

Foreign Policy and Discourse Analysis

France, Britain and Europe

Henrik Larsen

Routledge Advances in International
Relations and Politics



Foreign policy and discourse analysis

In this book Henrik Larsen presents discourse analysis as an alternative approach to foreign policy analysis. Through an extensive empirical study of British and French policies towards Europe in the 1980s he demonstrates the importance of political discourse in shaping foreign policy.

The author discusses key theoretical problems within traditional belief system approaches and proposes an alternative one, political discourse analysis. The approach is located within the discipline of foreign policy analysis and consideration is given to the implications of its use for the study of international relations. The theory is illustrated through detailed analyses of British and French discourses on Europe, nation/state security and the nature of international relations.

Henrik Larsen demonstrates the usefulness of the discourse approach as a tool for the understanding of foreign policy. His book will be of great value to undergraduates, postgraduates and lecturers in international relations and European politics.

Henrik Larsen is a lecturer in international relations at the University of Copenhagen. He was previously a diplomat at the Danish Foreign Office, Copenhagen.

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Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	viii
Introduction	1
<i>The chapters</i>	2
1 Discourse analysis and foreign policy	3
<i>Problems in the traditional literature on 'psychological factors'</i>	3
<i>An alternative approach – discourse analysis</i>	11
<i>The consequences of the use of discourse analysis for foreign policy analysis in general</i>	21
<i>International implications of national discourses</i>	27
<i>Methodological issues</i>	28
2 The British political discourse in the 1980s on the concepts of nation/state, Europe, security and the nature of international relations	34
<i>Nation/state</i>	34
<i>Europe</i>	51
<i>The nature of international relations</i>	70
<i>Security</i>	77
3 The French political discourse in the 1980s on the concepts of nation/state, Europe, security and the nature of international relations	87
<i>Nation/state</i>	87
<i>Europe</i>	95
<i>Security</i>	115
<i>The nature of international relations</i>	122
<i>The discourses in a wider context</i>	126
4 British and French policies towards Europe in the 1980s – application of the discourse framework	129
<i>The European external environment in the 1980s</i>	130
<i>French policy towards Europe</i>	135

vi *Contents*

<i>British policy towards Europe</i>	154
<i>Applicability of political discourse – summary and comparison</i>	174
5 Accounting for foreign policy: discourse analysis versus alternative approaches	182
<i>Geopolitics</i>	183
<i>Interdependence</i>	185
<i>Realism</i>	187
<i>Middle-power theory</i>	191
<i>National versus international discourses</i>	196
<i>Concluding remarks</i>	196
<i>Notes</i>	200
<i>Bibliography</i>	218
<i>Index</i>	238

Figures

1.1	A discursive tree	17
2.1	The rival discourses on Europe in Britain in the 1980s	69
2.2	The rival subdiscourses on Europe within the dominant discourse in Britain in the 1980s	69
2.3	The rival discourses and subdiscourses on Europe in Britain in the 1980s	70
3.1	The relationship between the French discourses on the nation/state and Europe	95
3.2	The French discourses on Europe from 1981 to 1989 and their links to the discourses on the nation/state	110
3.3	The French discourses on Europe from 1981 to 1990 and their links to the discourses on the nation/state	114

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Introduction

A general problem in foreign policy analysis is how to deal theoretically with general beliefs to which actors adhere. This is not only a problem in relation to what has often been labelled political ideology but also in relation to beliefs about concepts such as Europe, the state, the nature of international relations, security etc. The traditional foreign policy analysis literature tends to present these kinds of beliefs in an individualist and positivist way without taking into account the impact of language and the societal foundation of the beliefs (see [chapter 1](#)). This forms the first set of the problems treated in the book. The book proposes a theoretical framework, based on linguistics and the concept of political discourse, which takes these problems into account.

The central thesis of the book is that this discourse framework can help us to analyse differences and similarities in British and French policies towards Europe in the 1980s. The different meanings, signified in different discourses, of four concepts which are assumed to be critical concepts in the policies of the two countries towards Europe in the 1980s will be studied: Europe, the nation/state, security and the nature of international relations. The book argues that the discourse on these four concepts can account for British and French policies towards Europe in the 1980s.

One important aim of this study is to provide an empirical evaluation of one of the 'reflectivist' approaches.¹

The reasons for examining these four concepts are as follows. The concept of Europe, it can be argued, was a contested concept on the hidden agenda behind the debate about Europeanisation in the 1980s (see, for example, Wæver 1989a). The concept of the nation/state is important given that the new state/society debate in international relations indicates the relevance of state/society structures in explaining foreign policy and international relations outcomes (see, for example, Halliday 1989) and therefore the potential importance of the *meaning* of these concepts for explicating foreign policy. Also the concept of security was a contested concept in the 1980s. The concept of the nature of international relations can be said to be of general value for any analysis of foreign policy. Many other concepts could, arguably, be of relevance (e.g. 'history' or 'man') but for practical reasons the book is restricted to a focus on the importance of these four.

2 *Introduction*

The period examined is the 1980s. For practical reasons the study finishes in autumn 1990 (in order to include the reactions to German reunification). The starting point is 1980, although some consideration is given to the question of continuity with the period before.

In summary, the book attempts to develop a theoretical framework for dealing with beliefs in FPA which takes into account the language in which beliefs are expressed and their social nature. It draws on elements of linguistic theory and the concept of political discourse. This framework is used to describe the political 'discourse' on four concepts in France and Britain in the 1980s. The hypothesis is that this framework (the discourse on the four concepts) can contribute to explicating² British and French policies towards Europe in the 1980s.

THE CHAPTERS

In chapter 1 the theoretical problems in the traditional belief system approaches are presented and examples from the literature are given. Tendencies in the traditional literature towards individualism, a positivist approach to meaning and a lack of attention to the role of the language are identified. A new approach which can provide an answer to these three problems is proposed – political discourse. An attempt is made to locate the political discourse approach within the discipline of foreign policy analysis and to pinpoint the concrete implications. The implications of the political discourse approach for the field of international relations are discussed.

In chapter 2 the British discourses on Europe, the nation/state, security and the nature of international relations in the 1980s are presented.

In chapter 3 the French discourses on Europe, the nation/state, security and the nature of international relations are presented.

In chapter 4 British and French policies towards Europe in the 1980s are described with respect to three dimensions: policies towards the EC; the security dimension and the all-European dimension. An explication of these policies, including their similarities and differences, based on the political discourses described in chapters 3 and 4 will be attempted.

In chapter 5 the findings from chapter 4 are evaluated by examining whether other factors could explain them. General explanations in terms of the external environment are attempted. The results of these are compared with the results of the discourse analysis approach in chapter 4. Generalising from the results of the case treated in the book a conclusion is offered about the ability of discourse analysis to explain foreign policy. The conclusion is that, although certain aspects of French and British policies towards Europe in the 1980s could also be explained by external factors, the discourse/'understanding' aspect is indispensable for a general analysis of the period.

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