



Koschut, S., Hall, T. H., Wolf, R., Solomon, T., Hutchison, E. and Bleiker, R. (2017) Discourse and emotions in international relations. *International Studies Review*, 19(3), pp. 481-508.

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Deposited on: 2 May 2017

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## Rethinking Productive Power through Emotion

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Power has long been one of the key conceptual anchors around which IR's debates have cohered. Whether material power in realist terms, institutional power in liberal terms, normative power in constructivist work, or linguistic power in post-positivist theories, power offers a medium for facilitating conversation across schools of thought (Berenskoetter 2007). Although one of the reasons for power's centrality to the field is its multidimensionality, my concern here is with developing post-positivist formulations. Eschewing essentialist frameworks, this work views power not in classic terms of brute force, but rather as *productive* of social relations. As detailed by Barnett and Duvall (2005), Campbell (1998), Epstein (2008) and others, productive power is the capacity to shape agents' self-understandings and perceived self-interests. Rather than merely describing pre-existing states of relations, language actively constructs identities, self-perceptions, and social relations.

Yet, the concept of productive power falls short in some crucial ways. While most post-positivist scholars focus on language as the primary medium of productive power, current accounts leave open at least two questions. First, what precisely is productive power *productive of*? While it is clear that language produces meanings and identities, they are not *merely* linguistic. Rather, they are infused with emotional attachments and affective orientations. Current models of productive power do not adequately account for how language is continually implicated in emotions. Emotions are *also* key effects and aspects of productive power that are in need of unpacking.

A second question follows from this. What is it about language that does the *work* of production? If language is productive (and not merely descriptive) of social relations, then this likely entails an affective component that accounts for how some instances of language become efficacious and some do not. Put differently, something must explain how some instances of language viscerally resonate or

“stick” (Ahmed 2004) with audiences, beyond the fact of their mere verbal utterance and social construction. It is not the mere utterance of discourse that accomplishes this production. If this were the case, then every instance of discourse would be equally influential or hegemonic, which is clearly not the case. We should view language as overlapping with emotion in intimate ways if we are to more fully understand how some discourses become powerful symbolic sites of emotional investment on the part of audiences. Considering these two questions speaks not only to theoretical questions surrounding what constitutes emotions and how they are expressed through discourse, but particularly their effects on relations and constitution of power (Koschut, this forum). Language and emotions blend together to do the political *work* of social production, and so can help us to more comprehensively understand the many kinds of effects emotions have in different contexts.

This essay outlines a reformulation of productive power with insights from the contemporary affective turn in IR and social theory. Affect and emotion, it is argued, are deeply implicated in the social construction process (Koschut 2016, this forum), and are therefore key components in the workings of power. The essay suggests that language needs an affective element if it going to efficaciously produce meanings and identities.

### **Productive Power in IR**

In their typology of power in IR, Barnett and Duvall (2005:43) define productive power as “the socially diffuse production of subjectivity in systems of meaning and signification” (2005: 43). Productive power “concerns discourse, the social processes and the systems of knowledge through which meaning is produced, fixed, lived, experienced, and transformed” (Barnett and Duvall 2005:55). Here, discourses do not merely describe pre-existing social relations, but actively constitute those relations (Campbell 1998:4). Discourses set the boundaries for the possible, rendering some things “thinkable” while excluding others to be considered beyond the pale (Bleiker and Hutchison, this forum; Epstein 2008). The analysis of such categories draws attention to the power relations sustaining what is taken for

granted in world politics, and in doing so open up space for new ways of challenging existing power relations.

Yet, the two questions mentioned above arise when examining productive power from an affective perspective. Developing these two lines of thought offers some initial steps toward an outline of a re-conceptualized productive power that more effectively incorporates emotional dimensions.

*What exactly is language productive of?*

This question suggests not only that IR's current models of productive power are insufficient in understanding issues surrounding emotion and affect. It is also to raise the possibility that the notion of power itself is infused with emotion to a much greater degree than IR has so far acknowledged (Solomon 2014).

In one sense, to ask this question is to challenge one of the prevailing dichotomies in recent social theory on affect, emotion, and discourse. Theorists such as Massumi (2002) draw rigid distinctions between affect, emotion, and discourse. For Massumi (2002:35), affect is "autonomous," a pre-conscious, automatic response rooted in the sensory and neurological systems of the body. Affect is seen to "happen" before one is consciously aware of its effects. Emotions, on the other hand, are captured and given meaning within language. Affect becomes emotion when it is expressed within discourse. Discourse and affect, consequently, are separated and cannot coincide by this definition.

Although there are indeed experiences that fit with this framework (such as trauma, see Edkins 2003), the politics of affect, emotion, and discourse are likely more complex than this most of the time. Developing more intimate links between them would go a long way towards a more comprehensive understanding of the emotional dimensions of productive power. Discourse produces not only meanings and identities, but also emotional effects which can infuse and strengthen meanings and identities. One need only point to the example of US President Donald Trump, whose discourse produces a range of emotional effects and investments across the political spectrum (Koshcut, this forum).

This line of argument follows recent IR research developing links between discourse and emotion. For instance, Van Rythoven (2015) reconceptualizes securitization theory to more fully account for how securitizing speech acts both evoke and elicit emotional responses. For him (2015:466), securitizing moves succeed “by eliciting culturally specific fears whose emergence hinges upon the appraisal of recognizable memories, identities, images, metaphors, and other tropes to construct a plausible, yet anxiety inducing, future.” Ross (2014) argues that discourse is a key medium through which affects can be transmitted. “Discursive media of various kinds – news media, political speeches, literature, film, and so on – transmit symbols, identities, narratives, and other emotionally significant constructions” (Ross 2014:31). Solomon (2015) similarly argues that different types of discourse shape emotional desires for stable subjectivity in different ways.

Other scholars across the social sciences similarly develop frameworks that view discourse as productive not only of linguistically-constructed identities and meanings, but also various kinds of affective structures, conditions, and orientations. In human geography, Anderson (2014) offers two points in this regard. First, rather than asking about how accurately discourse may or may not capture affect, the key question is instead one of paying attention to how affect, emotion, and discourse are composed together in ever-shifting ways in actual practices (Anderson 2014:60). Second, affect is not some mysterious phenomena that discourse invariably fails to fully capture. Rather, “representations are themselves active interventions in the world that may carry with them or result in changes in bodily capacity or affective conditions . . . [Representations] have an expressive power as active interventions in the fabrication of worlds and are integrated alongside other discursive and non-discursive elements” (Anderson 2014:60). The effects of a discourse are not only (re)constructed meanings, but also involve the power to shape peoples’ feelings towards, involvements with, and affective investments in such meanings and the orienting roles they play in peoples’ lives. Some affect theorists develop this to the extent that they view politics itself as mostly concerned with the elicitation, management, and channeling of affects. In this sense, Berlant (2005) proposes an understanding of the “national political

sphere not as a real or ideal scene of abstraction-oriented deliberation, but as a scene for the orchestration of public feelings – of the public’s feelings, of feelings in public, of politics as a scene of emotional contestation.”

*What is it about language that does the **work** of production?*

If discourse is indeed productive and constitutive of social relations, something beyond mere verbal utterance or articulation must account for how some instances of discourse become more prominent or efficacious than others. A number of theorists in social and political theory suggest that if language is productive, then it must entail an affective component that helps to account for the power of how some discourses gain legitimacy, and hence hegemony, over others.

Ernesto Laclau (2005) has explored this question by considering the overlaps between discourse and affect. Laclau argues for the necessity to explore how discourses resonate with audiences beyond analyzing their socio-historical contingency as such (Solomon 2014). Here Laclau draws a key distinction between “form” and “force.” For him (2005:110), current approaches to discourse and productive power focus mainly on reconstructing the discursive “forms” or structures of identities produced in language. However, such analyses cannot fully grasp the “force” which accounts for subjects’ *investments* in these structures (Laclau 2005:110). The “different signifying operations to which [most discursive analyses focus] can explain the *forms* the investment takes, but not the *force* in which the investment consists” (Laclau 2005:110, emphasis in original). Consequently, he suggests that the next step should be to examine how such investments endow discourses with the resonance that they often have. For him, such investments are rooted in affect. “It is clear, however, that if an entity becomes the object of an investment – as in being in love, or in hatred – the investment belongs necessarily to the order of *affect* (Laclau 2005:110, emphasis in original). Affective investment, then, relates to the anchoring forces that bind subjects to their identities and particular narratives (Solomon 2014).

The concept of affective investment is key here. If discursive structures constitute subjects and identities, these structures alone cannot fully account for the

visceral potency of identities. Language must be infused with affect, in a sense, in order for it to have the “force” that it often has. Put differently, words alone often cannot carry the power that they often have – the force of affect is needed to explain how words resonate with audiences and have political effects beyond their mere verbal utterance (Solomon 2014). Without this intensity or force (that is, without [affective] investment), Laclau argues (quoted in Glynos and Stavrakakis 2010:236), “there would be no discursive structure in the first place.” Discourses need an affective push or stimulant for their articulation – “the complexes which we call ‘discursive or hegemonic formations’ . . . would be unintelligible without the affective component” (Laclau 2005:111). What Laclau offers, then, is a way to think about how the affective aspects of discourse do the hard work of social production, and thus how production necessarily implicates affect if it is to fully account for relations of constitution in power dynamics.

### **Methodological Implications for IR**

As Koschut (this forum) outlines, there are at least three strategies that are useful in examining the relationship between discourse and emotion. A re-conceptualized emotional productive power bears on each of these strategies. First, *interpreting* emotion terms, connotations, metaphors, and analogies that serve to express emotion is also part of investigating the productive power of language. Constructing responses to terrorist attacks, for example, in terms of *sorrow*, *shocking*, or *anger* not only produces particular meanings that constructs the events in particular ways. It also helps to shape emotional reactions to the events that then become part of the meaning-making process itself. Such effects may be studied at multiple levels of analysis, whether at a societal level (Hall, this forum), interactions between society and the state (Holland and Solomon 2014), or at a state level (Sasley 2011). Second and related, *contextualizing* emotions in terms of othering entails both tracing emotional reactions within specific cases and reconstructing the emotionally performative effects of how such discourses gain currency and power with particular audiences. Third, *historicizing* the emotionally productive power of discourses would enrich our understanding of how communities govern certain

modes of affective expression as legitimate while simultaneously delegitimizing others, and how these may shift over time (see Hutchison 2016).

IR scholars interested in these issues are fortunate that the field has already begun to develop tools that are apt for these tasks. Yet, there are also resources from neighboring fields that offer approaches more finely attuned to the interwoven complexities of emotion, discourse, and power. In examining the emotional productive power of discourse, not only are words themselves relevant, but equally important are the concrete everyday practices, spaces, and feelings surrounding the articulation of those words. Fine-grained micro-oriented studies (Koschut, this forum) that weave together the co-composed aspects of language, felt affect, expressed emotions, embodied dispositions, and meaningful spatial settings would aptly draw out the role of affect in ongoing processes of identity construction. In this sense, conceptualizing research design in terms of an assemblage (Acuto and Curtis 2013) may help to capture such multifaceted processes. Viewing discursive power as a component of a broader configurational assemblage of heterogeneous elements intermingled with language, affect, bodies, and space would go some way towards demonstrating productive power's emergent reliance on these mutually infused elements. Thinking in assemblage terms of contingent, relational phenomena that have no fixed "center" yet combine to produce particular effects is useful for recognizing the key role of the component aspects of productive power without needing to isolate and assess any "independent" effect of any one aspect.

Ethnography, interviews, participant observation, focus groups, and aesthetic approaches all shed light on the lived, everyday aspects of global politics. Although these tools are not always used to address questions surrounding the politics of emotions, they stand to be clearly adaptable to questions of studying discourse as richly emotional and affective. As they rely upon peoples' narrated self-understandings, such tools can be fine-tuned to more explicitly draw out the role of emotions in discourse. For example, Värnyn and Puumala (2015) draw upon narrative to illustrate the lived, affective, and felt aspects of war experience, calling into question conventional distinctions between individual and nation, past and present, and self and other. Focusing on these more corporeal and lived elements of



politics does not mean that discourse analysis itself should be abandoned (see McSorely 2012; Park-Kang 2014; Rowe 2013). Rather, tools and concepts from cognate fields (such as sociology, human geography, anthropology, and psychoanalysis) can be used to bolster IR discourse analysis. Focusing not only on narrative itself but also how affective discourse develops intersubjectively between agents through paralinguistic elements (Ross 2014) of tone and gesture, in addition to bodily comportment, and past and present routines, rituals, and expectations, IR scholars can develop appropriate methodological tools to disclose the productive power of emotions in concrete empirical cases.

Finally, such approaches might at first seem too micro-oriented to be relevant for a field traditionally focused on “grand” scales of analysis. However, examining power as constituted through discourse, affects, embodiment, and relationally produced through interactions, IR scholars interested in emotions and discourse may find tools that are able to sidestep most of the problems associated with IR’s levels-of-analysis schema. Instead, these questions channel a focus on how emotional effects may produce emergent changes in the social order. A re-conceptualized emotional productive power and associated methodological approaches tracks closely with a number of prominent theoretical and empirical developments in recent years, such as growing attention to practices, emotions, and the everyday (Solomon and Steele 2016). As IR increasingly turns to such questions, interrogating the emotional-productive power of discourse is a pressing task.

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