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Ideology in Language Use

Pragmatic Guidelines for Empirical Research

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To the memory of Tim McDaniel:
True scholar, great friend

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Preface

The public sphere is an arena with never-ending struggles over meaning. Situations may ‘arise’ but, more often than not, human agents are involved whose decisions and actions are based on assessments of and disputes over a present or prior context as well as hopes for the future. Decisions have to be argued for in advance. Actions may require subsequent legitimation. The idea that an issue – any issue – could be settled once and for all is an illusion. Not so long ago, for instance, some of us were convinced that Europeans’ views of their past as colonizers had finally matured, a strongly critical stance being allowed to come to the foreground. As in other areas of debate, however, the pendulum kept swinging. A social and political dynamics trying to cope with more recent questions concerning diversity and patterns of dominance, and the possible conclusions one might have to draw on the basis of an admission of past errors, led, in France, to the adoption of law 2005-158 (23 February 2005), “portant reconnaissance de la Nation et contribution nationale en faveur des Français rapatriés.”¹ Article 1 says,

La Nation exprime sa reconnaissance aux femmes et aux hommes qui ont participé à l’oeuvre accomplie par la France dans les anciens départements français d’Algérie, au Maroc, en Tunisie et en Indochine ainsi que dans les territoires placés antérieurement sous la souveraineté française.²

With this opening article, as well as with the title, this law casts itself as a means of protecting French citizens who served in former French colonies against undue personal disregard and disapprobation. This is fully compatible with the many practical measures specified in the law to the benefit of those citizens, or with an article explicitly prohibiting attacks on anyone identifiable as or supposed to have been an *harki*, an Algerian soldier loyal to the French during the Algerian War of Independence. This noble goal of protecting individuals who can barely be held responsible *as* individuals for policies of the state is used in passing,

¹ See Claude Liauzu (2005); “bearing on recognition of the Nation and the national contribution in favor of the repatriated French.” Note that, throughout this book, all translations from French sources are my own.

² “The Nation expresses its recognition of the women and men who have participated in the work accomplished by France in the former French departments in Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Indochina as well as in the territories placed earlier under French sovereignty.”

however, as a frame of legitimation for measures with clear *ideological significance*. Thus Article 4 says,

Les programmes de recherche universitaire accordent à l'histoire de la présence française outre-mer, notamment en Afrique du Nord, la place qu'elle mérite.

Les programmes scolaires reconnaissent en particulier le rôle positif de la présence française outre-mer, notamment en Afrique du Nord, et accordent à l'histoire et aux sacrifices des combattants de l'armée française issus de ces territoires la place éminente à laquelle ils ont droit.³

This is a straightforward instruction for history writing and history teaching. The heart of the matter is a definition of events, discursively generated meaning, which enters the cycle of assessments, arguments, decisions, actions, legitimations.

The purpose of this book is to provide a research tool, methodological building blocks, for the investigation of such processes. Its background is linguistic pragmatics, the interdisciplinary science of *language use*. But the target audience includes students in all fields of inquiry to which the societal construction of frames of reference or ways of viewing actions and events, as mediated through discourse, is relevant: historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists, to name just a few broad categories.

The book has been specifically designed for training purposes. That is why there is an extensive appendix ([Appendix 2](#)) with the texts I use for purposes of illustration – all taken from history textbooks published during the transition years from the nineteenth to the twentieth century and bearing on colonial history. No full-scale analysis is provided. Rather, issues for analytical attention are defined and illustrated. [Appendix 2](#) is sufficiently rich to allow further practice of all angles of approach reviewed in this book without a student having to go through the process of looking for appropriate materials which require their own contextual specifications before matters of detail can be addressed. These extracts are also available online at www.cambridge.org/verschueren

Unoriginal as it may sound, this book has been much too long in the making. A skeletal picture was presented as early as 1996 at the 5th International Pragmatics Conference in Mexico City. First it had to wait for two other book projects to be completed, then an eight-year spell as dean of my faculty at the University of Antwerp took my mind and time in other directions.

During that latter period, fortunately, I enjoyed a three-month research stay at Monash University (June–September 2004), during which the first half of this book was written. I will be forever grateful to Keith Allan for inviting me and providing a stimulating environment for research, which has led to other

³ “University research programs give the history of French overseas presence, specifically in North Africa, the place it deserves.

Educational programs recognize in particular the positive role of the French overseas presence, specifically in North Africa, and grant the history and the sacrifices of the soldiers in the French army coming from these territories the eminent place to which they are entitled.”

fruitful forms of collaboration as well (most recently, the organization of the 11th International Pragmatics Conference, July 2009, in Melbourne); to Marko Pavlyshyn and Brian Nelson, heads – before and after my arrival, respectively – of my host institution, the School of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics; to Irene Romanowski and Lona Gottschalk, for their logistical support; to Brian Gerrard and Richard Overell of the Rare Books section of Monash's Sir Louis Matheson Library, who were helpful beyond the call of duty while I was collecting most of the sources I am now using as illustrative data; and to many Melbourne colleagues, including Kate Burridge, Michael Clyne, Marisa Cordella, Ana Deumert, and Anna Margetts, for useful discussions.

After Monash, the half-finished manuscript entered a dormant state again, to the great frustration of a number of doctoral students who could have used better-developed methodological advice in their language-and-ideology-related endeavors, until I emerged from the deanship at the end of September 2009. I completed this book while enjoying the hospitality of the *École des hautes études en sciences sociales* (ÉHESS) and the *Maison des sciences de l'homme* (MSH) in Paris. I owe a serious debt of gratitude to Michel de Fornel (Centre linguistique anthropologique et sociolinguistique), and Louis Quéré (Centre d'études des mouvements sociaux) for their kind invitations to ÉHESS, Institut Marcel Mauss; to Michel Wieviorka, Director of the Fondation MSH, and Jean-Luc Lory, Director of the Maison Suger (Fondation MSH), for providing the unparalleled hospitality at 16–18 rue Suger; to the entire staff of the Maison Suger for making life so easy. I also thank FWO-Vlaanderen for financially supporting the sabbatical year I was enjoying, the University of Antwerp for granting me a leave of absence, and Bruno Tritsmans, my successor as dean of the Faculty of Arts, for systematically not bothering me with all the unfinished business I left behind.

In the course of the past fifteen years, roughly, I have been able to benefit from working with many students and close colleagues, traces of whose contributions are no doubt to be found in the following pages. A minimal list includes Kaspar Beelen, Jan Blommaert, Frank Brisard, Chris Bulcaen, Eric Caers, Jonathan Clifton, Roel Coesemans, Pol Cuvelier, Helge Daniëls, Walter De Mulder, Patrick Dendale, Sigurd D'hondt, Gino Eelen, Isabel Gomez Diez, Geert Jacobs, Jürgen Jaspers, Lut Lams, Gilberte Lenaerts, Katrijn Maryns, Michael Meeuwis, Liesbeth Michiels, Eva Palmans, Stefanie Peeters, Kim Sleurs, Dorien Van de Mieroop, Sarah Van Hoof, Tom Van Hout, Eline Versluys, Matylda Weidner, and Jan Zienkowski. Outside this immediate past and present circle, in order not to forget too many colleagues whose ideas have had an impact on my own thinking, I must restrict myself to a few of the guests received at the IPrA Research Center (ipra.ua.ac.be) over the years: Monica Aznárez, Teresa Carbó, Paul Chilton, Jenny Cook-Gumperz, Carmen Curcó, Baudouin Dupret, Irene Fonte, John Gumperz, 'Daisy' Jiang Hui, Monika Kopytowska, Rūta Marčinkevicienė, Luisa Martín Rojo, Inés Olza, Rod Watson, Igor Žagar, and, last but not least, Jan-Ola Östman, who is probably my steadiest fellow traveler in academia. I would like to reserve a special mention for three historians. Steven Epstein strengthened my

belief in the potential relevance of a pragmatics-based approach to historical data during the discussions we had while we were co-residents at the Bellagio Study and Conference Center (February–March 1997) and by demonstrating it in his *Speaking of Slavery* (2001). At the University of Antwerp, interesting collaboration on historical data is being developed with Henk de Smaele and Marnix Beyen; Marnix also undertook a thorough critical reading of the post-Melbourne half of the manuscript, saving me from some important errors. Finally, this book benefits from a last-minute reading by Johannes Angermüller, and from extensive comments by Rod Watson and two anonymous reviewers as well as a dedicated editor, Helen Barton, production editor Elizabeth Davey, and copy-editor Karen Anderson Howes at Cambridge University Press. All remaining mistakes are of course my own responsibility.

Acknowledgements are not complete without thanking Ann Verhaert (some 13,000+ times) for sharing work and life.

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Introduction

Consider a few simple anecdotes that may clarify the topic of this book and hint at its basic tenets.

The first one relates to an old friend who once said, when our conversation turned to a war that was front-page news at the time, “Let ideologies die, let people live.” A lifetime of experience lay behind this recipe. Born a Bolivian German, he received his education in Germany in the 1930s. Imbued with Nazi propaganda, he enlisted, was sent to the eastern front, and survived a dangerous head injury, but would have gone back to fight if he had been strong enough after his recovery. His beliefs were not shaken until most of the cruel and criminal realities of the Nazi regime had been fully exposed, forcing the viewpoint of the victims upon anyone who did not refuse to see. During the days when we were neighbors in his new home country, the USA, he used to frown a bit sadly whenever his president explained why another war needed to be fought. *Déjà vu*. And he understood why the rhetoric worked.

In a different context, I listened to Regina Schwartz’s story of how she used to teach about the Bible with great enthusiasm. She viewed the Exodus as the central event of the narrative, a myth of liberation directly relevant to cries for freedom and emancipation movements of the day. Until a student asked, “What about the Canaanites?” This embarrassing shift of perspective, focusing on the conquest and exile of the ‘Others’, led to her book-length answer to the student’s question, *The Curse of Cain* (Schwartz 1997), in which she unveils the other side of the Bible as a story of collective identity construction (one God, one land, one people, one nation) which may lend itself – and often did – to endless legitimations of violence and injustice.

The third anecdote bears on personal experience as a seventeen-year-old Flemish student in the late 1960s, when I participated in a demonstration demanding separation between the Francophone and the Flemish parts of the University of Leuven, and the removal of the Francophone section from the Flemish city of Leuven altogether. Riding the waves of the international student movement of those days, we were led to believe that we were fighting for democracy by returning to Francophone Belgium their own university (which would make it less ‘elitist’) while safeguarding Flanders from another ‘oil slick’ such as the bilingual (but French-dominated) Brussels spreading in the middle of Flemish

territory.¹ Years later, as a graduate student in Berkeley, a Jewish-American fellow student asked me during a dinner party to explain why the University of Leuven had to be split in two. It struck me that I had never really questioned the measures that were taken, even though in the process an entire new city was created, Louvain-la-Neuve. I did not get beyond the reproduction of commonplaces such as “Otherwise Leuven would have become another Brussels.” “What is so terrible about Brussels?” my interrogator continued. I parroted some more platitudes until the cross-examination culminated in a verdict: “Look, Nazi prosecution of German Jews did not start with concentration camps – it started with relocations!” It did not take me too much longer, fortunately, to understand that the ‘Belgian model’ for dealing with diversity, which I had never questioned (imagine, an aspiring linguist not questioning the institutionalization of a language border, nor the equation – even if metaphorical – of the spread of a language with environmental pollution!), was in fact a peaceful version of what would, years later, be called ‘ethnic cleansing.’

These are just three anecdotes, but each of them illustrates the strength of what is commonly referred to as *ideology*. Once ways of thinking about relations between groups of people are felt to be ‘normal’, they may become powerful tools for legitimating attitudes, behavior, and policies, whatever the frequently negative consequences in terms of discrimination, patterns of dominance, and even violence. Each of the anecdotes also shows, however, that changes of perspective are possible. Such shifts usually require critical incidents, but since ideological struggle (and, by extension, most social struggle) centers around *meaning*, simple acts of *questioning* may be enough. Its power and its changeability² turn ideology into a necessary object of systematic scrutiny in the social sciences. Research may not only help us to gain a better understanding of some of the processes of meaning generation that affect everyone’s life, but it may also provoke the kind of questioning needed to pave the way for attempts at improving the fate of the less powerful. This expression of hope is purposefully naïve, aware of the limited contribution a researcher can make, but refusing to

¹ Note the subtly aberrant use of “returning.” The Francophone section of the University of Leuven had never been anywhere outside Leuven, where French and later (Flemish) Dutch became the languages of teaching after Latin had been abandoned. For those too young to remember, or too far removed: The establishment of a language border in 1963 created two officially monolingual territories in Belgium, the outcome of what started as an emancipatory struggle ending the *de facto* dominance of French in public institutional life in spite of the numerical majority of Flemish speakers. It left only Brussels as a bilingual island in otherwise Flemish territory. In that context, the presence of a partly Francophone institution in the Flemish city of Leuven was felt to be an ‘undemocratic’ anomaly by many Flemish politicians and activists.

² Changeability takes different forms. It may also mean, for instance, that perspectives are not necessarily applied logically in the same way to the same types of phenomena at different times or in different contexts. I will come back to this property of ideologies later. But it may be useful to point to an example here: The old friend from the first anecdote suddenly showed fewer objections when the bombing of Yugoslavia started under the Clinton administration. Yugoslavia was at the time the only remaining European communist country; though he had obviously shed the old Nazi ideology, it may simply have been harder to get rid of the corresponding (but easily detachable) anti-communism.

be immobilized by such awareness. The limitations are serious indeed. In order to have any impact, changes of perspective should extend beyond the individual. Some of the more effective instruments to bring this about are education and the mass media; though both are indeed instruments of change, they are also entangled in the structures of power that will resist change.³ Moreover, any new perspective is susceptible to unpredictable transformations and applications. A permanent monitoring of ideological processes, therefore, is imperative.

In other words, I fully side with Eagleton's (2007, p. xxiii) observation that "it is because people do not cease to desire, struggle and imagine, even in the most apparently unpropitious of conditions, that the practice of political emancipation is a genuine possibility." However constraining frames of thought may be, people do not just passively absorb them; the importance – and potential – of agency should never be ignored.

There has been a lot of theorizing about ideology. It would take us too far – and within the scope of one small book certainly not far enough – to give an overview. For a history of the concept and an overview of its various manifestations, I would refer the reader to McLellan (1995), Heywood (2007), and Billig (1982), depending on whether one wants a brief introduction, a focus on political issues, or an emphasis on social-psychological implications, respectively. An interesting selection of readings, some more basic than others, is to be found in Žižek (ed.) (1994). Theoretically coherent treatments of the topic, from an angle that is closely related to my own, are developed by Thompson (1984, 1990, 1995) and – possibly with the closest affinity to the tenets of this book – by Eagleton (2007). Also relevant is the tradition of the sociology of knowledge (Mannheim 1936, Berger and Luckmann 1966), which often deals with ideological issues without using that term, as well as the microsociological, praxis-oriented, often ethno-methodological studies of the situated production of knowledge (e.g., Garfinkel 1967, Goffman 1981). For a critical elaboration of some of the fundamental issues involved in the connections between discourse and power or between discourse and knowledge, in relation to which ideology can be defined, the reader may turn, for instance, to Bourdieu (1991), Foucault (1972), or the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory (e.g., Habermas 1979). My own theoretical starting point is summarized as briefly as possible in [Chapter 1](#) of this book.⁴

What must be kept in mind from the outset is that my use of the term 'ideology' bears on much more mundane and everyday processes than the grand political

³ On a similar note, Hobsbawm (1997, p. 363) says, "The third limitation on the historian's function as mythslayer is even more obvious. In the short run they are impotent against those who choose to believe historical myth, especially if they hold political power, which, in many countries, and especially the numerous new states, entails control over what is still the most important channel of imparting historical information, the schools." He adds: "These limitations do not diminish the public responsibility of the historian."

⁴ Further reading: Ball and Dagger (2001, 2004), Baradat (1999), Barth (1961), Bell (1960), Boudon (1986), Decker (2004), Eagleton (ed.) (1994), Hawkes (2003), Larrain (1994), Meyer *et al.* (eds.) (2009), Smith (2001), Susser (1988), Talshir, Humphrey and Freedon (eds.) (2006), Taylor (2010), Žižek (ed.) (1989, 2005).

strands of thought it is usually associated with (such as liberalism, conservatism, socialism, Marxism, nationalism, anarchism, fascism, fundamentalism, and the like). This is true even if my opening anecdotes touch upon ways of thinking that are not unrelated to what goes under such ‘isms.’ Moreover, I explicitly distance myself from a reification of ideology that would posit it as an autonomous reality in the world of thought in contrast with discourse, or with history, in such a way as to talk of dominance and hegemony as facts rather than processes. In other words, praxis and processes are the real focus.

In contrast to the abundance of theories, there is a true scarcity of methodological reflections and in particular of research guidelines. When guidelines are formulated, either they tend to remain vague or they give the impression that simple steps can lead from observations to interpretations. A lack of procedural openness often leads to conclusions with insufficiently explained foundations, while a lack of procedural systematicity may produce results that make it hard to distinguish between preconceived ideas, research findings, and mere speculation.⁵ The main purpose of this book, then, is to reflect on methodological requirements for empirical ideology research, and in particular to offer procedures for engaging with ideology in practice.⁶ Without, at this stage, going into the details of what ‘ideology’ may mean precisely, it should be clear that here the term is not used unless social phenomena, processes, and relations are at stake. The study of ideology, therefore, is not a gratuitous endeavor. It always touches upon issues of great consequence. Its findings may also have consequences, or efforts may be made to use or abuse them in the pursuit of specific goals affecting the lives of real people. As a result, a serious degree of responsibility is involved and the need for methodical analysis, controllability, and accuracy can hardly be overestimated. I hope to bring research practice closer to those ideals with the proposals that make up the substance of this book. Hence the desire to formulate guidelines for research that is truly ‘empirical’ – not to be confused with ‘empiricist.’ A side effect may be that the guidelines themselves, though inspired by a theoretical position on the notion of ideology, may turn ideology into a more ‘operational’ notion, thus eliminating some of the fuzziness in which it tends to be couched.

The venture is ‘reflexive’ in a literal sense. The need for it developed in the course of research into a societal debate surrounding the presence of ‘migrants’ in Belgium and in particular in Flanders.⁷ This research was not originally

⁵ See, for instance, my (Verschueren 2001) critique of a type of critical discourse analysis, as represented by Norman Fairclough (1992), as well as my more general warnings (in Verschueren 1999c) related to the risk of ideologized research in the wider domain of linguistic pragmatics (i.e., the science of language use). Helpful examples or overviews of methods of discourse and text analysis, many of them relevant for ideology research, can be found in Cap (2002), Jalbert (ed.) (1999), Mann and Thompson (1992), Renkema (ed.) (2009), Titscher *et al.* (1998), and Wodak and Meyer (eds.) (2009).

⁶ Two highly recommended recent books with goals close to my own, but different in approach and with a different scope, are Chilton (2004) and Scollon (2008).

⁷ The research in question has been reported in numerous publications, including Blommaert and Verschueren (1991b, 1993, 1994, and in particular 1998); the scope of the same line of research

defined as ideology research at all, and there was no definition of ideology at its source. Rather, it was a spinoff of an earlier interest in problems of intercultural and international communication.⁸ In a heterogeneous social world – i.e., in *any* social world – questions about communication beyond the level of the purely individual (and sometimes even at that level) are inseparable from ideas about group identities and intergroup relations. Similarly, questions related to the discourse on ‘migrant problems’ turned out to be inseparable from ideas about what a society should look like. Hence our shorthand description of the minority–majority debate, as conducted in this case primarily by members of the majority, as a *debate on diversity*. For reasons that will become clear in [Chapter 1](#), this overarching issue can only be described as ideological. Hence the redefinition of an investigation into a specific intercultural communication topic as a type of ideology research. It is this investigation that, retroactively, will serve as a first systematic point of reference for the more general theoretical and methodological reflections in this book (mainly in [Chapters 1](#) and [2](#)). For the sake of brevity, it will be referred to, whenever necessary, as our ‘migrant research’.

One other type of data source, of a strictly historical nature, will be used equally systematically but much more extensively, starting with the general theoretical and methodological principles (in [Chapters 1](#) and [2](#)) all the way through the details of research guidelines and procedures (in [Chapter 3](#)). It consists in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century discourse on (parts of) the colonial world and colonization in French and British history textbooks, starting in particular from Lavissee (1902) and narrowing the topic to accounts of the 1857 ‘Indian Mutiny’ in a wide range of British counterparts. In contrast to the migrant research, which can be looked back upon to be evaluated in terms of the principles put forward in this book (though the materials are too elaborate for them to be a usefully coherent point of reference when we come to detailed guidelines and procedures), the history book materials have not yet been the subject of a full analysis and are adduced for the purposes of illustrating actual research processes, showing how the relevant questions can be asked and the appropriate steps can be taken in conducting an ideology-oriented investigation; needless to say, the ‘reflection’ involved here is of a different nature.

The temptation to supplement systematic reference to the ‘debating diversity’ or ‘migrant’ research (in [Chapters 1](#) and [2](#)) and these historical textbook writings bearing on aspects of colonization (in [Chapters 1](#), [2](#) and [3](#)) with more sporadic examples (which could be amply provided by accounts of events in the world today) will be resisted. For different types of examples, the reader may consult

was extended beyond Belgium into the realm of European nationalist tendencies in Blommaert and Verschuere (1992, 1996), Meeuwis (1993), and D’hondt, Blommaert and Verschuere (1995). Earlier attempts at deriving methodological guidelines and procedures are reflected in Verschuere (1995, 1996) and in chapter 8 of Verschuere (1999b).

⁸ This earlier interest is reflected in Verschuere (1984, 1985a, 1989) as well as in Blommaert and Verschuere (eds.) (1991a).

earlier work leading up to this book,⁹ while it should be clear that the recommendations in the following pages are intended to be relevant for any topically selected discourse-based study of ideological patterns and processes.¹⁰

The theoretical [Chapter 1](#) will be followed by ‘rules of engagement’ ([Chapter 2](#)), the most general preliminary guidelines for engaging with ideology. [Chapter 3](#), the bulkiest part of this book, will go into the more practical guidelines and procedural details specifying how to investigate ideology empirically. This enterprise goes against the grain of a widespread anti-methodological stance, as embodied in the suggestion “that more understanding is to be gained by using the traditional, ill-defined skills of scholarship than by following a rigorous, up-to-date methodology” (Billig 1988, p. 199). The main challenge will be to avoid a situation in which “The reliance upon a single methodology would inevitably dull the critical edge” (Billig 1991, p. 22), while at the same time being precise enough to make the guidelines operational. This may amount to showing that a clear set of guidelines and procedures, based on equally clear general principles, formulated in such a way that it is adequate for the empirical study of ideology, should never be describable as ‘a single methodology’ and does not fit the caricature of methodology as an impersonal set of rules that will inevitably lead two researchers to identical results.¹¹ A methodologically adequate approach should enable two researchers to sensibly compare and evaluate their results beyond the mere voicing of contrasting opinions.

⁹ In particular, D’hondt, Blommaert and Verschuere (1995), Meeuwis (1993), Verschuere (1996, 1999b, 2001). The growing literature on language ideologies provides another ‘case’ with systematic alternative sets of examples; see, e.g., Bauman and Briggs (2003), Blommaert (ed.) (1999b), Gal and Woolard (eds.) (2001); for an overview, Kroskrity (2010).

¹⁰ See, e.g., Verschuere, Östman and Meeuwis (2002) for a specific field of investigation defined as the monitoring of international communication, which can easily be seen as an endeavor that would benefit from an application of the methods advocated in this book.

¹¹ The wording of this sentence was inspired by the fact that Billig’s (1988) plea for “traditional scholarship” as opposed to “a rigorous, up-to-date methodology” adduces only an example of quantitative content analysis to illustrate the inadequacy of “methodology” to achieve an understanding of ideology. That is what I am alluding to as a caricature of methodology.

1 Language use and ideology

Though the concept started its career that way, ‘ideology’ is no longer seen as the systematic analysis of sensations and ideas which should provide the basis for all scientific knowledge.¹ Ideology is no longer an academic discipline, but rather an object of investigation. It is related to *ideas*, *beliefs*, and *opinions*, but this relationship is not a straightforward one. Ideas, beliefs, and opinions, as such, do not make ideology. Simplifying a bit, they are merely ‘contents of thinking,’ whereas *ideology* is associated with *underlying patterns of meaning*, *frames of interpretation*, *world views*, or *forms of everyday thinking and explanation*. Thus the ways in which beliefs, ideas, or opinions are discursively used, i.e. their *forms of expression* as well as the *rhetorical purposes* they serve, are just as important for ideology as the contents of thinking for which these three terms serve as labels.²

Let me illustrate this first point by asking whether there is anything ideological about an utterance such as the final one in the [introduction](#) to this book:

A methodologically adequate approach should enable two researchers to sensibly compare and evaluate their results beyond the mere voicing of contrasting opinions.

This utterance certainly expresses an idea or opinion and – unless it is insincere – a belief. In order to identify ideological content, however, a deeper level of meaning would have to be found that we may expect to serve as a wider frame of interpretation or as a pattern of explanation that can be directed at multiple targets, thus with the potential of transcending the *ad hoc* character of the example under consideration. One such meaningful element, reflected in but not recoverable with certainty from the quoted utterance, could be the general way of thinking about language (i.e., possibly a ‘language ideology’) that enables the author to refer to “the mere voicing of contrasting opinions.” Implicitly, this phrase presents language (“voicing”) as a potentially straightforward (“mere”) vehicle

¹ I am referring to the French philosopher Antoine Destutt de Tracy who launched this endeavor in 1796 in order to spread the ideas of the Enlightenment. The scholars who worked with him in the pursuit of this goal are generally known as *les idéologues*. See Destutt de Tracy (1803).

² When we talk about ideas, beliefs, and opinions, we generally think of highly differentiated mental phenomena (measurable, for instance, by means of opinion polls, designed to identify types and degrees of variability). One could be tempted, therefore, to regard them as the volatile and variable counterparts to supposedly stable patterns and frames that would constitute ideology. However, it would be misleading to ignore the dynamics and variability characterizing ideology itself, as will be shown later.

for the expression of ideational contents (“opinions”) which may be identifiably separable (“contrasting”) entities. Let us call this perspective on language, for the time being, the ‘vehicle view of language.’³ Whether the present author actually subscribes to that view is irrelevant at this point but will have to be addressed later.

A second aspect of a first approximation of the concept of ideology can also be discussed in relation to the closing utterance in my introduction. In addition to expressing an idea, that utterance is also a *maxim*, a succinctly formulated basic principle or rule of conduct. It expresses a (research) *attitude*, adherence to certain *values*, and even a (research) *mentality*. This observation, in its own right, is not enough to qualify the utterance unequivocally as an ideological claim. Ideological patterns of meaning are rarely so plainly prescriptive. Typically, *ideology* – and hence its discursive manifestation – *balances description and prescription* (both of which can be explicit and implicit to varying degrees). In other words, it involves theories of how things are in combination with theories of how things should be. An explicit rule of conduct, as in the utterance under discussion, by no means guarantees the presence of a general underlying pattern of meaning and interpretation that would deserve the label ideology. The prescriptiveness of ideology consists mainly in a form of *normativity* that is akin to *commonsensicality*. The products of common-sense reflections (mainly descriptive) are turned into norms (both in the sense of what is seen as normal, and in the regulative and prescriptive sense). Furthermore, the common sense in question is not the invention of individuals, but common sense with a history, common sense that members of a wider community appeal to in order to be persuasive. Hence, nothing can be said on this score about the ideological caliber of the utterance without a further exploration of the wider discourse it fits into, much of which is still to be produced/interpreted at the time this sentence is written/read.⁴

Before moving on, I should not leave any doubt about the fact that ideology is a fully integrated *sociocultural-cognitive phenomenon*.⁵ As the notion of

³ Linguists will recognize this ‘vehicle view of language’ as an instance of what Reddy (1979) called the “conduit metaphor” describing an everyday pattern of talk about talk according to which thoughts are wrapped in a linguistic form which then serves as a conduit before the thoughts are unwrapped in the interpretation process.

⁴ An interesting connection should be pointed out between what I have said so far and the notion of *permissible statements or utterances*. When statements or utterances are felt *not* to be ‘permissible,’ this is usually related to what common sense dictates as a norm within a given community, and hence to ideology.

⁵ A strong argument for not forgetting the cognitive dimension is made by Chilton (2005). Note that neither cognition nor society/culture can be seen as taking precedence over the other. In theories of ideology, the focus may shift from one to the other. Thus Eagleton (2007, p. 19) describes Althusser’s view of ideology as a shift “from a *cognitive* to an *affective* theory of ideology,” adding:

– which is not necessarily to deny that ideology contains certain cognitive elements, or to reduce it to the merely ‘subjective’. It is certainly subjective in the sense of being subject-centred: its utterances are to be deciphered as expressive of a speaker’s attitudes or lived relations to the world.

‘common’ sense implies, cognition is not seen as a purely individual property of human beings, even though each individual carries a unique apparatus in which the processing takes place – Vygotsky’s (1978) “mind in society.”⁶ What makes ideology special as a cognitive phenomenon, while it shares social situatedness with most other higher forms of cognitive processing, is that it also has aspects of society as its object (the next point to be clarified) and that its social situatedness involves a specific form of intersubjectivity or sharing (to be explained later), as well as affect and stance.⁷

A third general property of ideology, then, already hinted at in the *Introduction* and further underscored in the previous paragraph, is that the normative or commonsensical frames of interpretation which the term refers to bear on aspects of *social reality*. This is meant in a wide sense, including sociohistorical, socio-political, sociocultural, and similar aspects. But, for instance, ideas about the shape of the earth are not ideological under this definition, even though changes in such beliefs may be induced or hampered by ideological processes. Within the realm of social reality, of particular importance are *social relations in the sphere of publicness*, i.e., the public positioning of people in relation to each other, usually involving the level of (perceived) groups.⁸ More often than not, *relations of power and dominance* are involved. That is why Thompson’s (1990, pp. 7, 56) definition of ideology as “*meaning in the service of power*,” and his view of ideology research as the study of “*the ways in which meaning serves to establish and sustain relations of domination*” touches the very core of what we should be interested in.

Yet, there are good reasons not to restrict social relations in the public sphere *a priori* to relations of domination for the purposes of ideology research. For one thing, at the theoretical level, powerless and dominated groups may – and usually do – have their ideologies too. Moreover, there is a good methodological reason. Whether patterns of meaning bear on social issues or on social relations is a matter of relatively straightforward analytical observation. But what functions are served by that meaning in relation to social patterns – the establishment and sustenance of domination being one such function – is an entirely empirical issue

Note also that the debate over cognitivism in the social sciences is very much alive, and that there are good reasons to argue against purely cognitivist interpretations in favor of giving center stage to constitutive practices (see, e.g., Dupret 2011, Watson and Coulter 2008).

⁶ This entire book is formulated against the background of a theory of linguistic pragmatics (as presented in Verschueren 1999b) to which the notion of ‘mind in society’ is very important. Central to the theory is the notion of adaptability (see Verschueren and Brisard 2002) which allows us, amongst other things, to talk systematically about processes of language use in terms of their status *vis-à-vis* the medium of adaptability which is the human mind, seen as the seat of cognitive abilities that have an essential link with the intersubjective level of society.

⁷ In Eagleton’s (2007, p. 20) words: “Ideological statements, then, would seem to be subjective but not private [...] On the one hand, ideology is no mere set of doctrines but the stuff which makes up uniquely what we are, constitutive of our very identities; on the other hand it presents itself as an ‘Everybody knows that,’ a kind of anonymous universal truth.”

⁸ I realize that the term ‘public’ evokes its opposite ‘private,’ that the distinction is not always so clear, and that it may even be related to aspects of language ideology (see Gal 2005). It is used here in an untheorized everyday sense.

that can, at best, be decided only upon completion of the analysis. Taking the final utterance of the *introduction* as our example again, if it can be established that the utterance is the expression of a vehicle view of language, it may also be the case that it represents a type of language ideology that allows institutions of various types (e.g., academia) to establish and maintain an in-group's domination by imposing certain communicative norms on others whose conceptualization and handling of language may not fit the same paradigm. Clearly a whole lot of analytical work would have to be done to establish the plausibility of such an interpretation, and a domination perspective cannot be taken as the starting point for the analysis. Even if simply differing views of language were involved that affect aspects of social interaction and relationships, of which none could be said to be dominant, that would not make the patterns of meaning that are at issue any less 'ideological.'

The strong focus on processes of domination in which meaning plays a role, even if it results from analyses, rather than antedating them, is the reason why ideology research is predominantly a critical enterprise, even if we do not follow Engels in his characterization of ideology as 'false consciousness.'⁹ The relation of all this to politics should be clear, where struggle is central and takes the form of *struggles over meaning* (categorization, highlighting, and perception – all to be discussed later) and *struggles over norms*. Thus typical 'ideological themes' can be seen to emerge, such as *identity*, which invoke further themes such as *prejudice* and *stereotyping*.¹⁰

On the basis of these elementary observations, I can try to present a preliminary definition of ideology in the form of the following thesis:

Thesis 1: We can define as ideological any basic pattern of meaning or frame of interpretation bearing on or involved in (an) aspect(s) of social 'reality' (in particular in the realm of social relations in the public sphere), felt to be commonsensical, and often functioning in a normative way.

Note the single quotation marks enclosing 'reality,' warding off suspicions that ontological claims are involved concerning a reality outside the meaning in

⁹ The study of ideology as a critical enterprise goes back to Karl Marx (see, e.g., 1977), whose position it was that what makes ideas into ideology is their connection with the conflictual nature of social and economic relationships. We also find this view very strongly in Althusser (see, e.g., 1971a, 1971b), who sees ideology in capitalist society as the cement that fixes a system of class domination. Such a critical angle, which was totally absent from the work of the French *idéologues*, was also suspended in the writings of Lenin (see, e.g., 1969) and Lukács (see, e.g., 1971), and in much of the work of Mannheim (see, e.g., 1936). These authors viewed ideology less negatively, either as a function of the political goal of promoting a proletarian ideology as a positive social force (as in the case of Lenin), or in order to objectify the study of ideology in such a way that the same type of analysis could be used for systems of thought that one wanted to criticize and for one's own thought (as in the case of Mannheim). For an extensive discussion of the false consciousness view of ideology (recently resurrected by Bénabou 2008), see Rosen (1996).

¹⁰ For a classic treatment of prejudice, see Allport (1979).

question. Note also that, for basically the same reason, the patterns of meaning or frames of interpretation that are defined as ideological may either ‘bear on’ or ‘be involved in’ aspects of social reality, or both. Any form of social action is, as eloquently explained by Winch (1958), ‘meaningful’ in the sense that it is interpreted by the actors engaged in it. Hence practices are inseparable from the concepts in terms of which they are interpreted. Therefore, ideology is rarely outside the social reality it bears on and tends to be partly constitutive of that reality.

A few additional points have to be made to clarify the nature of the common sense involved. First of all, how do we decide whether an aspect of meaning functions commonsensically? The meaning in question should clearly be taken for granted or, more negatively, should not be questioned. This means that individuals would assume that they *share* this meaning with other individuals. Thus (an assumption of) *intersubjectivity* or *common ground* is involved. In that sense, ideologies are comparable to what are known as *paradigms* in the philosophy of science: specific ways of looking, based on taken-for-granted premises (even if they were formulated explicitly at a certain time) that are shared within a community or generation of scientists. Like paradigms, ideologies (if we can use the plural at all¹¹) are *community-based*. Their relevance, while going beyond the individual, does not extend beyond a given society or community, even if they induce forms of behavior that clearly affect members of other societies or communities, and even if the formulation risks circularity given the fact that shared patterns of interpretation are at least partly constitutive of what passes as a community. Moreover, their traces may be restricted to forms of expression (say ‘language use’ or ‘discourse’ – see pp. 17–19) directly bearing on or involved in the aspect(s) of social ‘reality’ in question. In other words, frames of interpretation may vary across different realms of social action. Thus, returning once more to the final utterance of the introduction, a vehicle view of language could dictate the interpretation of what goes on in a specific institutional setting (say, academia), while being at odds with the way in which everyday interaction is conceived. But if discourses pertaining to aspects of ‘reality’ within the same realm of social action come in different genres,¹² the unquestioned nature of the ideological meaning in question may remain constant across those genres. Thus our hypothetical vehicle view of language as used in an institutional setting could be expected to manifest itself (in its common-sense, taken-for-granted,

¹¹ Like most comparisons, this one also has its dangers. Paradigms in scientific work (see Kuhn 1962) are usually relatively clearly delineated. This is not generally the case with ideology (except in its reasoned and purposefully constructed manifestations – e.g., some of the great political ideologies such as communism or liberalism – which are of less interest to us here). Hence it is safer to speak of ideology and ideological meaning rather than to run the risk of reification by using the plural ‘ideologies’ or the countable singular ‘an ideology.’

¹² The term ‘genre’ is used here to refer to relatively stable discourse types associated with different spheres of human activity (see Verschueren 1999b, pp. 151–156). Its origins go back to Bakhtin (1986). For a good example of its current use, see Bauman and Briggs (1992) or Muntigl and Gruber (eds.) (2005), and for a recent overview Solin (2009).

unquestioned form) in, among other things, guidelines for, reports on, and discussions about, the relevant institutional proceedings.

I can summarize the above in the form of the following subthesis:

Thesis 1.1: *The common-sense (basic/normative) nature of ideological meaning is manifested in the fact that it is rarely questioned, in a given society or community, in discourse related to the ‘reality’ in question, possibly across various discourse genres.*

Briefly, when one is inclined to say “But that is normal,” there is a good chance that ideology is at work.¹³ Its not being recognized as ideological, its coincidence with normalcy, is what makes ideology powerful. In Eagleton’s (2007, p. xvii) words, “Ideology [...] is always most effective when invisible.”

The intersubjectivity of aspects of ideological meaning should not lead us to the conclusion that what we are dealing with is stable. *Ideology evolves*. Its dynamics may result from occasional explicit questioning, from forms of interaction between different frames of interpretation, but also from changing circumstances that induce adaptations in ways of thinking.

Without an appeal to dynamics, in combination with reference to the society or community basis of ideology, it would be hard to make sense of the issue of *hegemony*.¹⁴ Whereas the term originally refers to the influence of one state over another, in this context it bears on relations of dominance and power between different strata of a society. In the context of discussing ideology, its use is based on the observation that dominant classes may be able to avoid coercion by obtaining the consent of the oppressed, i.e., by successfully making certain patterns of meaning or frames of interpretation (e.g., pertaining to the unequal structuring of society) seem natural, by turning them into common sense. Hegemony in this sense involves the internalization of the authority one may be subjected to. Hegemony and ideology do not coincide. Consent may also be obtained by non-ideological means; e.g., feeding people well may keep them from (even considering) acts of resistance. And, though the establishment of hegemony is often an ideological process in the sense that the consent-based maintenance of the power and dominance that it involves is usually supported by meaning, it is not a necessary property of all ideology (unless one wants to restrict ideology exclusively to meaning in the service of power, which, as argued before, I am not inclined to

¹³ Van Dijk (2001, p. 15) distinguishes the ‘group knowledge’ that is ideology-based from what he calls ‘common ground.’ In contrast to the ideological group knowledge, common ground would be non-ideological cultural knowledge shared by all culturally competent members of a society across groups (i.e., “the sociocognitive basis of our common sense,” as presupposed in all public discourse). Though it is of course the case that aspects of meaning are shared across groups, there is no sound basis for defining these *a priori* as non-ideological.

¹⁴ The notion of hegemony was developed in particular by Gramsci (see, e.g., 1971, 1985), who inherited it from Lenin and Lukács. For an extensive explanation and interesting use of the concept, see Laclau and Mouffe (2001).

do). The hegemonic potential of ideology is clearly related to its spread, though spread does not have to imply hegemony. This is expressed briefly, and hesitantly, in the following thesis:

Thesis 1.1.1: *The wider the society or community, and the wider the range of discourse genres in which a given pattern of meaning or frame of interpretation escapes questioning, the more ‘hegemonic’ it may be.*

Though ‘ideology’ is not necessarily, but just *may* be hegemonic, this should not lead us to believe that it would make sense even to speak of ideology in relation to the world view of an individual. That would contradict what I have said about intersubjectivity, sharedness, the community-based character of ideology and its relation to common sense, normality, and the public sphere.¹⁵ The structure and size of the community, however, are unimportant: An ideological study of the world view of smaller communities and non-dominant classes is perfectly feasible.¹⁶

Questions of hegemony go beyond what this methodological treatise on ideology research aims at. The notion bears less on patterns of ideological meaning (the core topic I want to be able to investigate) than on mechanisms by which such patterns may get established and the consequences they may have for the life of a society. Introducing the notion, however, underscores the fact that practices are involved and not just ideas, the dynamics of ideology, and the agency (even if submissive) that is involved on the part of those acquiring or acquiescing to certain frames of interpretation.

The common-sense nature of ideology, whether or not hegemonic, has direct consequences for its forms of expression, described as follows:

Thesis 1.2: *Its not being questioned means that the meaning concerned is often (though not always and not exclusively) carried along implicitly rather than being formulated explicitly.*

This, in turn, has immediate implications for the methodology of empirical ideology research, as spelled out later (especially in [Chapter 3](#)).

[Thesis 1](#) and its subtheses focus on inherent properties of ideology. More needs to be said about the relation between ideological meaning and the experiences of community members ([Thesis 2](#)), ideology and its manifestations ([Thesis 3](#),

¹⁵ It may be useful to distinguish between ‘ideology’ and ‘world view’ by saying that an ideology is always a world view, but that a world view does not have to be an ideology: A world view may pertain to non-social as well as social phenomena, and it may be held privately by an individual – both aspects being incompatible with our notion of ideology.

¹⁶ Ginzburg (1982) has demonstrated how revealing it may be to delve into the frames of interpretation of marginal and powerless movements or subordinate classes that may lead a life detached from the societal mainstream.

the content of which is already presupposed in the formulation of the preceding account), and ideology and fields of action (Thesis 4). Starting with the relation between ideological meaning and the experiences or observations of community members, I propose the following:

Thesis 2: Ideology, because of its normative and common-sense nature, may be highly immune to experience and observation.

Note that I avoid specific claims about the emergence of ideological frames of interpretation. They may result from oft-repeated explicit statements, from processes of internalization, from shared experiences and observations, or from any combination of these. Lived experience and observation, however, form only a possible, not a necessary, source. And, once established, ways of seeing social reality may become entirely detached from what one personally experiences or observes.

How this works is easiest to observe when looking at processes taking place in a world that is not or no longer one's own (which, at the same time, serves as a reminder that the property pointed at here does not imply invariability or a lack of changeability). Take the following example from Lavissee (1902). In the short preface to this history textbook we read, after a succinct description of the contents of the book, the following sentence:

A côté de ces œuvres de la politique et de la guerre, nous avons mis les œuvres de la paix: industrie, commerce, colonisation du monde.

[Next to those works of politics and war, we have placed the works of peace: industry, trade, colonization of the world.]

The enumeration *industry, trade, colonization of the world* under the general label *works of peace* is likely to make most of us frown today. We no longer think of colonization as an acceptable way of handling international relations, and certainly not as a peaceful activity on a par with industry and trade. Clearly, the early twentieth-century perspective was sufficiently different to allow for such a categorization of colonization. Does this mean that today we know more about the violence involved in colonization? Maybe our documentation is more elaborate, but there was no attempt to hide that side of reality in Lavissee's textbook. On the contrary, colonial history is described as a history of conquests, wars, rebellions, repressions of rebellions – hardly peaceful activities. There are even visual presentations of rather unusual violence. Thus a one-paragraph account of a revolt of the sepoys (*cipayes* in French, the native – often Hindu – soldiers in the British army in India), supposedly spurred by a British decision to start using cow fat to coat cartridges (the tip of which had to be bitten off), and ending in the execution of the leaders, is accompanied by the illustration in Figure 1.

None of the information on and illustration of violence seemed capable of undermining the categorization of colonial activity as peaceful. The reason is



Fig. 10. — Exécution des Cipayes. Les soldats anglais marchèrent contre les Cipayes révoltés, reprirent la ville de Delhi et attachèrent les prisonniers hindous à la gueule des canons.

Figure 1. “*Execution of the Sepoys.* The English soldiers marched against the revolting sepoys, recaptured the town of Delhi and attached the Hindu prisoners to the mouths of cannons.”)

simply that colonial activity *was categorized as peaceful*, as a result of hegemonic legitimations in terms of good intentions which turned forms of violent intrusion not only into a right but even into a duty. The peacefulness of colonization was part of common sense. Any accompanying violence was therefore a random and unfortunate side effect (not so different from today’s ‘collateral damage’ when the West goes out to ‘liberate’ a country), usually provoked by the Other, unable to appreciate the colonizers’ real intentions. In other words, the early twentieth-century perspective was simply different from the one that is dominant today (even though today striking parallels can be found). The meaning given to events is stronger than any objectively observable facts. The conclusion should *not* be that early twentieth-century Europeans were blind. Rather, it is possible to perfectly observe two phenomena without making the link or to link them without seeing the contrast. From this point of view, ideology may be defined as a way of linking things ‘in the world.’ Ideology research, then, should be aimed at pointing out how this works in specific cases and even what alternatives there are. Hence ideology research also opens the way to – and is often informed by – alternative frames of interpretation. This is what I have already

referred to as the critical potential of such research. This cannot be an excuse, however, for simply superimposing researchers' ideologies on data. Hence the need for methodology.

Thesis 2 has further consequences for the forms of expression in which ideological meaning is couched:

Thesis 2.1: *Just as there may be a discrepancy between ideology and direct experience, there may be discrepancies between the level of implicit meaning and what one would be willing to say explicitly.*

Thus this author does not subscribe to the vehicle view of language that may be detectable at the level of implicit meaning in the utterance closing the introduction to this book. But if a systematic discrepancy were to emerge between what I am willing to say explicitly about the functioning of language and the implications of the way in which I say it, questions would have to be asked about the underlying language ideology and, if the latter does not match beliefs, developing a different way of speaking about language would be useful in order to avoid the trap of being guided by a misleading type of common sense.¹⁷

In the realm of wider societal debates such as the one surrounding 'migrants' in Belgium (Blommaert and Verschueren 1998), glaring gaps may appear between the explicit and the implicit. If you study the rhetoric of the tolerant majority, as we did, there will be an abundance of overt expressions of acceptance of diversity. Yet a systematic analysis at the deeper levels of implicit meaning reveals that such acceptance is at best superficial. This observation raises serious theoretical and methodological questions. On the theoretical side we must say that, normally, explicit meaning is as important as implicit meaning, since meaning generation is always the product of both. But in the search for ideology, where meaning hinges on common sense, on what is taken for granted and remains unquestioned, the implicit plays a particularly important role (see Thesis 1.2) which is strengthened when discrepancies between the explicit and the implicit become very clear and systematic to the point of becoming contradictory. This may be the main reason why we should be careful, as I was at the beginning of this account, not to equate ideology with ideas, beliefs, or opinions as such. It is possible for one to 'believe' something that is inconsistent with one's own more global and habitual way of seeing and interpreting things, just as it is possible to express an opinion or to profess a belief that does not match one's more basic attitudes (even

¹⁷ This is why the study of language ideologies is so important, not only because of what they do in the world as sources of principles of social structuring (see, e.g., Meeuwis 1999), but also because of their influence on scientific ways of looking at language (see, e.g., Silverstein 1979). Further useful reading: Blommaert (ed.) (1999b), Kroskrity (ed.) (2000), Lucy (ed.) (1993), Schieffelin, Woolard and Kroskrity (eds.) (1998), Verschueren (ed.) (1999a), Woolard and Schieffelin (1994).

without assuming insincerity), and just as it is possible to believe things that do not fit basic observations (as in the example above from Lavissee).¹⁸

The methodological question is: How can we devise analytical procedures that enable us to recover, with any degree of certainty, patterns in these incessantly intermeshing layers of meaning? The answer is what [Chapters 2 and 3](#) of this book are intended to provide an approximation of. One thing should be clear by now: If implicitness plays the role described earlier, subjects cannot be *asked* about the patterns of meaning that make up ideology. Responses to questionnaire questions can never be taken at face value in the search for ideology.

There is no *empirical methodology* without an ‘object’ to apply it to. Thus we have to ask what *manifestations* of ideology should provide the data for empirical ideology research. The answer to that question is implicit in much of what has been said so far. The core issues I have declared an interest in are situated at the level of meaning. Meaning, however, needs to be expressed before it can be investigated. A strong case could even be made for saying that meaning does not exist without its expression or manifestation. [Thesis 1.1](#) made reference to manifestations in discourse, a reference that was repeated in [Thesis 1.1.1](#). [Thesis 1.2](#) mentioned the contrast between implicit and explicit formulation, a distinction that was used again in [Thesis 2.1](#). Clearly, it was the expression of meaning in *language* that I had in mind throughout. Note, however,

that ideology is a matter of ‘discourse’ rather than ‘language’. It concerns the actual uses of language between particular human subjects for the production of specific effects. You could not decide whether a statement was ideological or not by inspecting it in isolation from its discursive context, any more than you could decide in this way whether a piece of writing was a work of literary art. (Eagleton 2007, p. 9)

The key concepts here are *language use* and *discourse*, which I will use as equivalents for the purposes of this book. Thus we can try the following formulation:

Thesis 3: (One of) the most visible manifestation(s) of ideology is LANGUAGE USE or DISCOURSE, which may reflect, construct, and/or maintain ideological patterns.

Ideology, like ideas, attitudes, and opinions, does not lead an abstract existence. It is not the filling of otherwise empty heads, but it exists in its being *used* and hence can be studied only in relation to that use. While the use of ideology in

¹⁸ Frank Brisard (personal communication) has pointed out to me that there is a significant philosophical debate surrounding rationality and intentionality with implications for theories of the authority – or lack thereof – of the ‘self’ over his/her ‘beliefs’ (e.g., Anscombe 1957, Marcus 1983, Quine 1976). More could be said about all this in relation to the false consciousness view of ideology, as well as to psychoanalytic theories which allow for the possibility of explicit assent/negation as an indicator of the opposite.

thinking is hard to observe, and therefore hardly a candidate for empirical analysis, there is direct access to its use in linguistic, discursive (rhetorical, argumentative, etc.) practices.¹⁹ Language use or discourse not only reflects habitual frames of interpretation, it also constructs, shapes, and reshapes them, and can be observed to twist them around strategically or to avoid or pass over them altogether. The term ‘manifestation,’ therefore, should be interpreted broadly. The discursive manifestations of ideology are themselves part of the social ‘reality’ which the discourse pertains to, and they must be seen as *constitutive practices* rather than mediating expressions.²⁰ No doubt there are other interesting manifestations as well, such as a flag symbolizing nationalist feelings or aspirations.²¹ But *language use* or *discourse* is the *only* medium or situated practice in which one can literally *question* patterns of meaning as opposed to *not questioning* them. This fact accords language use or discourse a privileged status *vis-à-vis* ideology because it relates to one of ideology’s most basic properties (see [Thesis 1.1](#)). Language use or discourse is also privileged as a manifestation of ideology because it is no doubt the main instrument for spreading complex patterns of meaning. It is also related to the structures of dominance that are often involved, in that the ownership of the means of persuasive rhetoric is unequally distributed in most societies.²² The foregoing means that, while responses to questionnaire questions provide dubitable data for ideology research, sociological interviews may provide very interesting data indeed, on condition that they are studied as discourse subject to all the processes of interaction that shape any other type of discourse rather than as straightforward and factual reflections of ideological content.²³

In addition, there are purely practical reasons for the centrality of language use or discourse in ideology research. First, it is a highly observable or empirical

¹⁹ What is ‘directly observable’ varies, of course, from practice to practice. Thus spoken interaction provides more access to processes, while for writing the product is more tangible (in spite of the availability of advanced techniques for writing research).

²⁰ Thus I adhere to a constructivist view of social reality (cf. Berger and Luckmann 1966). Yet, the relativism that is often associated with constructivism should itself be seriously relativized: There are things in the world, even in the social world, with an ‘existence’ prior to our discursive framing of them, even if our discursive framing provides them with added meaning. Note that the very purpose of this monograph, the formulation of an adequate research methodology, implies that there are evaluation criteria for research in relation to their ‘object’ (even if this object is largely discursive), which implies a rejection of pure relativism. (See Searle 2009 for a useful discussion, even though this review has a tendency to go too far in its rejection of constructivism and relativism by attacking some of its most absurd manifestations.)

²¹ Because a flag may be the primordial symbolization of a nationalist ideology, Billig (1995) talks about ‘flaggings’ of ‘banal nationalism’ (called ‘banal’ because what is investigated is precisely the category of ever-present and relatively superficial manifestations to which the ‘flag’ belongs).

²² Blommaert (1999a) provides a good example of rhetorical inequality in the institutional setting of asylum procedures.

²³ For methodological reflections related to interviews in social science research, see e.g. Briggs (1986); for an example of how interview data can be handled as discourse rather than as straightforward data, see e.g. Meeuwis (1997).

object of inquiry.²⁴ Second, present-day linguistic pragmatics²⁵ provides all the necessary tools for investigating the generation of meaning as a dynamic process, with a continuous mutual calibration of the explicit and the implicit in a context of social relations. It has developed these tools over the past three to four decades in response to one of its most basic premises, viz. that every utterance necessarily relies on a world of background assumptions, supposedly shared or presented as such, which combines with what is explicitly said in a process of generating meaning.²⁶

Finally, and very briefly, a few words to summarize the way in which ideology can be seen to function in fields of action that make up social life, which is itself the reason for studying ideology:

Thesis 4: Discursively reflected, constructed, and/or supported ideological meanings may serve the purposes of framing, validating, explaining, or legitimating attitudes, states of affairs, and actions in the domains to which they are applicable.

States of affairs, attitudes, and courses of action are made to look like they are normal or at least acceptable by framing, validating, explaining, or legitimating them in a way that appeals to the commonsensical core of ideology. It is in this way that ideology can support the perpetuation of existing relations of power and dominance.²⁷ However, social realities are rarely stable, so that reframings also occur, in which case forms of explanation and justification – often equally rooted in (possibly rivaling) common-sense patterns of meaning – can function as agents of change.²⁸ These various possibilities are meant to be captured in **Thesis 4**.

When relating ideology to fields of action, however important the link may be, it is also important to keep in mind that there is no predictable one-to-one

²⁴ Eagleton (2007, p. 194) makes essentially the same point, though not exactly for the same practical reasons, when he says, “there is a third way between thinking of ideology as disembodied ideas on the one hand, and as nothing but a matter of certain behaviour patterns on the other. This is to regard ideology as a discursive or semiotic phenomenon. And this at once emphasizes its materiality (since signs are material entities), and preserves the sense that it is essentially concerned with *meanings*.”

²⁵ Linguistic pragmatics is seen as the general science of language use, taking the broadest possible interdisciplinary (i.e., cognitive, social, and cultural) perspective. This tradition is represented in the activities of the International Pragmatics Association (IPrA; ipra.ua.ac.be) and is reflected in Verschuieren, Östman, Blommaert *et al.* (eds.) (1995 ff.) and in Verschuieren (1999b).

²⁶ The term ‘meaning generation’ is preferred over the more common *meaning construction* to avoid an exclusive focus on the active and predominantly conscious involvement of the producer of utterances. A well-balanced theory of linguistic pragmatics must allow for the interpreter’s contribution to meaning by means of the interpretation choices he/she makes, which feed back into the interaction. See Verschuieren (1999b).

²⁷ Thompson (1990, p. 60) lists legitimation in a set of ‘modes of operation’ of ideology which also includes dissimulation, unification, fragmentation and reification. Much of what is meant by this will be dealt with in the form of specific discursive devices or strategies in **Chapter 3**.

²⁸ Antaki (1988b, p.1) suggests that explanations “have the power to challenge social realities” and “seem to be implicated in changes in people’s behavior.”

correspondence between frames of interpretation and behavioral choices. Thus a retired Flemish worker, finally able to read his newspaper every day, may come to realize the benefits of socialism; yet, loyalty to the Christian-democratic institutions that have provided security for him all his life may keep him from changing his voting behavior. This worker is real, not hypothetical. Cases involving more ambivalence can be imagined where discrepancies emerge between purposeful behavior (e.g., giving money to a beggar), which a person may feel he or she has to do, and a more general perspective (e.g., the belief that giving money to beggars keeps them dependent) which the same person shares and knows to be in conflict with his or her immediate actions.

Finally, the link between ideology and fields of action gets blurred by the mediating role of the uptake of discourse. Serious mismatches may emerge between the patterns of meaning that underlie specific types and samples of language use or discourse and the frames of interpretation that live and are generated in various audiences. This remark is especially relevant at the present point in history, when a communicative overflow makes consistent absorption of communicative content virtually impossible. Rather than to defeat the purposes of ideology research, however, this phenomenon makes it all the more relevant and necessary to search for underlying patterns of meaning that may inform seemingly diffuse forms of expression.