Discourse as an Essentially Contested Concept in Media Studies: From the Correct Use to the Abstract Concept

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ABSTRACT: *The issue of concepts formation has always been at the centre of debate among scholars in media and communication studies. This paper is an attempt to introduce the general principles of Gallie's essentially contested concepts in the light of the widespread use of concept misunderstanding in this field of research where discourse is of central importance to researchers. We argue that the present essay explores primarily the option of placing more attention on theorizing rather than on theory. Accordingly, this article does seek to address the concepts of discourse in the established schools of discourse analysis within Gallie's framework aiming at settling the conflict over discourse by constructing epistemological bridge with Sartori's ladder of abstraction to overcome the problem of essential contestedness in media and communication studies.*

KEYWORDS: Essentially Contested Concepts, The Concepts of Discourse, Discourse Analysis, W.B.Gallie, Ladder of Abstraction, G.Sartori.

Introduction

An overview of the research literature in media and communication studies does reveal the variety of the used concepts. However, it does not mean that the conceptual framework entails methodological and epistemological challenges in the Algerian academic environment, as research practices in this context demonstrate that the conceptual framework is conducted in two ways. First, digging into the linguistic and semantic field, and the other is reviewing thesis's data base to retrieve the concept.

Viewed in this way, it is quiet known in media studies that concept, regardless of its cognitive structure and its field of development, is ultimately a linguistic formulation able to be defined and measured as well. From this way of thinking, the concepts are framed in the dictionaries, which represent only one side to approach any concept. Rather, it has built a representation in scientific research that looks at concept as a term available for direct application in the research.

By contrast, it must be said that understanding concepts is closely linked to the level of mastering the knowledge of their historical, cultural and social dimensions. These dimensions invite us to quote what the philosopher M. Weber concludes, as he believes that one of the factors for developing research in social sciences is the growing conflicts over the definitions of terms and concepts (Weber1949,103). In other words, conflict over concepts fuels concepts in their own, pushing them towards constant renewal in any academic field. This situation is almost similar to the nature of media and communication studies, which is marked by "its method of constructing topics and formulating its problem statements" (Davallon 2004,30).This paradigm is of central importance to focus on the structure of concepts and their cognitive backgrounds.

The purpose of this entry is to pave the way to present in details the idea of essentially contested concepts and its evolution and application in the context of media and communication studies.

Research problem and Objectives

As a matter of fact, it is useful to point out initially that the philosophy of the social sciences does not deny the existence of disputed concepts which are raised around them, and here we can mention, for instance: Ideology, Identity, Democracy, Populism, Terrorism, Gender, Values and so on. Such concepts have travelled from the social sciences to the other field of research. To illustrate this idea in media and communication studies, we identify that the scientific discourse on communication technologies in the Arab region has used many concepts such as Public Space, Civil Society, Digital Divide, and others as assumptions, but not as problematic concepts.

There has been a lack of debate over this point of view unless this type of problem exists in media and communication studies. In this direction, the issue of using discourse as a concept in our research environment has shown a little academic interest in it. Without doubts, we cannot ignore the difficulty of figuring out discourse due to the multiplicity of its research streams, intellectual roots as well as theoretical frameworks, which goes hand in hand with any attempt to scrutinise the "text" from a scientific angle. Furthermore, it is of crucial importance to pinpoint that studying the concept of discourse was not taken into consideration the problematic issues related to this concept as a research subject in the social sciences and media studies as well.

What matters here is that some academic works have not put discourse in its right scientific path, as it is not regarded as a problematic concept that evolves in its properties and renewal in its practices. Accordingly, in our path to reduce the gap between scholars over the concept*s* of discourse, we adopt the notion of *"theorizing",* defined by R.Swedberg as "a process and a reflective activity which differs from "theory", which is the end of product" (Swedberg 2011, 2-3). To be more explicit, theorizing is belonging to the context of discovery, while theory is part of the context of justification (Swedberg 2011,4-5). In approaching the topic of discourse in media studies, the objective of this paper is to rethink the concepts of discourse from the perspective of Gallie's essentially contested concepts, and then Sartori's abstraction ladder as well.

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In light of the foregoing, the research problem is guided by three fundamental research questions: (*a*) Is the awareness of discourse as an "essentially contested concept" considered as an epistemological bridge that allow us confronting the issue of misuse of discourse in media studies? (*b*) What are the limits of employing this framework? (*c*) And lastly, what can be put forward to address the conflictual aspect of the concept of discourse in media studies?.

This research questions will be addressed through the following research blueprint:
- Theoretical framework: The essentially contested concepts.
- Critiques of Gallie's essentially contested concepts.
- Is the concept of discourse in crisis?.
- Overcoming the essential contestedness of discourse.
- Discussions: Discourse's levels on the ladder of abstraction.

Theoretical Framework: The Essentially Contested Concepts
To begin with, we suggest that the essentially contested concepts (ECC) represent a useful point of departure for our study. It helps us to discuss different arguments about the concepts of discourse, and to explain why there is a growing scientific conflict over this concept in the fieldwork of media and communication. This conceptual thesis took shape within the research efforts of the British philosopher W.B. Gallie, in which he delivered a thesis based upon a matrix of ideas. Gallie's process can be divided into three phases:

Firstly, he presented his ideas initially in a paper discussed at a meeting of the Aristotelian Society in March 1956 in London, in which he broached how the conflict over concepts emerged, and as examples, he cited Art, Democracy, and Social Justice. The paper was then subsequently published in the Journal of the Aristotelian Society. Secondly, he published another academic essay in the Journal of Philosophical Affairs in April 1956, in which he delved into a discussion of the idea of art as an essentially contested concept. Lastly, his whole works have been gathered in a book entitled *Philosophy and Historical Understanding* published in 1968.

Aiming at demystifying concepts, Gallie has examined the question of how understanding the different and various applications of concepts in social research notably those that failed to make connections between term and meaning, by establishing coherent and rational arguments that can solve complex concepts (Gallie 1956B, 196). Furthermore, he proceeded to identify the limits of forming the conceptual framework, directing his thinking towards finding an explanation for the reasons behind the emergence of conceptual conflicts (D. Collier, F.D.Hidalgo, A. O.Maciuceanu 2006,212). From his point of view, scholars' lack of common foundations and unified principals for defining concepts is not the only reason to question them. He explains that by saying: *"Examining the uses and the arguments that support them shows that there is no general and clear use of concepts that can be considered only as the correct use. In fact, each party continues to believe that the special functions performed by the utterance are the correct, proper, essential, or important function that can be clearly expressed by the utterance in question. However, each party continues to defend its claim believing that it has arguments, evidence and other forms of justification"* (Gallie 1956A, 168) .

To discuss this philosophical question, Gallie has set out two preconditions. ***First***, the dispute prevails between the conflicting parties in the issue of the correct use of the concept. ***Second***, each party claims that its use of the concept is the correct one. On the basis of these two conditions, conceptual conflicts are established and manifested in two significant features. Firstly, it is a ***Perfectly Genuine***, which means that concept's structure contains properties or attributes that make them the subject of endless disputes about their proper uses. Secondly, it is related to the difficulty of settling the conflict between all parties because they are established on logical and rational thoughts, even if these disputes are difficult to solve, but the arguments that the conflicting parties rely upon are convincing arguments, aiming to prove that their use of the concept is still the correct use. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is one concept with several perceptions, or rather, several uses of a concept. Essentially contested

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concepts refer to their correct use and there are endless disputes over their correct usage by their proponents.

What attracts our attention here is that there are three important observations in Gallie's framework:

    a. Using the phrase *" the correct use"* instead of *"the correct definition"* of the concept is related to the basic ideas that shape any concepts ;

    b. Using the term *"essentially"* to refer to the inevitable nature of these conflicts, which are difficult be avoided or ignored in any sense;

    c. Using the term *"endless"* to describe the conflicts, referring to their permanent and intractable nature.

For his part, M. Freeden stands at the phrase essentially disputed and believes that it is not only associated with necessity, but it also includes inherent necessity, logical necessity that transcends both time and space, and extreme necessity in terms of social and political dimensions (Freeden 2014,42) . Now, we are going to explain the criteria set by Gallie to establish the essentially contested concepts framework. To lay the groundwork of this proposal, Gallie has suggested seven guiding principles that must be comprised by any concept in order to be classified as an essentially contested concept.

    a. **Appraisiveness,** it signifies that the concept has some kind of valued achievement;

    b. **Internally Complex**, as Gallie states, the achievement consists of several organised properties or attributes that deserve to be given the status of an indivisible whole;

    c. **Diverse Describability,** it underscores that any concept might be described in different ways and manners;

    d. **Openness,** an essentially contested concept is seen as open in its meaning in the sense as it is able be modified or adopted to the changing contexts or circumstances, and these alterations cannot be prescribed or even predicted in advance.

    e. **Reciprocal Recognition**, each party acknowledges that its own concept's use is disputed by the uses of the other parties, even if each party does not have at least some appreciation for the different criteria on which the others base their application of the concept in question. Gallie explains that by saying: ***"Using an essentially contested concept means using it against other uses and to recognise that one's own use of it has to be maintained against these other uses...in both aggressive and defensive manner"*** (Gallie, 1956A,p.172).

    f. **Exemplars,** A contested concept is anchored in an original exemplar, and the disputants do recognise its authority over the use of the concept. The link to the original exemplar plays a central role in distinguishing essentially contested concepts from confused ones.

    g. **Progressive Competition**, it is associated with the gradual and permanent conflict over concept's use contributes to maintaining the sustainability of the original exemplar and developing it under optimum conditions. Gallie also asserts that the centrality of the 6th and 7th conditions in explaining the use of essentially contested concepts, owing to the fact that using any concept is based upon the rivals' recognition that it is derived from an exemplar, and that the constant conflict over its use would fuel the development of the original model.

Critiques of Gallie's Essentially Contested Concepts

Despite that Gallie's ideas have been endorsed by a number of scholars interested in the political theory of concepts (Connolly1993,17), his ideas on concepts formation have not remained free of criticism, notably from researchers in American academic sphere, whom centered their criticisms towards the methodological effectiveness of this framework in the field of the social sciences. We are therefore trying to shed lights on some of these observations and criticisms made by scholars who scrutinised Gallie's contribution.

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Smith Kenneth	Gallie's priority in the formulation of this framework is given to endless dispute over the idea of the use. This trend has opened the door to the claim that inappropriate use of a concept is also appropriate even if the connotation and meaning of this concept are clear (Kenneth 2002, 332).
John Gray	The emergence of this type of concept would exacerbate the conceptual relativism, may be radical, or may turn into a self-contradiction (Gray1977, 341-343).
David Collier and his fellows	It is difficult to distinguish between concepts that are essentially contested and from those that are contested. The term "contesable", however, makes us expect the conflict to always occur, although there is a possibility that it exists during the analysis of the concept itself (D.Collier, F .D .Hidalgo, A .O.Maciuceani, 2006, p214).
Barry Clarke	Gallie's thesis did not establish a clear boundary between the notion of Contested and Contestable. Nor did it refer to his study explain the source of this conflict: is it the concept itself, or is there a non-conceptual disagreement between the disputants. This idea doesn't move the discussion in a productive direction and the costs of using conflicting concepts will result at introducing radical radicalism in scientific discourse. As a consequence, any "stupid" use of an essentially contested concept would be viewed as an alternative to the "stupid use" (Clarke1979, 124).
Samatha Besson	This category of concepts does not express normative rules for the question of variation from one person to another. Nevertheless, the correct use creates a state of incompatibility about its correct use. In other words, about what is the concept itself. It is obvious that these concepts are only contested, but that it is inherently contestable, and therefore not only in its uses, but also in its components parts and key properties are contestable (Besson 2004, 343).
Micheal Freeden	We have not reached a consensus between these concepts, which have been travelled to the contested area of conflict due to the inability to agree on how to evaluate them (Freeden 2004, 2-3).
John Gerring	Settling conflicts over concept by finding a rational solution is not an equation that is impossible to reach out. Scholars whom focussed on concept formation have concluded that the possibility of reaching a comprehensive and concise explanation of concept construction in the social sciences (Gerring 1999,367).

Table 1. Some Criticism of Essentially Contested Concepts' Contribution.

To summarise this phase, a critical reading of essentially contested concepts framework in the social sciences leads us to conclude that these debates are met in three points:

a. The authenticity and inevitability of these conceptual disputes;
b. The overlap between the concept as an abstract mental structure and the concept, which embodies this mental structure within an intellectual system;
c. The impossibility of settling these conceptual conflicts with rationally established justifications and arguments.

Therefore, we have taken the advantage of Gallie's framework as a criterion in the development of alternative approaches to analysing concept in varying contexts. To this point, it is worth heeding the fact that the absence of concept formation theory in the social sciences has permitted the emergence of concept misformation as the Italian thinker G.Sartori conceives it. Following the debate that can be

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carried over to discourse studies in the social sciences, using this framework to enhance discussions on "discourse" as an essentially contested concept, by taking into account the socio-historical context in which the diverse use of discourse have crystallised.

Is the Concept of Discourse in Crisis?
In order to deal with the most common concepts of discourse in social sciences, we benefit from the outcome of three scholars that have studied discourse as a subject of reflection, and hence we explore:

a. The classification adopted by R. Arnaud on the major schools of discourse analysis (Arnaud2009, 138);
b. The observations mentioned by D. Maingueneau on the development of discourse studies in these various schools (Maingueneau 2012B);
c. The proposal of R.Langer to classify the concepts of discourse employed in different approaches (Langer 1997).

In this sense, we suggest considering other approaches that are emerging in this research discipline. We would also add that we do not *only* rely upon these schools' definitions of discourse, but also to determine the field it covers, its features and properties. Hence, we try to recapitulate the principal definitions of discourse put forward by the different researchers.

At the outset, our attention has been drawn by the American Pragmatic School; lead by the the contributions of Z.Harris who deeply probes into the matter of discourse and he comprehends the notion of the discourse through the following properties:

- Discourse is a "text", and it is a sequence of grammatically acceptable sentences;
- The sequence constitutes the highest linguistic unit from which the formal analysis of language must proceed;
- The text is "speech acts" or "a series of speech acts" ;
- There is no preference between two topics or two types of linguistics, the linguistics of the tongue and the other of speech. Describing the data formally in terms of language and structure, is the practical concept that allows the study of linguistic phenomena (Maingueneau 1979A, 7).

In the same line of reasoning, E.Benveniste believes that any discourse can be grasped within the following perspective:

- The utterance is seen from the point of view of the mechanisms and processes of its functioning in communication;
- Pronunciation requires a speaker and a listener, as the speaker's goal is to influence the listener ;
- Language is a reservoir of compound signs according to a specific system that makes the speaker start - from the form that his speech apparatus takes - translate in his own way of speaking with distinctive phrases, which are precisely what the speaker adds to his speech, and to the outside world with his own tone, self-indicators, and personal character.

And furthermore, there is the contribution of J.P.Gee who assumes that the concept of discourse is at the end the language in-use, and it includes actions, interactive thinking, value, conversation, in the right way by means of the right props at the right time in the right place (Gee 2014, 17).

On the other side of the Atlantic, Britain has witnessed the establishment of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The pioneer of the latter approach is N.Fairclough who focuses his level of analysis on the following elements:

- Social practices that construct the meaning, or the interactive and contextual use of speech or the interdependence of use with practice;
- Discourse is a tool that produces and reproduces power relations within society, and it is an appropriate means to impose power in society;

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- The role of texts, that is, language and discourse, in building the social world;
- Power relations are at the end discursive relations, and discourse does shape society and culture,

The discourse carries out an ideological act; discourse carries a historical dimension (Fairclough 1995, 18).

In the same line of research, T.Van Djik proposes the Socio-Cognitive approach to cope with all sort of discourse within the social context. He has added some important details related to how we figure out the concept of discourse by saying:

- Discourse is synonymous with social or institutional use in daily speech. It is made of four dimensions: linguistics, perception, communicative opinion, and interaction. The production and reception of texts is based on perceptual systems called superstructures, which are individual and collective ideologies.
- Perceptual systems are the missing link between text and society, and between discourse structure and social structures (Langer1997, 11).

In contrast, linguistics studies in France have oriented their interests towards the study of the different functions of discourse in the social life. For F.De Saussure, discourse is "the speech" and it is the opposite of "the tongue and the language is part of the discourse. Nonetheless, R.Barthes does highlight that there is a symmetrical relationship between the narrative structure and the discourse in the formal organization of the text. In Barthes thoughts, it is the logic that apparently organizes all semiotic systems, regardless of their varying materials and dimensions. That is why the linguistic model includes all systems of verbal or non-verbal signification, and language strongly refers to discourse, as it is no longer similar to the language of linguists as Barthes mentioned.

Going deeper, both P.Charaudeau and D.Maingueneau have added new dimensions related to the existence and meaning of discourse in our daily life. They strongly defend the side of a wider understanding of this concept by spelling out three factors which are:

- Discourse is the language in itself, which is considered an activity in a context to construct meaning and social relationship.
- A means to link the linguistic and linguistic phenomenon with socio-psychological phenomena: by that we mean action and influence (Charaudeau, 2009B).
- Discourse has three dimensions :first, cognitive dimension that explores the semantic cognitive processes of the linguistic construction of the world. Second, social and socio-psychological dimension: it looks for the value of the exchange of connotations and the value of the influence. And finally, semiotic dimension that is linked to clarifying the relationship between the construction of meaning and the formation of forms, and how to adding a semiotic character to the meaning (Charaudeau 1995A).

The academic sphere in France has also monitored the growth of the ideological philosophical trend. This approach concentrates its critics on the limits of the linguistics studies and its methodological tools to analyse the concept of discourse. M.Foucault is one of the well-known leaders of this scientific movement; he cemented over his thought by setting out a series of ideas which are as follows:

- Discourse is an embodiment of will, power and authority. It is an object of desire, power and conflict;
- Its practices is placed at the socio-historical scope;
- The necessity of "liberating" discourse analysis from the dominance of the linguistic analysis;
- Discourse controls and defines social practices, and it does not only constitute a representation of external subjects, but rather enters into the process of building them (Keller 2012, 53).

Meanwhile, in the Vienna School, R.Wodak and F.Januschek lay the foundation of what they have coined "the historical method of discourse". They show a particular interest in understanding the concept

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of discourse within the scope of the multiple linguistic forms in the various expressions of power and its will. Furthermore, they both believe that discourse is a tool that works to produce and reproduce power relations within the society, which is the suitable means to impose power in society. Therefore, in the historical method, discourse is regarded as:

- Linguistic forms of social discourses at the micro level.
- The use of language as a social practice.
- Discourse is socially established and determined (Langer1997, 29).

In Germany, the notion of discourse has evolved differently, and so we can distinguish between three major trends. Firstly, Critical Analysis in Duisburg School lad by J.Siegfried who defined discourse as:

- Linguistic manifestations of the rhetorical practices.
- Texts are individual manifestations and social action, an expression of socio-historical knowledge in relation to a subject.
- Text is understood as fragments of discourses and building blocks that form chains of discourse.
- The flow of text, speech and knowledge over time (Langer, 1997,p.28).

Secondly, the Excursus Reading Analysis (ERA) suggested by the linguist U.Maas. In his works, he has defended the following stands:

- Linguistic patterns are strongly linked to the social practices, which must be investigated from both the social and historical perspectives;
- Discourse does not control its field and does not specify its time, but with its content. And it has three dimensions: rhetorical, historical an interpretive as well.

Lastly, the German School has also invented "Discourse Analysis from Sociology of Knowledge" (SKAD Analysis). It is a research programme initiated by the sociologist R.Keller who has claimed that discourse has a number of attributes which are:

- It represents a specific group of verbal practices, and a semiotic content that suggests a certain perceptual-symbolic structure of the real world;
- It constitutes meaning and reality for the real world;
- Real social practices embodied in the abilities of social actors to formulate topics for discussion, and make them end up in a diverse index that presents them as a social interpretation of those practices.
- It consists of the materiality of discourses, practices, dispositifs (Keller 2012, 59).

In Brussels School, however, E.Laclau and C.Mouffe urge to approach discourse with a critical eye by using a new grounded concepts. Noticeable, Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory has been based upon the concept of political hegemony.They argue that the relationship between discourse and texts must be reviewed, and they propose to debate five central ideas which are:

- Discourse is not a "text" but a political struggle for domination ;
- Discourse in itself represents a material thing that alone constitutes the external world.
- A set of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to social phenomena, and which are produced and reproduced through a set of practices;
- There is no distinction between discursive and non-discoursed dimensions of what is social;
- Rhetoric is not only what is said but also what we do (Laclau &Mouffe 2019, 188)

Generally speaking, the previous overview demonstrates that the concepts of discourse are floating in a complex zone of conflict and are seen cases of conceptual stretching. It can be clearly noticed that there are differences between scholars, linguists and non-linguists, regarding the definition of discourse, its

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features and properties as well. It has become a source of distinction and conflict between scholars belonging to the established schools of discourse analysis.

Within this perspective, we shall seek to explore how discourse is counted as an essentially contested concept. More precisely, we are going to try applying Gallie's seven conditions of essential contestedness on the field of discourse to confirm his belonging to the family of these concepts.

Gallie's Seven Conditions of Essential Contestedness	Discourse in the Major School of discourse analysis	Evaluation
1st condition *Appraisiveness*	An evaluating concept indicates that the linguistic use as an expression of social-ideological practices that guarantee its achievement and its continuation in a specific context.	**Fulfilled**
2nd condition **Internally complex**	The discrepancy in the definitions proposed in discourse studies clearly demonstrates the complexity of the internal structure of the concept	**Fulfilled**
3rd condition **Diverse Describability**	It can be described in many different styles.	**Fulfilled**
4th condition **Openness**	The case of conceptual stretching experienced by discourse since 1953 is translated this concept into open concept able to be revised partially, taking into account the changes that occur in it.	**Fulfilled**
5th condition **Reciprocal Recognition**	Scholars belonging to the major schools (mentioned above) are convinced that discourse has increasingly become essentially contested concept, and each side defends its definition and criticizes what rival schools propose.	**Fulfilled**
6th & 7th conditions **Exemplars And Progressive Competition**	The conflicting parties acknowledge that they are fighting over a common concept that is witnessing constant development and expansion as a result of that conflict.	**Fulfilled**

Table 2. Gallie's Seven Conditions on the Concepts of Discourse

Taking insights look into the outcome of the previous table demonstrates that the concepts of discourse used in the American, French, British and German schools, as well as the Vienna and Brussels schools, meet, *par excellence*, the seven conditions set *priori* by W. Gallie to fulfil the requirement of the essential contestedness in social research. To this point in the discussion, we assume that discourse is characterized by:

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a. There are various uses of the concept of discourse in light of the expansion of conceptual conflict among many scholars;
b. All the conflicting parties acknowledge that the discourse has become a subject of dispute between them ;
c. Each party in the conflict respect the evidence and arguments presented by the other party in defending its own view of using the concept of discourse.

In our opinion, it remains true to say that the concept of discourse is unstable; and it is in a constant state of having its chief criteria subject to contestation. Therefore, there is no single definition that can be given to discourse. The purpose of the above-mentioned observations is to build the epistemological context in which the necessary conflict prevails over the concept of discourse itself (Pennanen 2021, 40).This context is made of historicism and contributes to the better understanding of the nature, interpretation and scientific values of this conflict. Nevertheless, we can ask the following question: Is there a systematic solution to terminate the conceptual stretching of discourse? (Collier & Mahon1993, 845).This question is deeply examined by the Italian thinker G.Sartori, who proposes the *Ladder of Abstraction* with the objective of reaching the conceptual consensus in the field of research in social sciences.

Overcoming the Essential Contestedness of Discourse
Notwithstanding addressing the situation in which discourse is categorised as an essentially contested concept, our primary objective does remain the same: reducing the gap between the different schools of discourse analysis regarding the concept of discourse. We do not claim that we have a quick-fix solution to this problematic. Nonetheless, we shall try to answer this question by referring to *the Ladder of Abstraction*, an approach formulated by G.Sartori with the aims of overcoming the methodological setback when dealing with concepts misformation in the social sciences (Sartori1970, 1003).

Most importantly, the other purpose of this essay is to build an epistemological bridge between Gallie's essentially contested concepts and Sartori's ladder of abstraction, Or how Sartori's classic rules of concept formation can be employed to resolving discourse as an essentially contested concept. Now, let us grasp the essence of the ladder of abstraction. As noted, G.Sartori uses semiotic logic to complete the distinguishing part between the different properties of any concept. The table below is developed by G.Sartori to summarise his idea of the ladder of abstraction.

Levels of Abstraction	Major Comparative Scope and Purpose	Logical and Empirical Properties of Concepts
High-Level Categories: Universal conceptualisations	Global theory : Cross-area comparisons among heterogeneous contexts	Maximal extension, Minimal intension Definition by negation
Medium-Level Categories General conceptualisations and taxonomies	Middle-range theory: Intra-area comparisons among relatively homogeneous contexts	Balance of denotation with connotation Definition by analysis , i.e. per genus et differntiam
Low-Level Categories Configurative conceptualizations	Narrow-gauge theory : Country-by-country analysis	Minimal extension, Maximal intension, Contextual definition

Table 3. Sartori's Ladder of Abstraction

Source: Sartori, 1970, p1044

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In Sartori's explanation, climbing the abstraction ladder in both directions (ascent and descent) can produce two scenarios. **First**, broadening the ability of the term by reducing some of its main properties or attributes to obtain a general concept but without losing its accuracy and precision . **Second**, increasing the expansion of the term without reducing its content, that is, expanding the topics to which the term refers by making the concept meaningless, and hence, we do not get a general concept. In brief, the ladder of abstraction requires the following rule: the concept gains a higher level of abstraction by reducing its properties or attributes, so the degree of concept's abstraction is therefore linked to the extent of the cases which it covers, the more abstract the concept covers a wider range of cases, and the more concrete the concept covers a narrow range of cases. Largely, G.Sartori assigned concepts among three degrees, which are spelt out as follows:

First Degree: Universal Concepts

It includes concepts that belong to the higher-level category, and are obtained waiver of significance in order to meet the requirements of the assignment. These concepts are characterised by covering a wide range of topics and cases by using minimal properties or attributes.

Second Degree: General Concepts

These concepts belong to the medium level, and they are classified as general concepts in contrast to the universal concepts. This category does not require dropping all content in order to meet the requirements of capacity, but rather establishes a kind of balance between denotation and connotation. These concepts cover a range of cases, but narrower level compared to the high-level categories.

Third Degree: Conceptual Conception

These concepts are at the bottom of Sartori's ladder of abstraction. They belong to low-level concepts, and have very specific configurative conceptualisations, containing the upper limit of term's content. The minimum of its amplitude are obtained by reducing the denotation meaning to satisfy the precision of the connotation meaning.

To bring out the importance of this point, Sartori asks a key question: How do we climb the ladder from the bottom to the up? The answer is to expand the scope of concept's coverage by dropping certain properties or attributes from its structure, which is, increasing its capacity by reducing its connotations. By the end of this process, we will obtain a more general and inclusive concept without impacting its semantic contents or empirical testability.

G.Sartori sums up this situation by mentioning: "it will not be possible to climb the ladder of abstraction and move between its levels (from down to up), unless we reduce the load of the concept: the lighter the weight of the concept, the easier it travels between those levels"(Sartori1970, 1044).To which P. Mair comments in metaphorical way by saying: "... They are like hot-air balloons; they need to be lightened before they can be moved very far" (Mair 2008, 192).

Having outlined Sartori's approach of concept formation, it is fundamental to keep in our mind that the movement across the abstraction ladder is up and down instead of transversal. It is also useful to emphasise that the concepts of discourse have always been at the centre of the debate between scholars in media studies. We offer this good example to see how discourse as an essentially contested concept can travel across the ladder of abstraction by throwing out some of its properties or attributes to become more abstract concept.

Discussions: Discourse's Levels on the Ladder of Abstraction.

From what has been said so far, we are going to start with the question of the concepts of discourse (see Table. N°1) . Our strategy is at first glance a rethinking of the major schools' definitions of discourse. It does seem to us that mastering the concepts of discourse begin with defining the nature of the relationship between discourse itself and text, and by applying Sartori's abstraction ladder; we have come up to the following cases:

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Firstly, *discourse is a text*, it is a universal concept that covers a wide range of cases and thereby to widen its scope as its properties are diminished. It is an abstract concept belonging to the high-level categories.

Secondly, *discourse is a text that has a social practice*, which may have ideological, historical and psychological dimensions. The concept of discourse is at the medium level, and it is classified in the category of general concepts. It involves a wide range of cases and phenomena, but it is narrower compared to the concept of high-level categories. And lastly, *discourse is not a text*, which is a universal concept defined by negation (the object is known by its Ex adverso). In this situation, discourse becomes more universal and abstract concept that covers a wide range of cases.

So, and by applying Sartori's rules on the case of discourse, we obtain two abstract concepts (precise and focused): discourse is a text, and discourse is not a text, along with a third definition of a general concept that is at the medium level of the ladder of abstraction.

Epistemologically, reviewing the concepts of discourse, according to the logic of paradigms, highlights that the angle of view and treatment stays determined by the discourse-text relationship. Taking advantage of the three cases that resulted from the practical application of the ladder of abstraction on the concept of discourse. So, we come to the conclusion that we can put forward a project to review the classification of the major schools of discourse analysis, which is worthwhile to discourse from the perspective of paradigms:

a. **Linguistic paradigm**: it starts from the assumption that discourse is a text (abstract concept), manifested only in a linguistic practice (speech act) in the society. This tendency is common to Z.Harris, E.Benveniste, J.P. Gee and F. De Saussure.

b. **Paralinguistic paradigm**: This tendency advocates studying the relationship of discourse with the text as a socially constructed practice, which may have ideological, historical and psychological dimensions (general concept). Among those who paid a particular attention to this aspect are: R.Barthes, P. Charaudeau and D.Maingueneau (French School), N.Fairclough and T.Van Djik (British School), R.Wodak and F.Januschek (Vienna School), J.Siegfried and U.Maas and R.Keller (German School).

c. **Philosophical-ideological paradigm**: it defends the idea that discourse is as not a text (abstract concept), but an ideological act manifested in the multiple forms of social practices, centered on the production of power and knowledge in the social institutions. This tendency has been flourished by M.Foucault (French School), E.Laclau and C.Mouffe (Brussels School).

As such, conceptual conflict over discourse can be mitigated by drawing on the three cases that have resulted from the application of Sartori's abstraction level, and supporting this by going beyond the traditional classification of discourse, in favour of adopting the logic of paradigms by referring to the discourse-text coherence.

Conclusions

This study has shed lights on the original contribution of essentially contested concepts, and how the concept of discourse fulfils the conditions to be considered as being essentially contested in media and communication studies. However, discourse as an essentially contested concept is not perceived as a problematic concept, but rather as a concept that is often formulated and framed, and the researcher has to quote it from a literature review in order to avoid discussing this aspect in his/her study. This research practice does not deal with the crisis of discourse as a concept and its uses in the social research.

In reality, we are acutely aware of the difficulty of establishing a bridge between discourse as an essentially contested concept and the ladder of abstraction in order to bring the views of the conflicting parties closer together. Hence, to alleviate the degree of dispute over the concept of discourse, and looking for a common ground between researchers interested in this discipline of research.

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In this sense, it is useful to pinpoint that the concept of discourse can be identified in three ways : "discourse is a text", "discourse is not a text", which are both abstract concepts, while there is a third definition that believes that discourse is a text in relation to social practices in its ideological, historical and psychological dimensions. Thus, discourse turns into more abstract concept able to travel farther and farther to cover the largest possible number of cases in different contexts.

In closing, our work is just an essay that tries to open the windows to see the world of concepts differently in our research environment. We do believe that it will not be the end of the debate about the concepts of discourse, or the essentially contested concept or even the ladder of abstraction, but it is the beginning of what media and communication studies in our universities need to fertilise its academic works and push it towards more efficiency.

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