

# AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL FOR THE OPERATIONALIZATION OF DISCOURSE THEORY OF LACLAU AND MOUFFE

**Peter Bakumov**

*Peter Bakumov, Jacobs University Bremen. Address for correspondence: Jacobs University Bremen, Campus Ring 1, 28759 Bremen, Germany. p.bakumov@jacobs-university.de.*

**The present article provides an alternative model for qualitative studies based on the discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, with special emphasis on computer-based analysis. The model may be used for empirical research and analysis of large data corpora. The model offers a mixed-method approach of operationalization, an alternative to existing approaches, combining a quantitative coding stage and a qualitative interpretation stage. First, a list of key signifiers is obtained from open coding of the existing secondary literature on the topic. Second, the key signifiers compose a case research matrix, which includes the list of key signifiers, the word cloud (thesaurus), and subcodes. The case research matrix establishes frameworks for the computer-assisted analysis of the data corpus. Third, the use of the key signifiers in the data corpus is structured using the conceptual framework of Laclau and Mouffe. If the need arises, the case research matrix is updated with the secondary codes and the previous steps are repeated. Fourth, the interpretation process occurs hermeneutically, with emphasis on contextualized self-interpretations. The provided model should fill the gap in the variety of operationalization approaches designed for qualitative studies in which, for methodological reasons, lexicometric analysis cannot be applied. The application of the model is presented on the example of a case from the field of historical sociology studying the ideological alignment of far-right movements in interwar Switzerland.**

**Keywords:** Discourse Theory; CAQDAS; Frontism; Laclau and Mouffe; Research Method

The following model for the operationalization of discourse theory was developed as a methodology for a dissertation in the field of sociology that focused on the ideological alignment of Swiss national socialists<sup>1</sup> in the interwar period. A historical sociological research study poses a certain methodological challenge, since the availability of primary sources is limited and sociological value must be extracted in a transparent and reproducible way.

The dissertation was based on the modern comparative approach to the theory of fascism, which supposed that fascist movements throughout Europe in the interwar period were forming largely independently of Germany and Italy and pos-

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<sup>1</sup> "Fascism" and "National Socialism" are capitalized when I refer specifically to the Italian Fascist movement or regime and the German Nazi movement or regime, respectively.

sessed unique features determined by local contexts (Mosse 2000; Pinto 2011; Bauerkämper and Rossoliński-Liebe 2017). In my hypothesis, I posited that Swiss national socialists were a part of the phenomenon of “international fascism” but that “Swiss national socialism” itself (or Frontism, if we use the terminology common in the historical research<sup>2</sup>) existed only as a label, since the far right was divided into a large number of political currents with significantly different ideological alignments.<sup>3</sup> The research investigated the group of articulators who were particularly influential in the discursive community. The cases were analyzed separately, allowing for a comparison of common and divergent features.<sup>4</sup> The selection occurred as a consequence of expanding the theoretical framework with the concept of “individual ideology” (Freeden 1996), motivating the selection of the individuals who formed a significant part of the discourse of Swiss national socialism.

I decided to design a qualitative research study with a sample consisting of eight prominent Frontist personalities who belonged to the discursive community of Swiss national socialists. In the corresponding archives, the documents related to their life path were digitalized. These individuals were divided into subgroups (“moderate,” “radical,” and “intermediate”) based on their political alignment as reported in the secondary literature. Specifically, Frontists from the German-speaking part of Switzerland were selected based on their inclination toward National Socialism rather than Fascism. Together, the individuals constitute a “discourse coalition,” defined by Martin Nonhoff as “numerous speakers adopt[ing] an encompassing demand but interpret[ing] this demand in different ways” (2019:83).<sup>5</sup> In

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<sup>2</sup> Frontists (*Frontisten*) was a common name for the Swiss far right in the interwar period. It derives from the names of the organizations they belonged to, which frequently included the word “front” (e.g., the National Front).

<sup>3</sup> While Frontists are usually viewed as a unified group in the historiography, I deemed it necessary to separate the discursive community of “Swiss national socialists,” isolating the articulators who shared a particular use of language. As Jørgensen and Phillips clarify, “according to Laclau and Mouffe, there are no objective groups since groups are always created through contingent constructions of equivalence among different elements.... It is not until someone speaks of, or to, or on behalf of, a group that it is constituted as a group” (2002:45). At the same time, we can speak about the group of “subjects who contribute to the spreading of a discursive formation,” striving for discursive hegemony (Nonhoff 2019:78).

<sup>4</sup> Howarth, Norval, and Stavrakakis note that “the articulation of a political discourse can only take place around an empty signifier that functions as a nodal point” (2000:13). Thus, a nodal point (or points) valid for the discursive community must be identified. In the application of discourse theory, however, I attach importance to the “central signifiers” as well. Both the contested meanings of the nodal points and different central signifiers, which vary from articulation to articulation, highlight the differences between cases.

<sup>5</sup> The “encompassing” demand means the universal demand that can overcome all problems and difficulties that hinder discursive closure once the demands are achieved (Nonhoff 2019:80). The intermediate steps might be indicated or introduced consequentially on the way to the fulfillment of that all-encompassing demand. For Swiss national socialists, the concept of the “overhaul” represented such a demand. They competed, however, for the “dominant reading” (83) of this encompassing demand, unable to find agreement on its contents.

other regards, the sample was not limited by the interwar period and instead captured documents from each personality's entire life span. Personal documents related to private issues were ignored, leaving only those that would reflect political or philosophical views, express an opinion on various matters, and represent a worldview.

Such sampling produced vast amounts of data that could never have been analyzed manually. Moreover, the chosen methodology should have been able to divide the data into suitable units of analysis and provide answers to the research questions. Therefore, the selection of an appropriate methodological approach suggested the integration of a quantitative component, which would allow the gathered data to be processed, and a qualitative component in order to analyze and interpret them. For this purpose, computer software was applied: PDF24 for OCR (since the texts were initially present in the form of images) and ATLAS.ti 8 and 9 for the coding.

I considered various methodological approaches, among them qualitative contents analysis (Schreier 2012), critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2010), the discursive historical approach (Glynos et al. 2009), and post-foundational discourse analysis (Marttila 2015). After a thorough investigation, however, I decided to use discourse theory developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. The model presented in this article employs the theoretical premises developed by Laclau and Mouffe to draw up a model for operationalization suitable for the empirical analysis of large data corpora. The proposed model combines quantitative and qualitative approaches with computer-assisted data processing. I do not aim to enhance or develop discourse theory, but rather to offer an operationalization model alternative to the existing approaches and designed for empirical research with a set of prerequisites.

First, I present the theoretical background, with a brief description of discourse theory and examples of its operationalization in the research. Second, I turn to the model itself, detailing its function and area of application. Lastly, I describe an example of its application to my case study.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

Laclau and Mouffe ([1985] 2001) conceptualized the philosophical premises of discourse theory, exploring the role of language in the social world and showing how various discursive elements are connected structurally. In developing the theory, they rejected the view of language as a stable system with an unchanging structure, thus passing from the structuralist to the poststructuralist approach. Simultaneously, they conceptualized the process of meaning-making, claiming that "signs derive their meanings not through their relations to reality but through internal relations within the network of signs" (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002:10) Laclau and Mouffe proposed a concept of "field of discursivity" that contained all possible

meanings (“elements”).<sup>6</sup> Articulators establish relations between them, constituting a discourse: “we will call articulation any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice. The structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice, we will call discourse” (Laclau and Mouffe [1985] 2001:105). Marianne Jørgensen and Louise Phillips elaborated further: “a discourse is always constituted in relation to what it excludes, that is, in relation to the field of discursivity” (2002:27). The articulated positions in the discourse are called “moments.”<sup>7</sup> The meanings are always challenged by antagonistic forces, which struggle to fix the preferred meanings and exclude the unwanted ones. The process is perpetual, and the meaning can be challenged at any moment. Thus, the discourses can never achieve full “closure” (the ultimate fixing of the meanings) but can sometimes become “sedimented,” even for a prolonged time, when the alternatives vanish.<sup>8</sup> Discourses become stabilized by “nodal points” or “central signifiers.” “Nodal points” are always viewed as “empty signifiers,” easily filled with vague or arbitrary meanings, and “floating signifiers,” meaning that different discourses compete for meaning-making:

Floating signifiers are the signs that different discourses struggle to invest with meaning in their own particular way. Nodal points are floating signifiers, but whereas the term “nodal point” refers to a point of crystallization within a specific discourse, the term “floating signifier” belongs to the ongoing struggle between different discourses to fix the meaning of important signs. (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002:27)

At the same time, they occupy a privileged position, which enables their influence on other moments: “Any discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre. We will call the privileged discursive points of this partial fixation, nodal points” (Laclau and Mouffe [1985] 2001:112).

Along with the nodal points, the articulators establish “chains of equivalence” or “chains of difference” around them to stabilize the discourse (Laclau and Mouffe [1985] 2001:144). The logic of equivalence comes into play when meanings of moments become equivalentially united, negating their differences. This equivalence, however, is formed in relation to the third element, and thus two elements situated in the same chain of equivalence are not necessarily identical (Nonhoff 2019). The

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<sup>6</sup> Jørgensen and Phillips, however, argue that “in discourse theory it is not entirely clear if the field of discursivity is a comparatively unstructured mass of all possible constructions of meaning or if it is itself structured by the given competing discourses.” In turn, for the latter they proposed to use the concept of the “order of discourse”: “a concept from [Norman] Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis—would denote a limited range of discourses which struggle in the same terrain” (2002:27).

<sup>7</sup> Although, as Laclau and Mouffe note, “the transition from the ‘elements’ to the ‘moments’ is never entirely fulfilled” ([1985] 2001:110).

<sup>8</sup> The opposite is also true. Not only can full “closure” not be achieved, but the meanings are never completely open either, as they are always subject to some degree of fixing.

same is applied to the logic of difference, when moments become antagonistically juxtaposed and one element is “blocking” another in relation to a third one. In other words, with the help of nodal points, articulators not only change the meanings but also establish various links between them. As Jason Glynos and David Howarth (2007) point out, the chains of equivalence are constructed by the opposition to overcoming the existing hegemony, while chains of difference are maintained by the hegemony to weaken the opposition.

Another vital concept for Laclau and Mouffe is hegemony, based on research of Antonio Gramsci. If the discourse struggles to dominate the field of discursivity, some of them will achieve (relative) success, mainly using power structures (such as government institutions), which allows for more effective sedimentation. This hegemony can be understood as “the dominance of one particular perspective” (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002:7).<sup>9</sup> Of course, this sense of “objectivity” is purely illusory, since even hegemony cannot achieve full closure of a discourse.

In Laclau and Mouffe’s understanding, the world is discursively determined: the material world exists but is always linguistically interpreted in order to make sense of it (Laclau and Mouffe [1985] 2001:107). It is different from critical discourse analysis (CDA) which allows for nondiscursive practices.

The discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe allows us to use the conceptual framework for empirical analysis: to classify signifiers in which we are interested as elements or moments, central or peripheral signifiers, nodal points and floating signifiers; investigate the relations between them; and draw conclusions about their position in the discourse.

Attempts to operationalize the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe have been made for the purposes of social, political, and even economic research. Their extensive list remains beyond the scope of the present article. Since its aim is to contribute to the discussion about operationalization, I will mention only the studies that have contributed to the conceptualization of the operationalization process.

Jørgensen and Phillips suggested ways of operationalization for discourse theory. In general, they proposed to explore “how discourses, identity and the social space respectively are organised discursively.” They argued that the main frameworks for the analysis should be the key concepts from the discourse theory grouped for analytical purposes: “concepts of chain of equivalence,” “concepts concerning identity,” or “concepts for conflict analysis” (2002:50). A varying mixture of the concepts may be proposed, however, if motivated by the needs of the empirical research.

Nico Carpentier and Benjamin De Cleen (2007) used the discourse theoretical approach to conduct a media study, combining it with both quantitative and qualitative analysis. They put forward the conceptual frameworks of the discourse-theoretical analysis (DTA), expanding them methodologically for their

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<sup>9</sup> Jørgensen and Phillips also stress that “the concept of hegemony comes between ‘objectivity’ and ‘the political,’” meaning that “hegemonic interventions” dissolve the existing political conflict to form the dominant perspective (2002:36).

proper operationalization. Moreover, they added further theoretical conceptualization that was initially lacking in discourse theory, closing the theoretical gap for the purpose of conducting a valid empirical study.<sup>10</sup> Correspondingly, the discourse theory in the present case was complemented with the concept of ideology for theoretical and methodological coherence in the analysis of the ideological alignment.

This work largely adjoins the research of George Glasze (2007), who developed a system of operationalization of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory. The model consisted of two stages: lexicometric analysis to build the data corpus and narrative analysis to interpret the results. In other words, the first stage created a solid corpus from the dispersed data, which later could be subjected to the interpretation method. I could not, however, use the aforementioned model for several reasons. Firstly, lexicometrics is used to systematically gather the lexical means from the texts, while I have already selected a certain subgroup of the discourse related to ideological alignment that should be studied. In addition, not all of the most frequently used signifiers would be most important in this case. The far-right ideological alignment is limited to certain concepts outlined in the secondary literature on the subject. Moreover, a narrative approach is more suitable for interviews or single texts but could hardly be constructed from a data corpus that combines documents with various topics from different years. The model should be flexibly adjusted to the new circumstance of the research and yet preserve the quantitative nature of the first stage, leading to the solid interpretation in the second.

David Rear and Alan Jones (2013) conducted an empirical study with the help of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory. They used the appropriate terminology and employed intertextuality in the analysis and comparison of two potentially conflicting discourses, with a focus on floating signifiers. Rear and Jones provided several important remarks that were further elaborated upon in the following model. First, they showed how the nodal points and moments could be identified intertextually. In exploring the context, floating signifiers could be identified as well. Second, they pointed out the difficulties in determining the borders of discourse. Still, when the research is based on case studies, it is possible to focus on the group of articulators (this may be an actor, a group of actors, or an institution), although they would not naturally represent the entirety of the discursive community under consideration. I can conclude that this study was focused on floating signifiers but that the role of other linguistic elements was expanded in order to outline the borders of discourses.

Sara Walton and Bronwyn Boon (2014) explored how Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory could be applied in studies. They focused their preliminary theoretical conceptualization on the concept of the floating signifier, elaborating on the subject of borders between discourses. This approach resulted in a six-step model

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<sup>10</sup> Carpentier and De Clean argue that in Laclau and Mouffe's theory the "concepts such as identity, ideology and power remain undertheorized" (2007:272).

that first constructed a corpus of data (steps 1–2), then identified discourses and antagonistic relationships between them (steps 3–4), classified the subjects (step 5), and made conclusions based on the fixation of the floating signifiers (step 6). This particular model is suitable for the analysis of the hegemonic discourses and therefore is structured around one particular type of linguistic element (the floating signifier). Based on this model, I was able to compose a simplified structure of analysis: (1) the establishment of a corpus of data; (2) its empirical analysis, which may vary depending on the linguistic elements developed by Laclau and Mouffe; and (3) the conclusions drawn from the meaning-making process rooted in the linguistic elements, which became the subject of analysis, or the relationships between them. The additional division into minor steps could effectively bolster the methodological precision, but, more importantly, these steps were introduced given the specific circumstances of the study under consideration, which allows for such a course of action when developing an approach for operationalization.

Sean Phelan (2019) used Laclau and Mouffe's conceptual frameworks to analyze the signifier of "social justice warriors." They traced the articulation of the signifier in various discourses, showing the antagonism it provokes within the political left. He concluded that "social justice warriors" became an "antagonist," enabling the construction of "coherent political formations." This study differs conceptually from the examples listed above: instead of analyzing discourse, the author analyzed the articulation of a certain signifier within various discourses.

Ronald Hartz (2019) also used lexicometric analysis to study right-wing populism in Germany. The frequency of the use of signifiers had direct influence on the research findings in this case, since it confirmed the particular composition of the discourse. Nikos Nikisianis et al. (2019) used similar approach to study populism in Greece, with a more definite restriction on the contextual exploration around the key signifier "the people" ("in a distance of +/- 5 words"). They expanded the key signifier with the most frequently used collocations rather than searching for additional key signifiers related to the discourse of populism. As a result, they could conclude that populism acts as an empty signifier, always being accompanied by additional signifiers. Anti-populist attitudes, however, related to two further signifiers, "reforms" and "Europe," and the significance of the former decreased and of the latter increased with time. This information can point to the fact that the central signifier within a discourse can be actively changing over a reasonably short period of time.

Kseniia Semykina (2021) attempted to integrate discourse theory with corpus-assisted semantic network analysis. The concept of "nodal points" was introduced at the stage of data processing, with a suggestion that the signifiers most frequently used in the sample may act as nodal points. I believe that mere frequency of use in the discourse does not necessarily define the moment as a nodal point.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the study was quantitative in nature. By contrast, the application of Laclau and

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<sup>11</sup> In my case, the most frequently used signifier from the sample was "Switzerland," but, as it turned out, it was neither a nodal point in the discourse nor the most heatedly debated floating signifier.

Mouffe's conceptual framework in qualitative studies (even given the computer-assisted data processing) should occur at a later stage to aid with the interpretation, structuring, and summary of the results of the data processing.

In these aforementioned examples, I can trace the structure typical for the operationalization of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory. The use of the conceptual framework is present in all cases. In most examples, the following stages of analysis were present: composition of the data corpus, empirical analysis, and interpretation. My model takes this structure into account and focuses specifically on computer-based analysis, with consequent use of the conceptual framework.

## THE MODEL

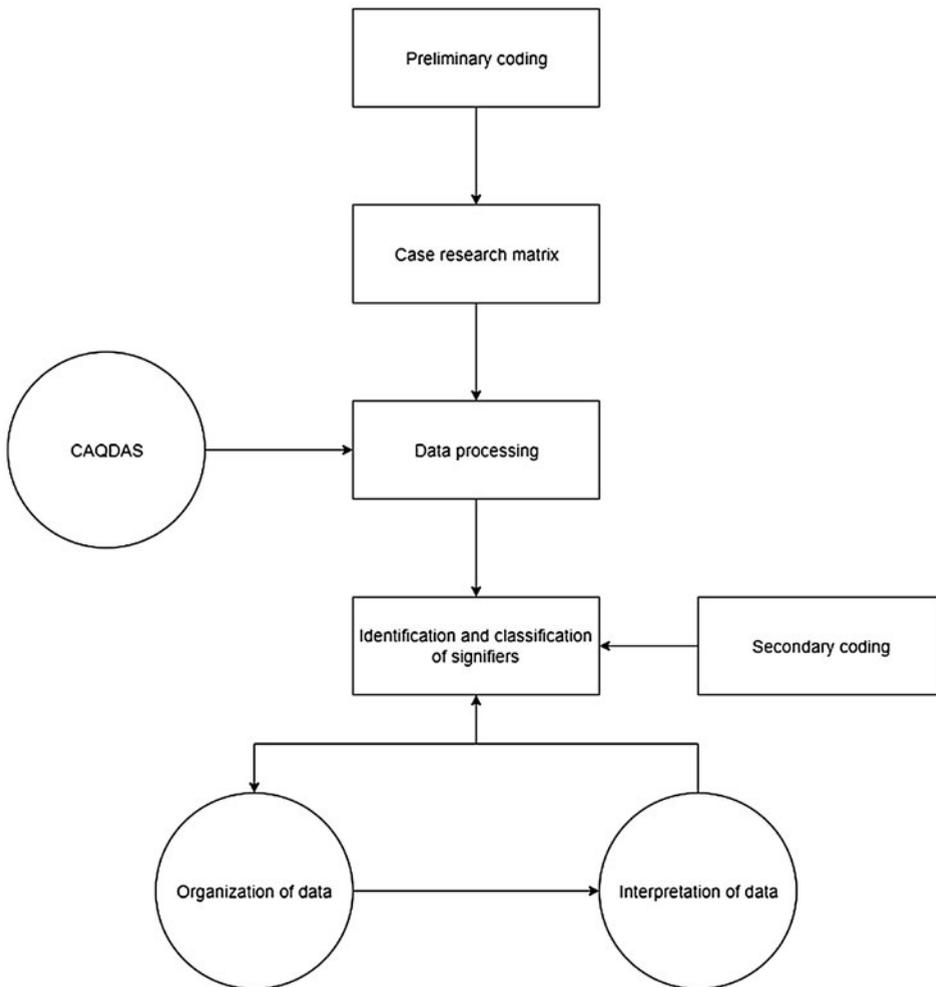
The goal of the present article is to contribute to the application of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory in empirical studies. The following model can be used as an alternative to the existing models and applied not only in historical sociology but in any discipline where the following prerequisites are met: Firstly, the presence of a large number of primary sources, predominantly texts, is suggested, to motivate the selection of computer-based analysis. Secondly, the theory or hypothesis has already been put forward. In comparison to discourse-analytical approaches centered on grounded theory, I was more interested in the development of a model to analyze the empirical data to confirm or confute the theory. The theory itself should focus on the structural limitations of discourse theory and focus either on concept(s), articulation(s), or discourse(s). Thirdly, the frameworks of theory should provide a list of open codes to start the coding process in the form of the thematically related signifiers.<sup>12</sup> Fourthly, the research should allow the integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches with the purpose of providing qualitative results. The interpretation process using the conceptual framework of Laclau and Mouffe limits the quantitative component to the computer-based data processing.

The absence of structural limitations to the methodological process facilitates the analytical process and expands the heuristic opportunities. The methodological process is restricted only by the theoretical premises of the discourse theory. As an additional point, it should be mentioned that it is possible for sole researcher to use the model (although, as in any other methodology involving coding, a cross-check of the coding list is desirable).

Instead of a two-step model, I introduced several main phases with intermediate steps and some additional options that may be included (see figure 1).

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<sup>12</sup> I employ the concept of signifiers initially introduced by Saussure (1959), which was later adopted for use in discourse theory.



**Figure 1.** The model for empirical analysis

The research starts with a preliminary (open) coding stage (Saldaña 2009). Since the preparation for the research and the formulation of a hypothesis usually involve an overview of the thematic literature, some key signifiers may be extracted from it. During the preparation of the empirical research, the secondary literature on the subject is usually consulted. It contains thematically relevant signifiers that may be used as codes for the purpose of the initial text analysis. The list of open codes will not, of course, be exhaustive, since it provides only the initial frameworks for the exploration of the context.

The key signifiers resulting from the open coding form the case research matrix. The goal of the research matrix is to turn the key signifiers into useful tools that can be analyzed with CAQDAS, software for qualitative analysis. The following columns must be present in the matrix: Firstly, the key signifiers themselves must be present

as a list. They have, above all, thematic relevance, as they are presented in the form of single words or collocations. Secondly, the word cloud should be drafted, representing the variety of linguistic derivatives related to the key signifier. Thirdly, the subcodes are introduced in order to differentiate among the possible meanings contained in the key signifier. Additional columns may be added, if necessary, but they must correspond to the goal of the matrix's creation: to justify selection of the particular signifier or facilitate its incorporation into the data processing.

Afterward, the data processing is conducted with the help of the computer-based analysis. Computer software will be required for the qualitative analysis, as it allows a search for the signifiers in the text. An optional intermediary step, adjusting the phase of data processing, may include OCR software, if the gathered documents are not in digital form. This processing allows us to search for instances of the key signifiers represented in the text in the form of linguistic derivatives from the "world cloud" related to them.

In the next step, the most time-consuming phase, the identification and classification of the signifiers, is initiated. The key signifiers are analyzed using Laclau and Mouffe's conceptual framework. For their valid classification, it is necessary to explore the context of articulation behind the usage of each signifier. It is not the signifiers themselves but the process of meaning-making that plays the main role, as well as their structural or hierarchical position in the discourse. The context around the signifier may be limited to a sentence or a paragraph if the usage of the signifier in this particular context is clarified. The frequency of use does not influence the process of interpretation. Thus, the model differs from those that apply lexicometric analysis, where the frequency of signifiers plays a certain role and the context is investigated within a certain distance from the original signifier.

In the end of this stage, the interpretation process occurs. Interpretation is carried out hermeneutically, or, in other words, in the form of contextualized self-interpretations (Glynos and Howarth 2007). The elements activated in the discourse are identified as moments—contested meanings in the form of floating signifiers—the nodal points are investigated, and the central or peripheral signifiers are positioned within a certain articulation or discursive community. The observation of the established chains of equivalence and difference (as well as of the failure to establish them) occurs at this stage as well. Thus, the research can focus on the self-interpretations of the articulators but integrating them into the contextual knowledge of the researcher. Therefore, it is possible to structure single processes of articulation, as well as to determine their role within and relation to a particular discourse. During the process of structuring, the signifiers are organized: the elements are hierarchically arranged, the main contested points outlined, and the borders of discourse identified. As a result, we are ready to turn to interpretation.

The work with contextual interpretation leads to the phase of secondary coding, when new signifiers are added from the text and others dropped from the matrix (if few or no instances of their use can be found). The same is applied to the subcodes, the list of which will be expanded as the new meanings of the known key signifiers arise. The natural limitation of this coding process in comparison to lexicometric

analysis is that some key signifiers may in the end be overlooked. To balance this disadvantage, it may be necessary to randomly select several program texts from the sample and read them through, conducting coding manually, and check their correspondence to the research matrix.

The process of secondary coding complements the case research matrix, and the steps that followed the open coding are repeated in this case as well until the source of the secondary codes is exhausted. The emergence of new codes, however, does not force us to start the data processing from scratch, and the search is conducted considering only the new codes that appeared in the matrix.

The intermediate process of data interpretation is followed by the process of presenting the research results, which may be concluded only when the case research matrix is complete. During the final data interpretation, leading to the presentation of the research results, further methodological approaches may be adjacently used to facilitate the interpretation process or to answer research questions. For example, a comparative approach may be applied if two rival discourses are under consideration. If there is a single hypothesis, the relations among the signifiers can be presented structurally in order to prove it. Any complementary methodological approaches, however, should neither interfere with nor come into conflict with the theoretical premises or conceptual framework of Laclau and Mouffe.

## EXAMPLE OF APPLICATION

In the case of Swiss Frontists, I already had a significant number of preliminary codes from the secondary literature, both on the history of Frontism and on National Socialism or Fascism in general. The Swiss-specific key signifiers were expected to include the debates on democracy, liberalism, and discussion of independence, the threat of annexation coming from Germany, and the country's place in the "coming Europe." The resulting preliminary codes were formed into a matrix.

The original matrix was expanded by the following additional columns not presented in the model: word cloud (in German), or the key signifiers in the original language, since obviously our text corpus was in German; relationship to a thematic block, because the dissertation was very large and it was necessary to group the information thematically; a brief explanation of how the preliminary code was selected; and an anchor example from the actual texts. These columns do not represent the compulsory contents of the model and thus are not listed in the current example.

For the OCR, PDF24 was used, and for data processing ATLAS.ti 8 and 9. After the first round of processing was concluded, I determined that a certain signifier ("sovereignty") should have been excluded, since it was almost never used, as the discussion about Swiss sovereignty was fully covered by the signifier "independence." Later, "sovereignty" was turned into one of its subcodes when it was revealed that some of the Swiss national socialists did indeed care about it. Other key signifiers were added after observing the context and extracting from it the signifiers that surfaced frequently during the articulation (marked with \* in table 1). Table 1 presents the resultant case research matrix.

**Table 1.** The case research matrix

Signifier	Word cloud	Subcodes
Annexation	Annexation	
Aryan	Aryan, Nordic	An aspect of reality Nordic myth
Blood*	Blood	
Class struggle*	Class struggle	
Communism	Communism, communist, Bolshevism, Bolshevik, Marxism*, Marxist*	
Defense	Defense, spiritual defense, to defend	Military defense Spiritual defense
Democracy	Democracy, democratic	Swiss tradition Hostile political regime
Economy	Economy, economic	
Europe	Europe, (pan-)European	Actor of globalization* Geographical/historical entity Ultimate goal of the messianic mission
Fascism	Fascism, Fascist	Fascist regime Fascist ideology/worldview
Fatherland	Fatherland	
Frontism	Frontism, Frontists, Frontist	Saviors of the nation Traitors to National Socialism
German	German, Germany	Identity—German Country mentions—Germany
Germanic*	Germanic	
Hereditary ill*	Hereditary ill	
Hitler*	Hitler	Personality mentions Worldview leader
Independence*	Independence, independent	Appeasement Sovereignty*
Jews	Jews, Jewish	
Liberalism	Liberalism, liberal	Party/political affiliation Ideology of liberalism/materialism*
Masonry	Masonry, Mason	
Motherland	Motherland	
Nation	Nation, national	
National socialism	National socialism, National socialist	National Socialist regime National socialist ideology
New order	New order	
Overhaul	Overhaul, to renew	The rebirth of social life Unnecessary undertaking
People	People, folkish	
Race	Race, racial	
Reich	Reich	Country/historical references Utopian state*
Sovereignty†	Sovereignty, sovereign	
Swiss	Switzerland, Swiss, Swiss confederate*	Non-existing people* Unique identity—Swiss Country mentions—Switzerland
Treason	Traitors, treason, treacherous	We're not traitors* They are traitors
Women	Women, female	
Worldview*	Worldview	

Note: \* Added during secondary coding; † Excluded during secondary coding.

Using the extracted secondary codes now added to the case research matrix, the data corpus was processed once again. Many of the signifiers were rich with sub-codes. Even given that all of the personalities from my sample were from the far-right milieu, their opinions varied vastly. Sometimes, even those belonging to same subgroup (“moderate,” “intermediate,” or “radical”) had completely different views on the same signifier. The word cloud, both the original and German versions, was also expanded, sometimes due to spelling mistakes.<sup>13</sup>

After the composition of the case research matrix was concluded, I turned to the process of comparative interpretation of the search results and the context behind them. To facilitate the process of interpretation when answering the research question, I applied the tactics of “making conceptual/theoretical coherence” elaborated by Matthew Miles and Michael Huberman (1994:261–262). This tactic was used both when various concepts were connected within a single discourse and when cases were compared in the conclusion. It provided general methodological guidelines for turning the results into a coherent image to correspond to the hypothesis that existed before the empirical research had begun.

Each “case within the case”—namely, the articulation of each personality from the sample under consideration—was crowned with the intermediate conclusion, and the conclusions were compared in the end within the frameworks of the discursive community of Swiss national socialists. Although the starting point was a set of self-interpretations, they were approached critically and integrated into both the known historical context and the broader scientific discussion about the theory of fascism.

The research results confirmed that, despite the presence of the all-encompassing demands for “national socialism” and “overhaul” in the form of nodal points in the discourse of Swiss national socialists, their meaning varied from case to case. Moreover, in each articulation, a different central signifier was identified. These signifiers had priority in the articulation in comparison to other elements, but they sometimes changed over time, together with personal convictions. Further elements were arranged within principal thematic blocks and thus constructed the picture of the ideological alignment of the Swiss national socialists. Each personality, even using the same elements, defined them or arranged them differently. For instance, there was no unified perception of the “Other” within the far-right community, since various personalities tended to prioritize one “hostile force” above others, establishing a discursive hierarchy. Thus, the very classification of elements within Laclau and Mouffe’s conceptual frameworks allowed interpretations.

It turned out that Swiss national socialists not only contested meanings among themselves but also attempted to redefine moments in the public discourse. Since they never came to power in Switzerland, they could not establish a hegemony to assert them. In their discursive struggle, they failed to establish chains of equiva-

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<sup>13</sup> The word “Fascism” itself had two main spelling variants (*Faschismus* and *Fascismus*), as well as a third one that was definitely misspelled (*Faszismus*) but is also sometimes encountered.

lence that would have enabled them to overcome the democratic regime, not least because they constantly delved into mutual accusations and endless formations of the new Other instead of making a unifying effort to achieve a common goal. The hatred was directed not only against political enemies but frequently even against other far-right movements, which were considered to be propagating “false” versions of the “overhaul” and national socialism.

The research traced where the identified nodal points and floating signifiers, which were of special importance to Swiss national socialists, intersected with public discourse and the discourse of Frontism. Moreover, the research made a contribution to the comparative approach to the theory of fascism, with close investigation of a failed but ideologically independent movement.

## CONCLUSION

The present article proposed an alternative model for the operationalization of Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory. This model generally reflects the structure of other models but provides a specific focus on computer-based analysis of a large number of texts. The coding process occurred in two phases, with the primary phase based on open coding of secondary sources and the secondary phase considering the context of primary sources. The codes were composed into a case research matrix, which provided frameworks for the data processing. Afterward, the data was organized in accordance with Laclau and Mouffe’s conceptual framework. Finally, the context surrounding these elements was heuristically interpreted and summarized using a comparative approach to answer the research questions and prove the hypothesis.

I showed how the original structure of discourse theory could be modified for the purpose of operationalization within the framework of a particular study. Moreover, the model I provided is flexible, and additional intermediate steps may be introduced to improve it without negatively affecting the overall integrity of the research.

The model was designed to be applied to historical sociological analysis. It may resolve the complexities stemming from the abundance of information in primary sources and the need to combine quantitative and qualitative approaches in situations where lexicometric analysis is undesirable. Computer-based data processing enhances the validity and reproducibility of the research, discourse theory helps structure and organize the gathered search results, and, finally, the interpretation process concludes the research, allowing the findings to be presented.

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# АЛЬТЕРНАТИВНАЯ МОДЕЛЬ ОПЕРАЦИОНАЛИЗАЦИИ ТЕОРИИ ДИСКУРСА ЛАКЛО И МУФФ

**Петр Бакумов**

*Петр Бакумов, Бременский университет Якобса. Адрес для переписки:  
Jacobs University Bremen, Campus Ring 1, 28759 Bremen, Germany.  
p.bakumov@jacobs-university.de.*

В данной статье предлагается альтернативная модель операционализации для качественных исследований, базирующихся на теории дискурса Эрнесто Лакло и Шанталь Муфф. Основное ее отличие от аналогов заключается в применении компьютерного анализа. Модель может быть использована в эмпирических исследованиях при анализе больших корпусов данных, предлагая альтернативу существующим подходам к операционализации в форме смешанного метода, совмещающего количественный этап кодирования и качественный этап интерпретации. Во-первых, на основе открытого кодирования вторичных источников, посвященных теме исследования, создается список ключевых понятий. Во-вторых, составляется матрица кейс-метода для исследования, состоящая из списка ключевых понятий, облака слов (тезаурус) и субкодов. Такая матрица создает основу для применения компьютерного анализа. В-третьих, использование ключевых понятий в корпусе данных систематизируется с применением концепций теории дискурса Лакло и Муфф. При необходимости проводится этап вторичного кодирования и все предыдущие шаги повторяются. В-четвертых, проводится этап интерпретации результатов герменевтическим методом с упором на контекстуализированные самоинтерпретации. Предлагаемая модель должна восполнить пробел в подходах к операционализации при проведении качественных исследований, в которых из методологических соображений лексикометрический анализ использоваться не может. Применение модели показано на примере историко-социологического исследования, посвященного идеологии праворадикальных движений в Швейцарии межвоенного периода.

**Ключевые слова:** теория дискурса; компьютерный анализ; фронтизм; Эрнесто Лакло; Шанталь Муфф; метод исследования