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## **Discourse, Meaning and Epistemic Burdens: The Sociocognitive Paradigm**

**Abstract:** Teun Van Dijk is one of the most prominent scholars in the field of discursiveness and also one of the boldest writers. A serious proof for the latter is the fact that Van Dijk continuously revises his work in the midst of an incessant desire to make it even more complex than before. Van Dijk’s prolific career as an author has been characterized by the fruitful idea of designing research devices for the study of discourse and society that keep the pace with the newest discoveries in cognitive science and social psychology. Van Dijk’s message to this particular scientific community was that if we want to know more about the connections between discourse, ideology, communication tools, knowledge and society, then we have to do a sustained refinement of our intellectual means. This comes down to both correcting our errors (such as the behaviourist fallacy) and being open to multidisciplinary study. In fact, his latest book (published in 2014, focusing on the relationship between discourse and knowledge) constitutes a strong assertion in this respect: Van Dijk recommends, from the very beginning of his work, a multidisciplinary approach to knowledge, making reference to more than ten research domains. My paper has, as its starting point, Van Dijk’s remark concerning the “vast amount of ‘knowledge of the world’ ” that people are supposed to possess when they are in a discursive situation. Using the example of a news report, Van Dijk shows how much information (and knowledge) is needed for a proper understanding of it, on the one hand, and how much more of that is needed in order to deconstruct it, on the other hand. Yet the reality of discursive interactions is nothing but a horizon of infinite combinations: people talk even if they don’t know anything about the subject, sometimes they get it right using their intuition, without knowing the details, sometimes the people in-the-know remain silent, while the fools open their mouths. How should we

understand the problem of epistemic burden within this frame? How much of this burden affects the context of understanding? And, finally, how can the sociocognitive approach help us get a clearer idea about the knowledge factor in the discursive acts?

**Keywords:** discourse, epistemic burdens, meaning, sociocognitive approach, knowledge

## 1. Introduction

Any serious inquiry about discourse has to offer a valid account of the underlying epistemic problems. Much work has been done in the past in order to both describe the various structures of conveying meaning and analyse the multitude of interactions between language and society. The semantic and the pragmatic approaches to discourse don't tell the whole story, renowned scholar Teun Van Dijk argues. We are in need of discourse epistemics, a research domain that would clarify better the details of the relationship between what we say and what we know. This is no easy task, since the researcher has to be very careful in drawing relevant conceptual distinctions and in selecting the main themes.

Let us begin with an example, namely an excerpt from an article published by Naomi Klein (2015) in the esteemed journal *The New Yorker*:

“Surely the Vatican press room has air-conditioning. Then again, ‘Laudatio Si’ makes a point of singling it out as one of many ‘harmful habits of consumption which, rather than decreasing, appear to be growing all the more’. Will the powers that be make a point of ditching the climate control just for this press conference? Or will they keep it on and embrace contradiction, as I am doing by supporting the Pope’s bold writings on how responding to the climate crisis requires deep changes to our growth-driven economic model – while disagreeing with him about a whole lot else? To remind myself why this is worth all the trouble, I reread a few passages from the encyclical. In addition to laying out the reality of climate change, it spends considerable time exploring how the culture of late capitalism makes it uniquely difficult to address, or even focus upon, this civilizational challenge. ‘Nature is filled with words of love’, Francis writes, ‘but how can we listen to them amid constant noise, interminable and nerve-wracking distractions, or the cult of appearances?’ ”

If we are to question ourselves about the epistemic problems raised by the (potential) understanding of this text, then we will have to tackle many aspects. First, we have to underline the quantity of presupposed knowledge that is implied in the text. From simple terms, understandable by almost any modern reader (“air-conditioning”, “nature”, “writings”) to more complex ones (“harmful habits of consumption”, “the powers that be”, “growth-driven economic model”), the text opens a narrative world that connects a lot of semantic areas. Moreover, in order to grasp the intention of the writer and the goal of the text, the reader must be minimally acquainted with the contemporary design of the themes discussed: capitalism, consumption, climate control and climate change, the role of an encyclical, the civilizational challenge. This usually translates in what philosophers of language have coined as “epistemic burdens”. The practical problem that derives logically from this stance (Do the readers really follow what the writer wants to say?) is solved simply by ways of targeting the public: usually, the readers of *The New Yorker* are highly educated people, with solid knowledge in the field of economy, society or public affairs. But the theoretical part of the problem remains a key element: how much epistemic burden can a reader take from his or her author?

Second, reaching a minimum understanding of the text implies intertextual experiences from the reader: one should read “Laudatio Si” if he or she wants to know exactly the reference of Naomi Klein’s utterances. It is, probably, necessary to consult also other encyclical writings or teachings of the church. Information concerning capitalism or the difficulties of climate control might also prove useful. Third, outsiders of the Catholic Church could experience a hard time trying to grasp every nuance of the importance of the Pope’s message and direction of speech. Fourth, the first part of the text is constructed around two main elements: irony and contradiction. In fact, the underlying contradiction is created only as a means to support irony, as Naomi Klein insists on the difficulty of setting an equilibrium between the ideology embraced and the reality of things: even if we support the cause of climate control, it is rather difficult to turn off the air-conditioning on a hot summer day. Along the problem of epistemic burdens, the above text raises the question of epistemic authority: on what grounds should we accept what the writer says? Is the position of editorialist good enough as a reliable source of knowledge? Should we ask for more than a simple assertion in order to qualify Klein’s takes as pieces of knowledge?

## 2. Epistemic Authority

For Van Dijk, a person can be seen as a source of knowledge if that person has either direct or indirect access to knowledge (Van Dijk 2014, 230). Such a person is accepted within a *knowledge community* (K-community) as a source of knowledge if that piece of knowledge has been acquired through actual experience or from a different source that is interpreted as being reliable. For instance, as Van Dijk (2014, 232) put it, “epistemic authorities may have a license to tell, but not always the obligation to tell, and sometimes they may have a moral obligation not to tell – if the fundamental principle of social cooperation also implies not to hurt recipients, unless higher-order social norms (or a judge, etc.) require one to tell anyway”. Beyond the principle of cooperation, Van Dijk also states the principle of politeness. One debatable expression is nevertheless present in Van Dijk’s account, namely the idea of “interactionally or morally inadequate” (2014, 232). When it comes to interpersonal interactions, Van Dijk warns us about the possibility of hurting the other. We have to avoid hurting the feelings of the other person, doing damage to his or her reputation, or putting the other in a dangerous position. This means that the use of knowledge (active or passive) entails responsibility for the people involved. Not only that it is mandatory for us to share our information in some special situations (in court, for instance), but it is also recommended that we speak up in many cases (family or work). As John Heritage noticed, we have to deal with both the problem of entitlement and the problem of responsibility: we are accountable for the things we say (Heritage 2011, 181-182).

Van Dijk assumes the position according to which knowledge is relative to a K-community (a group of individuals that share a collection of beliefs). Evidently, this means that another group of people might have a different take (hold other beliefs as being “the truth”, even the opposite) than the first one. Van Dijk doesn’t focus on what he calls “absolute, ‘true’ beliefs, independent of K-communities and of people who know and believe” (Van Dijk 2012, 587). He maintains that truth is linked to assertions and not to beliefs. Moreover, the problem of justification is solved by means of criteria which are interpreted as valid within a specific K-community. This entails the fact that in certain situations the criteria are carefully formulated (this should be the case for organizations), while in others they are tacit, nothing more than an expression of the common law.

One essential aspect of the relationship between discourse and knowledge is the fact that knowledge, within the boundaries of a K-

community, is taken for granted. This explains, on the one hand, a plethora of behaviours belonging to the members of a K-community and, on the other hand, helps us see the root of the consistent number of misunderstandings in such a community. The members of the K-community may think, for example, that the distribution of knowledge is evenly made and expect therefore that each piece of knowledge be acquired by any member. Such a distribution calls for the use of the long-term memory (Van Dijk 2012, 588) for each member of the K-community. But, we may ask, shouldn't we talk about a form of *collective memory*, also? In many communities, we do not come over this perfectly designed distribution, but we rather witness the existence of collective memory patterns. Sometimes, these patterns include the presence of people believed to be authentic sources of knowledge. In other cases, we only have proof of common knowledge without having any clue for ascribing a certain piece of knowledge to just one individual (ancient cultures, for instance).

Another interesting problem is raised by the situations in which we get to know something using the process of abstraction and decontextualization. Here, we transform a subjective experience (using mental models in our episodic memory) into something valuable and reliable. We can tell others about what happened to us and thus enlighten their own cognitive universe. But how does this individual stance relate to the K-community paradigm? It seems that this is a theoretical path in need of further clarification.

### **3. Context models**

During a regular conversation, the speaker has to maintain a certain level of simplicity in the producing of the communication signals in order to get some kind of response from the receiver. Otherwise, his or her message would remain unanswered. So, that means that on the one hand the recipient has to offer a form of interpretation (and inevitably projects elements of her own into the interpretation). But, on the other hand, this interpretation is not built out of nowhere, but (consciously or not) having in mind the constituents of the context.

Heritage's (2011, 182-183) insistence on the importance of context is matched by Van Dijk's own theories on the matter. Van Dijk has done a lot to clarify the problem of the context and has written extensive material. For instance, in his "Contextual Knowledge Management in Discourse Production. A CDA Perspective" (2005, 71-72) he points out that

“another well-known insight in the theory of discourse is that discourse production and comprehension is context-dependent. Although in many areas of discourse studies this is nearly as trivial an observation as emphasizing the role of knowledge cognitive psychology has largely ignored this aspect of discourse processing. In linguistics, discourse analysis and the social sciences, the role of context is extensively discussed, but without much explicit theorizing, and thus far without a single monograph on the theory of context”.

There is, Van Dijk thinks, an interface between social situations and discourse, and that is precisely the concept of *mental models*. Mental models are representations of objects in episodic memory (Van Dijk 2007, 290). Each time that people talk or listen to someone who talks they are in the process of constructing mental models that are suitable for that communicative situation. Evidently, there are semantic models (linked to the conveyance of meaning) and pragmatic models (they keep track of the relevant points in the discussion). Going one step further, Van Dijk claims that “context models are just a special case of the kind of mental models that define all our personal experiences and that control all the situations and interactions in which we participate” (2005, 75).

When we think about context, we have to keep in mind the fact that every context is both relative and partial. On the one hand, we can imagine a K-community for which a certain social situation does not represent the context of talk, while for another one that may be the case. On the other hand, people and communities use only limited parts of the social situations in their activity of constructing models. In this vein, we can accept Van Dijk’s thesis according to which mental models are not arbitrary even if they are subjective (2007, 293). This helps us understand the fact that in spite of the differences between the members of a K-community, there is nevertheless a degree of coordination in the case of the models involved. This functioning of the mental models is important, Van Dijk argues, not only for sociolinguistic reasons, but also for the mechanism of reproducing the social order. The emergence of rules, for instance, is related to the process of confrontation of (contextual) mental models. Labov (1991, 111) noticed that what we used to interpret as invariants (norms shared by the members of a certain linguistic community) are, in fact, in a constant state of transformation: “many elements of linguistic structure are involved in systematic variation which reflects both temporal change and extralinguistic social processes”. But, as Van Dijk showed (2012, 588), people seldom construct models that do

not fit the image presented above: as it is the case with fiction or fantasies, those models do not correspond to the known reality.

#### **4. A Few Questions**

Van Dijk tackles some of the problems related to the connection between knowledge and discourse. For instance, he talks about the types of knowledge (personal knowledge, but also about generic knowledge). Second, according to Van Dijk, we should take into account the sources of knowledge (Van Dijk 2014, 223) such as sensory experiences, communication (hearsay, testimony or reliable sources) and inference. Third, we have the themes of certainty, probability and shared knowledge. To these we have to add the distinction between old knowledge and new knowledge.

But he leaves, in my view, a lot of things aside. An important aspect, for example, is the difference between socially shared beliefs and knowledge. Should I use the word knowledge only in this weaker meaning (as something that holds true for a K-community) or should I be also preoccupied by what we mean by knowledge in science. For instance, I can imagine a community of speakers that has a cluster of socially shared beliefs that are plainly false. Moreover, while certain terms are clearly dependent on the K-community (justice, peace, love), others are technical in nature and require precise understanding (encyclical). We can go even further and introduce the Gettier problems that are bothersome for any philosopher: we can imagine a K-community within which all the members share justified true beliefs that simply aren't knowledge. Note that in this case, people get along fine, since their beliefs are true, but are not even close to our intuitive understanding of the word knowledge.

In the case of Naomi Klein's text, we might also invoke the old distinction between knowledge by description and knowledge by acquaintance. Someone might know how to use the air-conditioning without having any clue about the technical details. In fact, in the history of mankind we have witnessed many situations in which we knew how to do it, but we were unaware of the underlying mechanism. We have been D-communities rather than K-communities.

Also, I'm not sure if Van Dijk is right when he says that

“different discourse genres correspond to different mental representations. Personal stories in conversation typically express mental models of (complex) personal experiences, whereas news in media expresses public mental models of public events or the experiences of

news actors. These personal and socially shared models are in turn based on personal and social generic knowledge, typically expressed in expository discourse genres” (Van Dijk 2014, 225).

In some cases it might be true, but in others we simply put too much epistemic weight on the shoulders of the speaker (to paraphrase Devitt and Sterelny): someone could ascribe the very same meaning (corresponding to the very same mental representation) upon both hearing the word “crime” during the news bulletin and talking to a fellow citizen about what happened to her colleague in the metro station. Or, in Naomi Klein’s text, a reader could project his or her middle-class experience as a struggling entrepreneur in the process of understanding the phrase “growth-driven economic model”.

Moreover, Van Dijk seems to create a strong connection between the concept of sharing knowledge and the concept of accountability. I am personally not sure whether this step from discourse epistemics towards ethics is completely necessary for his approach. There is commonsensical evidence for the fact that words have consequences, but this does not entail the presence of the ethical concern in the very centre of the newly founded domain. Mental models, K-communities or contexts play their respective roles in the production of discourse, in the conveyance of meaning and in the distilling of knowledge. Therefore, it is natural to study the intricate aspects of the mechanisms involved. Any discussion, on the other hand, about knowledge and accountability should be clarified from the beginning by acknowledging the philosophical, political, cultural or moral presuppositions that constitute meaningful elements of the author’s standpoint.

## **5. Conclusions**

I agree with Van Dijk when he argues that

“it is plausible that the communicative functions of language have evolutionary advantage over other functions. Like other species, humans are able to communicate with conspecifics where to find food, to warn of predators or other dangers, convey emotions and so on. But only humans have non-indexical discourse that goes beyond the here and now, can tell stories about past personal experiences, account for them, engage in argumentation and communicate detailed plans for the future” (Van Dijk 2014, 224).



Even though discourse has many functions (such as cooperation, affiliation, solidarity or resistance – Van Dijk 2014, 224), Van Dijk rightfully focuses on information and knowledge. He had the good intuition of turning his attention towards the cognitive aspects of discourse, while he sensed that the elaboration of any general theory of text and talk could not leave the evolutionary aspects unmentioned. However, the complexity of non-indexical discourse is a pretty good indication of the fact that humans developed not only symbolic systems fit for better adaptation, but have been able to produce superior forms of communication, dedicated to the design of the future.

Conversely, the clarification of the relationship between knowledge and discourse has only witnessed its first steps. Only by integrating the core problems of epistemology in our discussions about society and cognition can we hope to draw a more comprehensive image. Van Dijk's efforts in the direction of cognitive sciences seems to be the right path, but knowledge wise, we still have a lot to learn.

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