuccessful.

The paper therefore examines the institutional and sociolinguistic constraints participants encounter and the resources they mobilize as they de/recontextualize authoritative reported speech about them.

Amazing Secrets Revealed!

Graham Matthew (New York University)

Few groups value secrets more than entertainment magicians: secrecy is a basic precondition of magic performance, essential to producing the experience of illusion for an audience. At the same time (and as a consequence), secreted knowledge is a primary social tender among magicians themselves. Based on long-term ethnographic research on entertainment magic in present-day Paris, France, this paper explores the social life of secrets within a community of

people who adore them. Any magical secret faces a number of predictable crises in the course of its life cycle, which spans its manufacture through processes of innovation, circulation in networks of exchange, display in contexts of performance, and expiration by means of exposure. This paper focuses on several critical instances in which secrets are shared between magicians and, hence, openly revealed. As I hope to show, in these moments of revelation, a number of otherwise diffuse anxieties and beliefs about the nature of intellectual property are clearly expressed in a distinctively moral idiom of rights and responsibilities.

Past versus Present?: Critiquing Critiques of Historical Truth
Trevor Stack (University of Aberdeen, UK)

Truth has been a flashpoint within and across disciplines in recent years. One example is historical truth: Anthropologists have been quick to join the chorus that accounts of the past are contaminated by present perspectives. I critique that critique of historical truth by interrogating the notions of "past" and "present" that it presupposes. Even though it plays up the role of the present in their study of the past, it still reproduces the division of past and present made by historians themselves. We cannot take this for granted. When, after all, did the past stop and the present start? It is also too cosy a critique for ethnographers, because it leaves untouched their own claims to truth in an ethnographic present. I conclude by arguing that the pastness of the past is actually an idea that underpins not just history but much of our knowledge and indeed orientation within the world. In all this, I draw on materials from academic anthropology and history as well as from my field research in west Mexico.

Discussant
David Samuels (University of Massachusetts)