# Ideology, Heteroglossia and Populism:

## Interpretive Frames in the Perception of Televised Political Debates

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In my paper I will present the methodological design of my new research project, entitled "Interpretive Frames in the Perception of Televised Political Debates". To delineate the central research problem let me first make some introductory remarks.

Among the conceptual foundations of Discourse Analysis is Wittgenstein's assertion from his "Philosophical Investigations" (1953), that "meaning is use", i.e. meaning is a by-product of social practice, and "the import of an utterance is its 'way of speaking'", while "the import of a 'way of speaking' is what it can be used to do, which possible actions it can accomplish." (Schegloff 1997: 179, citing Garfinkel 1967: 29) In this way meaning is closely tied to practices of signification which are part of distinctive social worlds and forms of living. Discourses are therefore defined as the "patterns of meaning which organize the various symbolic systems human beings inhabit" and which people use "to make sense to each other" (Parker 1999: 3). Wittgenstein's basic assumption also corresponds with "Foucault's (1969:49) maxim that discourses are practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak." (Parker 1999: 3). That in these opening remarks I could rely on citations from proponents of quite different schools of Discourse Analysis, from Conversation Analysis to Critical Language Studies, shows that this is indeed common ground.

Now let's keep in mind that meaning is always tied to language practices and the ideological "Weltanschauung" of distinctive social worlds when turning to the *conditions of symbolic politics*: When empirically analyzing any sort of political rhetoric and trying to assess the effects of these rhetoric in the struggle for political dominance and hegemony, we are always thrown back to one problem: that what for certain social or political groups counts as 'social knowledge', for others is pure ideology. Now in Discourse Theory this might not sound very problematic, but as a practical

problem of political rhetoric and its public perception it is, and this in a very fundamental way: The understanding of political utterances for public recipients is an inferential process dependent on the recognizability of certain ways of speaking which mobilize certain normalized assumptions as contextual presuppositions in terms of which these utterances are intended to be understood. But utterances and the inferences they carry can also be recognized as representing the way of speaking of another community of interpretation, a political party, position or a group different or even hostile to one's own. So the same inferential process responsible for understanding – where certain keywords, stereotyped pictures or recognizable clusters of thematisations evoke certain habitualised representations – can work the other way round, where this recognizability responsible for understanding mobilizes resistance to the hidden assumptions which otherwise make up for the argumentative core of political messages. And lets keep in mind that this normally concerns about two third of the population political actors address over the mass media, or more, who do not share their party affiliation, who recognize the rhetoric as a way of speaking carrying the ideology of a political opponent, and this recognition 'tilts' the evaluation of the whole representation. The mechanism of 'tilting' is also characteristic for how certain discourses, which are normalized in certain communities of interpretation, influence the processing of other, competing discourses and thereby limit the scope of what is 'sayable' in one community (see Gotsbachner 2001, where I have shown how normalised xenophobic discourse reframes - and thereby tilts - immigrants' own representations of self).

When we reflect that any political utterance distributed over the mass media is subjected to heterogeneous receptions and that this can be seen as a basic condition of symbolic politics, it is astonishing that the problem has not yet been accounted for in Discourse Analytic research designs. And many analyses of political discourse use materials from mass media and try to assess their effects in the symbolic political struggle over defining what is publicly regarded as relevant social problem or close-to-experience representation of social and political reality.

I am just about to start a research project which will convert the problem of sometimes radically different readings in different communities of interpretation into the basic topic under investigation. The 'Frame Project', which will engage a four-headed research team in Vienna for the next two years, will analyse political panel-discussions on TV-news and their influences on the interpretative orientations of various audiences. Our point of departure is exactly that it would be a mistake, thinking that an audience can perceive such a TV-news "programme as possessing a fixed and

unproblematic meaning, to which they *then* react in different ways. Rather determining the sense of a text and 'reaction' are inextricably and mutually related." (Wilson 1993: 8)

The central analytic concept of our research is the notion of 'interpretive frames', which in different disciplines, from cognitive science (Minsky 1975) to media studies (Gamson1993, Livingstone 1998, Scheufele 1999), has become a pivotal concept to reconstruct how the inferential processes of understanding actually work: the understanding of language (and the same counts for any meaningful performative action) is not working in an inductive way, where we receive the meaning of a speech or text in a word-by-word manner, like reconstructing a puzzle. Rather, the cognitive processing of language is a three step mechanism much more dependent on the *'Gestaltwahrnehmung'* of audiences, and the speed of how a sense of understanding is arrived at in everyday exchanges is explainable only in that way: by the use of certain key-words, thematisations or other recognizable elements of speech, even contextualisation cues inferred through prosody and rhythm (Gumperz 1996), speakers 'display' the contextual backgrounds in which their utterances are intended to be understood. In drawing on their memories audience members will select an interpretive frame to make sense of what is said by preliminarily bringing the elements into a meaningful order, adding particulars of background knowledge or other information, which is implicated or left out. Audiences will activate expectations of crucial elements to occur, because they know that they belong to this recognised frame and actively look for them while listening. If this crucial information is only hinted at or not given at all, the frame drawn upon from memory can serve to insert default-meanings of prototypical instantiations for the missing elements. In such a way the received string of speech is 'monosemised'. By the mechanism of framing we can explain the relatively smooth functioning of understanding in everyday talk in spite of incomplete, ambiguous and often inconsistent utterances, because the recognition or mobilisation of frames, as a constantly applied and revised process, inscribes an order into what would otherwise be inaccessible to cognitive digestion.

Even when people construct meanings which do *not* follow the speakers contextualisation cues and intended meanings, a framing paradigm helps us to explain how readings are arrived at through activation of audiences own interpretive resources, derived from knowledge frames people are socialised into, or which they gather from habitualisation by comparing actual ways of speaking to previously heard texts. Especially in making sense of politics or political discourse framing and reframing effects are an important device, because political events, measures and programmes are typically too complex, ambiguous and unknowable in their consequences to be assessed directly, and the mobilisation and alignment of frames is crucial to the antagonistic ways competing discourses

structure people's perception of a complex social and political world. Framing is therefore the central analytic concept in our research when trying to elucidate how audiences find their own way through antagonistic problem definitions, competing diagnoses of cause and effect, moral judgments and implicit remedies in determining, what they take on as appropriate, close-to-experience definitions of social reality. How they do this, is what we want to find out when we examine people's understanding of political panel discussions on TV-news programmes of the Austrian public broadcasting corporation (ORF).

We have chosen current political panel discussions on TV-news as our research topic for three reasons:

● Television has become the major medium of political representation, and - together with life-interviews - panel discussions on the news are among the rare opportunities where politicians can be present on the screen for longer than just a few sentences, so they can elaborate their concerns, aims or objections in a more direct manner, without being submitted to the editing practices of journalists.

● Live-discussions are appreciated by journalists and the public for their relative openness, because they seem to give a more authentic picture, compared to political speeches and to edited programs on TV. At least political actors cannot pre-structure their contributions to a discussion after a strategic plan in the same way like political speeches or their statements in an interview, and under the multiple challenges of narrating their stories, performatively representing themselves and reacting to their opponents they might involuntarily be forced to reveal their original motivations. For this reason political panel discussions have become a quite influential source of public opinion formation. And as these discussions are arranged in the Austrian news programmes mainly on current events, when politicians are given the first chance to present their interpretations and explanations of new developments, reports, decisions etc., they seem very fruitful to analyze how audiences make sense of the ongoing political game.

● Our 3$^{rd}$ reason for using live-discussions between competing political actors on TV-news is a theoretical one, because here we can find one general characteristic of political discourse in a way open to observation which otherwise is mostly only implicit and hidden: that any specific political discourse, in at least some of its main orientations, is always positioned against some other, competing political discourse in the struggle for public support, and the way how political actors try to reframe their opponents' positioning is often an important part of their symbolic strategy. I will come back to this point when giving examples of the right-wing populist Austrian Freedom Party.

Now let me say a bit about the concrete methodological modus operandi of our research project: Basically we will use current political live-discussions from the late-evening news of Austrian television which we will replay shortly after their original broadcasting to organic audience groups of different social and political background, and ask them to explain by themselves, what they have seen and how they make sense of it. Methodologically this procedure could be categorized as focus-group interviews of a strictly non-directive kind with tendentially homogenous, organic groups of television-audiences, using the TV materials as initial stimulus.

The audience groups will be 'organic' groups, this means groups which normally also are used to sit in front of the TV set and watch the news together, who know each other well, and the setting of the focus groups will be close to this original scenario, in the groups' own living rooms. The idea behind this arrangement is to engage participants' daily interactional and interpretational routines to promote our own research interests, by mobilising and using a social setting, the habitual and expectable interactional dynamics of which we know and are able to control, instead of pretending that there could be something like a 'neutral' situation of data collection. What we want to set in motion is the self-representation of participants as an 'organic' community of conversant interactors (*'eingespielte Interaktionsgemeinschaft'*), where a 'non-directive' mode of interviewing is facilitated by prompting them to jointly develop their thematisations, and the joint production is expected to provide for a potentially broader coverage and richness. It is very important that the data from these reception-focus-groups actually contain this quality of mirroring the participants' interpretive repertoires according to their own relevancies and associations of meaning and not those induced from an interviewers' questions.

The social and political background of participant groups will be wilfully selected from the very beginning, when we build up a stock of different possible audience groups to choose from when afterwards we have a current TV-discussion which we want to present to different audience groups. Class or social background and political affiliation to a certain party will be the main variables to choose from, age, gender and social setting in divisions of the urban/rural divide will be other factors to be taken into consideration. Especially in Austria the urban – rural divide is closely related to sometimes widespread reservations against politics, which sometimes results in a veritable weariness, where from the rural point of view politicians are mainly representants of the water-head Vienna, unable to understand their ways of living. So our audience-research-groups will be taken to a considerable degree from rural areas and the focus-group-interviews conducted in local dialect, which is also provided for in the research team. As it is obvious, that the quality of the data is very

much dependent on the quality of relations between researchers and researched, we will invest considerable effort into building up an atmosphere of trust and confidence where the participants are encouraged to present their political world views freely. So selecting our groups and building up a researcher-informant-relationship stable over several month will be guided by the methodological requirements generally accepted for conducting sociological field work in unfamiliar socio-cultural settings.

Whenever there is a political panel discussion on TV-news, we will record it, preliminarily analyse its upshot and replay it to three or four different audience groups within just a few days. Initially two of the groups selected will be matching the party affiliation of the two discussing political actors, while the other two might be selected in terms of other variables which seem relevant to the reception of what is discussed, but these criteria might change in the course of the research process. The research process is oriented to Grounded Theory, which means a process of theoretical sampling, where each round of data collection is followed by an immediate, preliminary analysis of the insights to be gathered from these data before deciding, which sorts of data should be collected in the next round, and thereby, step-by-step coming closer to the perspectives, problems and phenomena which are relevant for the theoretical questions of the research and which can be reconstructed from the empirical materials.

After what I have said before about the dangers of a pure product analysis of political discourse it might come unexpected that our research design nonetheless provides for the analysis of the televised panel discussions which we use for the audience-research-part of our study. Indeed, the analyses of these discussions will be quite detailed, combining a conversation-analytic methodology with a fine-grain reconstruction of how discussants try to cast the emerging socio-political conditions and events in their own interpretive frames. The analysis will pay attention to the close interrelation between activity structure and the constitution of meaning, and – in vein with the Conversation-Analytic framework – will orient to the political actors´ "constitutive communicative problems" of interactively trying to establish their interpretive frames (Gotsbachner 2008; forthcoming). Part of these are among others: 1• gaining at least basic control over the distribution of talking rights, 2• identity politics, which assert the participant roles of a speaker and of the opponent, deciding about competences, rights of definition and burden of proof,  or 3• occupying certain cornerstones of the discussion (like who is legitimately and credibly representing the rights and interests of certain disadvantaged groups, or who stands for an active solution etc.) and 4• creating a network of mutually supporting, pseudo-logical references between single statements, which support the

argumentative story-line of one's interpretive frame. The central elements, anyway, are definitions of social or political problems, because they are the core to which all rhetorical moves and arguments can be heard to be related, which allow for certain types of inferences and exclude others, make certain phenomena salient and let others fade into the background. The analysis makes it possible to 'observe' something like 'rhetorical domination' of one of the discussants in the seizure of talking opportunities, or in how discussants succeed building their own interpretative frame even around their opponent's representations and behaviour through "reframing" (Gotsbachner forthcoming), but it is always kept in mind that for audiences the alignment of interpretive frames is to some degree independent of who is felt to dominate the discussion, and conceding that one of the actors was rhetorically 'stronger' is not meaning that his or her definition of political reality is accepted. Still losses and gains within debates are dependent on the struggle for dominance influencing the social prestige of actors and the validity of positions, and successful performance on the level of activity structure is a necessary precondition for an actor to expand his or her possibilities and increase the demands on opponents to a degree that these could not respond to them satisfactorily within limited time.

To register a broad range of possibly influential aspects within these televised political debates this accuracy of analysing the TV-discussions will be necessary, even for the subsequent reception analyses. How certain discursive acts or depictions are interactively constructed or achieved, sometimes through the sophisticated rhetorical strategies of skilful political communicators, might not always be fully transparent to audiences, which build upon them to form their interpretations of what is going on. Studying how audiences either take up the interpretative accomplishments of actors in the discussion or "reframe" these interpretations of political reality, needs the ability to compare, and this is possible only by close analyses of both, the discussions themselves and the reception materials, and both in their own right. The methodological challenge lies in the subtle nature of reframing processes: even a minor change of aspects can trigger tilting effects and it is important to grasp their details.

In the discussions themselves we will also be able to analyse politician's rhetorical efforts to produce a 'frame resonance' (Snow et.al. 1986) by drawing on established interpretive frames which for certain groups of recipients are group-specific 'social knowledge'. Although culturally available interpretive frames are saturated with patterns of values, belief and perception, this does not prevent them from being highly adoptable or appropriable. In fact, while trying to construct a credible narration of current political events, political actors often use heteroglot rhetoric drawing on popular

topics of their opponents, which they appropriate to make their own specific framings plausible even for those parts of the public, who are not (yet) part of their electorate. The rhetorical character of such heteroglot rhetoric is accessible when comparing the political argument of the thereby constructed interpretive frame to the political orientation from which the element originally came. If heteroglot rhetoric actually succeeds to undermine the processes of audiences` recognition of ideologically coined discourses, which I referred to earlier, is an important question, fact is, that politicians can be observed to use such tactics quite often to normalize their interpretations of political reality. And to elucidate those processes, how political actors are able to establish their interpretational patterns beyond their 'logical' clientele or constituency (in terms of social background and party affiliation) will be of special importance, because there, where interpretive frames and their definitions of social roles, problems and conditions spread to the wider public and become dominant, one can expect to find a basic leverage point of social and political dynamics.

At the end of my presentation let me add some remarks about why I think that the insights we can gather from this research project will be relevant also for the political problems of right wing populism.

I have argued that the success of the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) under Jörg Haider has been built to a considerable degree on their ability to recruit protest voters from other political camps, the conservative bourgeois as well as the social-democrat camps (Gotsbachner 2003). I have always seen it as a failure of Discourse Analytic studies on the FPÖ to concentrate only on the xenophobic, anti-semitic, extreme-right discourses of Freedom Party politicians, and not to elucidate how their normalisation strategies worked, where they used a broad range of popular thematical issues appropriated from their opponents to reach a much broader clientele than normally receptible to the nationalistic right.

And one could observe that the populist freedom party was quite successful in enforcing something like an immunisation strategy against critics, and a big portion of their success was built on this immunisation strategy, that the voters and supporters of the FPÖ were not receptible to public criticism on the xenophobic or post-fascist remarks of the FPÖ-leaders, although many of them could not be regarded as directly xenophobic or ultra-nationalistic. "They are against him because he is for you" was a slogan typical for Haiders' immunisation strategy, where 'they' was the 'political establishment', and over ten years later the current FPÖ-leader Strache now has recycled this slogan for his ongoing election campaign. How this immunisation strategy functions, is an important

question in dealing with the populist right. One could even speak of a political alchemy, where Haider explicitly turned the critic of his opponents against themselves and used it for creating his own distinct image as someone standing outside of the 'rotten political game'. Regularly he also used the media's exited attention after his calculated taboo-breaking provocations to spread his messages, where he always tried to normalise his initiatives as being in line with common political programs.

In an interview an Austrian writer recently said that most intellectuals nowadays have resigned to speak publicly against right-wing populism, or against the regular provocations from this side, because they became aware, that in their critique they never have reached the voters and supporters of the FPÖ. Now in our Frame Project one of our efforts will be exactly to develop an understanding of the reading formation of protest voters which are supporters of right wing populism. This understanding might contribute to opening up ways for political engagement, too.

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