

Uses of the Idiom: Gauging the Heuristic Value of a Liminal Concept

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Andreas Langenohl, Nicole Falkenhayner, Michael W. Nau, Johannes Scheu

1 General Objectives of the Research Group „Idioms of Social Analysis“

The interdisciplinary research group „Idioms of Social Analysis“ is part of the Center of Excellence “Cultural Foundations of Integration” at the University of Konstanz. Its aim is to trigger cross-disciplinary discussions about the conditions of knowing and representing the social world, about the reinsertion of social analyses into the “objects” they study, and about the contribution of social analyses to social and cultural integration and disintegration in a historical and contemporary perspective:

Aufgabe der Nachwuchsgruppe wird es sein, neue soziologische und wissenschaftliche Forschungsperspektiven zu erschließen, die unterhalb der Schwelle ausgearbeiteter geistes- und sozialwissenschaftlicher Methodologien ansetzen und stillschweigende Vorverständigungen der Wissensbildung in den Blick nehmen, wie sie in Metaphern, Leitbegriffen, bloß implizit legitimierte Untersuchungsformen oder in gattungstypischen Darstellungsweisen eingelagert sind. (Cluster-Antrag, 56)

The group has taken up its work in January 2008. Presently it consists of four members, among them three Ph.D. students, whose backgrounds comprise comparative literature (Michael W. Nau), English literature (Nicole Falkenhayner), and sociological theory (Johannes Scheu, Andreas Langenohl). The interdisciplinary orientation and composition of the group is due to two interrelated reasons:

First, social analyses are by no means a prerogative of sociology or the social sciences. Instead they have been put forth in varying academic and non-academic contexts. For instance, society is made subject to analysis in literary works and their respective readings in literary criticism and theory just as well as in history, political science, philosophy, anthropology, and journalistic and political discourse. The history of social analysis is full of examples showing that concepts and interpretations from one discursive field were taken up in other discourses and unfolded a cross-fertilizing potential. One of the aims of the group “Idioms of Social Analysis” is to exemplarily track such cross-references.

Second, different disciplines in the humanities and social sciences have developed different interpretive instruments in order to make social analyses subject to analysis themselves, and whose interrelations still awaits exploration. Sociology has fanned out a whole plethora of concepts that make social analyses subject to investigation under the labels of “sociology of (scientific) knowledge.” In history, its correlate has been mainly the sub-discipline of “history of concepts”. Literary studies (and some areas of history) have turned their attention toward social analyses in fictional texts, or as fictional texts, through narratological concepts. Cultural and social anthropology have problematized the notions of “society” and “cultures,” and with them their

methodological premises. Important currents in political science move from “realist” approaches, which traditionally centered on power and the access to scarce resources, to a more interpretive paradigm termed “interpretive policy studies.” Non-academic discourses shuffle concepts developed in different academic disciplines, insert them into their own styles of representation and narration, and in their turn feed back into academic debates.

As a first approximation, thus, the category “idiom” may be understood as an umbrella term to denote all those particular ways of making social analyses the objects of investigation. How are these idioms interrelated? Which “traveling concepts” (Bal 2002) interconnect them and at the same time delineate them from each other? And how do those analyses reinsert themselves, or are embedded in, the “object” that they investigate? In other words, how were and are “societies” implicated in the analytical vocabulary that was and is developed to make them subject to investigation?

However, in order not to give away the heuristic potential of the notion of the idiom, we found it necessary to discuss it in more detail and with respect to its academic and non-academic uses. The present paper will give an overview over these discussions, in that it first proceeds from a bibliographical report on uses of the category of the idiom (section 2) in order then to suggest a strategy of unfolding the heuristic potential of the concept (sections 3-5).

2 Academic and non-Academic Uses of the Idiom

As the research group is particularly interested in the ways that social analyses are culturally interconnected with what they study, discussing the term “idiom” would naturally presuppose to look at the ways in which this term is itself part of the social imaginary. However, apart from a few uses in the context of anthropology of the sciences (http://www.dur.ac.uk/anthropology/research/projects/project_details/?mode=project&id=381), intercultural communication and interethnicity research (Formoso 2007), and indeed transcultural psychiatry (Hollan 2004), the notion does not have the same currency as other social-scientific or humanistic categories like, for instance, “discourse.” As concerns theorization, one encounters a similar situation: the notion of the “idiom” has not been made subject to much theorization, nor is the debate very much interlinked and internally structured.

In view of the largely absent basic research on the notion of the idiom, any attempt at giving a systematized overview over the uses of the term of necessity produces scientific artifacts. Still, this non-debate is not completely without any references, implicit allusions, or at least coincidences. In linguistics, to begin with, “idiom” functions as an element in a series of terms like argot, jargon, idiolect, sociolect, phraseology etc. which indicate deviations from a linguistic norm and/or from the literal meaning of expressions. There are three characteristics of idioms, or idiomatic expressions, in the linguistic sense: (a) socio-linguistically spoken, the use of idioms is an effective way of (self-)delimitation of a group of speakers from others, and is therefore connected to identity formation; (b) the variability of expressions (word order and substitutability) is frozen in idiomatic expressions; (c) it is precisely the latter characteristic that enables idioms to generate a surplus meaning (a “figurative” meaning, Jaeger 1999: 245-6) beyond the sum of their individual parts. This, as one might phrase it, symbolic excess is understandable only through reference to historical semantics, that is, by way of reconstructing earlier uses of different idioms and possibly the point of transformation where a once “literal” expression became figurative.

This linguistic understanding shares some features which deconstruction, which views idioms as traces of paradoxes of their social and cultural uses. For instance, an analysis of a given linguistic idiom surrounding the world field "gift" brings to light the contradictory social ways of giving gifts which are constitutive of the meaning of "gift" (Derrida 1994). Unlike discourse analysis, which aims at reconstructing the rules of given discourses and (sometimes) their societal institutionalization as a generative force in producing that discourse, the notion of the idiom in deconstruction refers to the (historical) sedimentation of uses of language, thus indicating their constitutive paradoxes. The argument that the idiom is a symbolic excess (which linguistics frames as a result of the arrest of syntagmatic and paradigmatic shifts) is in deconstruction broadened and applied to whole language systems. For instance, the fact that the verb "to give" cannot be used intransitively like the verb „to rain“ is seen to signal a structural outside of a given language which thus turns it into an idiom.

It is at this point that Bernhard Waldenfels's interpretation of Derrida intervenes. According to Waldenfels, deconstruction itself is a „philosophisches Idiom, das sich durch Singularität auszeichnet und sich darin einer jeden Systematisierung verweigert.“ (Waldenfels 2005: 303, emphasis in the original) „Singularity“ indexes a phenomenological undertow present in deconstruction: as it moves from one text to the next, its move crossing them out though leaving them present, it remains for itself in actu undeconstructable. That is, deconstruction presents itself as being a singularity which escapes, or is always prior to, a systematicity that it constantly produces in its move from one crossed-out text to the next. Thereby, according to Waldenfels, the reproach of textualism which deconstruction is regularly confronted with is rendered obsolete (Waldenfels 2005: 305) because „die Sprache sich in der Erfahrung selbst vorausgeht“. In other words, prior to each text there is a speaking/reading which cannot address itself as text.

This phenomenological critique and differentiation of deconstruction sets the stage for Waldenfels's own use of the "idiom," in which the notion stands in for a radical distinction between "own" and "other" meaning, exemplarily rendered through the confrontation of mother language and acquired language. The mother language (= idiom) not only provides speakers with a taken for granted horizon of meaning whose structure does not have to be reflected in order to orient their action, but also introduces the speakers into the paradigmatic way of orientation in the world, which, according to this argument, is language. The idiom thus stands in for the principle/possibility of language use. In contrast to that, second language acquisition establishes an over-systematized relation between speaker and language which systematically leads to misunderstandings in actual language use (Waldenfels 2005: 318-321; cf. also Schuetz 1944). The distinction between idiom (as the positive condition of language) and language (as its own over-systematized misrepresentation) determines the frame conditions of comparisons between different idioms, because such comparisons cannot rely on some "meta-language" (which, as language, misses the essence of the idiom) but must insert themselves into an infinite translation between idiom and language. These dynamics between idiom and language can be extended to areas beyond the strictly linguistic problematics like, for instance, enculturation, cultural domination, or so-called "intercultural communication."

The notion of the idiom, though, might also be attributed a more immediate relevance for the constitution of and preconditions for the possibility of social analyses. In this regard it has been used in rather varying, and mostly independent from each other, manners which point to some problems connected with the possibility of social analysis. To begin with, Waldenfels's (2005: 297-309) interrogation of Derrida's use of the idiom indicates that every understanding presupposes a familiarity with the abstractness of language that has been gained through a

particular and particularizing language use which he calls “idiom.” This problematization implicitly connects up to the earlier use of the term by Michael Oakeshott (1975: 1-32), who introduces the term “idiom of inquiry” in order to identify the preconditions of scientific knowledge. Yet Waldenfels also departs from Oakeshott insofar as he is concerned with the preconditions of knowledge and language in general. While for Oakeshott an “idiom of inquiry” – that is, a certain academic discipline composed of a set of systematized categories – is indispensable in identifying a certain object as an object of inquiry that then can be explored within the framework of the categories that count as pre-given, for Waldenfels the idiom stands in for the principle that makes it possible to arrive at abstract categories through their particular uses in the first place. A third way of inserting the idiom into the practices of knowledge-production, which extends from the phenomenological into the social and political dimension, is hinted at by Gayatri Spivak (2003: 52; 2008). Against a universalizing and totalizing discourse about non-Europe, which according to Spivak characterizes most social-scientific and area studies writing about those areas, she proposes a comparative view on literatures that proceeds from their radical idiomaticity which displaces any easy comparison. Instead of inaugurating a new disciplinary paradigm, the existence of diverse “cultural idioms” serves as a platform from which Comparative Literature can ironically subvert, and thus differentiate, the totalizing discourses and abstractions about “other cultures.”

3 The Idiom: Definition vs. Liminality

This stocktaking, far from being a contingent list of uses characterized by a mere equivocality of the term under discussion, reveals that, compared to alternative concepts like “discourse,” “language,” or “identity,” there is a clear lack of theoretical rigor in most uses of the notion of the “idiom” in social analyses. This observation invites two possible readings. On the one hand, it may resemble a call for conceptual clarification. On the other hand, this lack may express a certain paradoxical functionality: the heuristic value of the concepts may reside precisely in its absent conceptual refinement so far. In other words, “idiom” may signal the problematization of the preconditions and predicaments of knowing, analyzing and representing the social precisely because it escapes any easy and clear-cut definition.

The following section will exemplify this alternative through interrelating the category of the “idiom” with that of “discourse.” In many social analyses the categories of “idiom,” “discourse,” or “language” are used more or less interchangeably (s. Mehan/Wood 1975, Rosaldo 1989). Still, as the deconstructive and phenomenological contributions mentioned above demonstrate, an idiom cannot be reduced to a discourse in the sense of a set of generative rules aimed at producing legitimate knowledge. Does this call for a confrontation and comparison of the two terms with the ultimate aim of defining the categorical content of “idiom”?

Let us outline two alternatives more clearly. On the one hand, one might, proceeding from the obvious difference between the concept of “idiom” and that of “discourse,” make an attempt at a further systematization and refinement of the former term. On the other hand, one might alternatively probe the notion of the “idiom” as a liminal category that renders palpable limits to the notion of discourse, and thus circumscribes the working of the latter term in the first place. While the first strategy would take the seeming under-theorization of the idiom as an impulse to work toward a more stringent and coherent definition through a neat distinction between “discourse” and “idiom, thereby presuming their symmetry, , the second strategy would rather embrace the non-paradigmaticity of the term as an irritating force that puts into question

paradigmatic concepts because it remains asymmetrical to them. In the remainder of this paper we shall outline possible consequences of these two heuristic strategies, exemplarily referring to the relation between “idiom” and discourse.”

4 Exemplification: “Discourse” vs. “Idiom”

From a formal-phenomenological viewpoint, the idiom is not absorbed in language-as-discourse but is, in a way, opposed to language-as-discourse, because it operates as the epitomizing and enabling condition of the principle of language. Idiomatic language use is distinguished from all other language use by its capacity to introduce the speaker into the very functioning of language as a fundamental way of relating oneself to the meaningful world (the mother language), while the apprehension of second and all further languages rather stand in for the ability to move within the meaningful world. In other words, from a phenomenological viewpoint idioms are the positive condition of discourse without being reducible to it. What consequences will such a characterization of the relation between idiom and discourse have in the two alternative strategies outlined in the last section?

On the one hand, any attempt to deduce a paradigmatic notion of the idiom from its distinction from the concept of discourse will soon face problems, because the two notions might turn out to be merely different vistas on a common phenomenon. If discourse denotes a set of institutionalized rules that generate and legitimate knowledge, and thereby also subjects both knowing and known, using “idiom” will reveal merely the phenomenological preconditions for the functioning of discourse: namely the making familiar of the subject with that set of institutionalized rules that then legitimate forms of subjectivity. In other words, what follows from such a strategy of symmetrically delineating “idiom” from “discourse” is precisely not a notion of the idiom in its own right but rather one heavily leaning toward the concept of discourse, the consequence being that it may easily be discarded on the grounds that it is always-already “implied” in discourse-analytical methodology or simply belongs to another methodological and theoretical vocabulary.

The alternative to such self-relativization of the “idiom” facilitated by attempts at systematizing it vis-à-vis “discourse” consists in probing its potential to problematically intervene into the – by now, mostly taken for granted – self-sufficiency of the notion of discourse:

First, the functioning of discourse is mostly held to presuppose a certain coherence of the structural relations of the regulative elements constituting it. From the point of view of the phenomenological use of the idiom, this is problematic insofar as the working of language in everyday use consists precisely in its glossing over blatant contradictions and incoherencies that usually remain pre-reflexive and come into view only for Schuetz’s (1944) “stranger,” who must acquire the idiom through conscious reflection and training and precisely through such reflection misses the idiom’s logic that operates on a pre-reflective level.

Second, while discourse represents a “totalizing force” (Lamarre 2004) which stands in relation to processes of modernization-as-forced-universalization, idioms stand in for a logic of locality and particularity in which the general meaning of articulations is not achieved through their self-proclaimed totality and deductive logic (as in discourse) but through their taken for granted self-evidence. Let us refer to a prominent and early instance of this understanding: Evans-Pritchard (1937) describes the Azande “idiom” of witchcraft not as a coherent set of generative meaning rules but as a mode of sensemaking that retroactively puts a fictive coherence over events that

contradict it from the perspective of the “stranger” (here, the ethnographer). The generality of worldviews is thus not to be seen as derived from a discourse that pretends to be universal and without an Other (Evans-Pritchard notes that his informants were quite aware that there exist alternative worldviews) but from a chain or series of sensemaking practices that organize the fiction of coherency (s. the discussion in Pollner 1974).

Finally, this puts a limit to a seemingly all-encompassing notion of discourse which, in the times of self-proclaimed globalization, lacks the conceptual tools to ward off the drive to transpose itself onto the global level, thereby glossing over localized differentiations.

Examining the emergent narrative in the press and official statements following each in an analysis of events of terrorism in Madrid in 2005 and London in 2007, Falkenhayner and Nau (2008) tested the notion of the idiom as asymmetrical to the structural closure of the notion of discourse. Examining the emergent narrative in the press and official statements following each event, we tried to locate the prominent topoi of those narratives considering their figuration of a transnational “foe”.

While these reactions to al Qaeda-inspired events of terrorism were not necessarily intended to disrupt the pretensions of universality implicit in the presumably “global” discourse of a “war on terror”, as when a critique of a political discourse is made, this effect was nonetheless produced as the surplus of simultaneous appropriation and localization. On the one hand, the discursive interlinking of each event (9/11, the Atocha station and London bombings), through the concatenation of violence, terror, actors, and objects, conditioned each instance as a “global” phenomenon. On the other hand, the interpretive moment after the event – constellated through the disparate matrices of language, history, and political ephemera – affected localizations of this discourse. In the passage of the putatively universal (a discourse) through the local (an idiom), totality and uniformity was not produced; instead, the circulation of the local in the universal appeared as a series of extruding irregularities, allowing departures from the nowhere of the discursive instantiation of the war on terror. The idiom, in this analysis, functioned like a marker of the “location of locality”, which pointed to the singularity of the description of specific events in specific places, which undercut or interrupted the positioning of a “totalizing” discourse even while moving within it. We tried to show here how local framings of contexts undercut a “fiction of coherence”.

Falkenhayner’s and Nau’s investigation demonstrates that the term of the idiom can be fruitfully deployed without necessarily giving it an ontological reference. Instead, the idiom comes into view as a specific (in this case, journalistic) mode of social analyses that constitutes itself only by way of appropriating, and at the same time rendering problematic, a totalizing discourse. The notion of the idiom is therefore a concept which is as relational as it is asymmetric: It gains its (meta-)analytical power from a displacement of another term, namely that of discourse. While most (post-)structuralist uses of the latter category implicitly deduce the totalizing power of discourse from a certain theoretical and/or methodological vantage point, the reconstruction of the working of the idiom transposes the seat of this power from the deductive to the empirical or inductive level. The totalizing gesture of the discourse on terrorism comes into view only in its localized subversions by idiomatic uses.

5 The Idiom and the Problem of Comparisons in Social Analyses

This final section will summarize the discussion and give an outlook on the subversive potential of the term “idiom” that might be realized if one refrains from attempting to define it in a clear-cut fashion. The confrontation between “idiom” and “discourse” has demonstrated that the former term renders the latter one problematic in a number of ways which exemplify how the notion might be inserted into research projects that deal with the preconditions of social analyses.

First, “idiom” refers to a mode of meaning which escapes categorization according to a universalizing linguistic model or an equally totalizing logic of discourse. Especially the phenomenological use of the term demonstrates that “idiom” is that principle which makes possible totalizing representations (language/discourse) precisely through its particularity (the concrete process of acquiring concrete languages).

Second, idioms produce meaning in a way irreducible to the working of discourse or language-as-discourse. In extension of the linguistic argument that idioms produce a “surplus” meaning exceeding the semantic “sum” of their parts through a syntagmatic and paradigmatic arresting of their parts, one might say that the idiomaticity of social analyses points to “imaginary” (in Charles Taylor’s [2002] sense) meaning arising from the practices of social analysis which cannot be reduced to the relations between the sequences and structures that make up those practices.

Third, idioms “localize” discourses, thereby interrupt them and circumscribe their totality. If discourses are mostly conceived of as globalizing and totalizing, idiomatic appropriations of them re-render the “meaning” of those discourses and at the same time, through remaining asymmetrical to them, undermine their very totalizing gesture.

Finally, the confrontation of the logic of discourse and logic of idiom, which, as should be kept in mind, serves only as an exemplary discussion about the heuristic value of the concept, points to a more fundamental point that highlights the interrupting potential of the notion and thereby its productivity for investigations into the preconditions of social analyses in general. If discourses are made palpable only through idiomatic localizations, and are at the same time undermined with respect to their universalizing and totalizing power, this has consequences for the possibility of comparison as a most fundamental practice in social analyses. To stick with the above mentioned example of different 9/11 idioms of terrorism in the Spanish and British context, it would be pointless to merely compare those idiomatic uses with each other because they constitute themselves in active interrelation with each other and delineation from one another. In other words, they already are a result of an implicit comparison.

Obviously this argument renders problematic the whole logics of comparison as an instrument in social analysis: if an idiom is an actualization/subversion of a discourse, any comparison between them is problematic precisely because their interrelation is already the result of an implicit comparative practice. In order to be able to compare something which is already the product of an implicit, and for that matter displaced, comparison (Harootunian 2004), the term of the “idiom” might serve as a reminder that comparison presupposes translation (Spivak 2003: 38) and amounts to “ein endloses Dolmetschen” (Waldenfels 2005: 321).

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