

## CHAPTER THREE: A discourse-analytical approach

### 3.1 Introduction

Chapter two introduced the empirical ‘logics of contestation’ regarding food (safety) policy discourse and thereby further delineated the object of inquiry of this thesis. The central problem with this existing scholarship, as identified in the introductory chapter, is that most scholars take the notion of ‘food safety’ as *given*. In contrast, this study focuses on the construction of the meaning of ‘food safety’, how and why it varies across contexts and over time, how and why meanings may change or stabilize, or both, and the implications that such dynamics bear for food (safety) policy.

This chapter sketches out the theoretical and analytical framework on which this study is based. At the core of this framework are two analytical assumptions that must be spelled out prior to a more detailed theoretical discussion: First, this study assumes the view that ‘food safety’ can mean a variety of things, and that its meaning is always transient, changeable, and contextually contingent. Second, while meanings do become temporarily fixed, these meanings constantly have to be reproduced and become open to re-negotiation at particular junctures. From these theoretical premises, the effects of food scares such as BSE and Foot-and-Mouth-Disease (FMD) are captured here as ‘dislocatory moments’ (Laclau 1990), meaning ‘an event, or a set of events, that cannot be represented, symbolized, or in other ways domesticated by the theretofore dominant discursive structure – which therefore is disrupted’ (Laclau 1990; Torfing 1999).<sup>24</sup>

The dominant discursive frame of reference differs across national and regional contexts, as well as over time. As a consequence, the food scares experienced in the late twentieth century in England, Germany, and the Netherlands were *interpreted* and taken up in different ways as policy issues. Second, and as a result, what counts as ‘good food’ came to mean different things in different national contexts, as well as over time, as this study will show by highlighting the (re)emergence and usage of terms such as ‘food safety’, ‘food quality’, and the food chain.

While the variation in meaning is remarkable, a considerable transnational policy discourse was mobilized on the level of the European Union (EU), which suggests agreement, unison, and coherence in the EU context. In order to approach this apparent contradiction, the variation in the interpretation of food scares will be illustrated and explained here along two lines. The first

---

<sup>24</sup> Mette-Marie Roslyng (2006) provides an illuminating media-based analysis of the salmonella affair and BSE in the UK. This study differs from her approach by, first, focusing on policy discourse in the broader sense, and, second, considering the changes and continuities herein at a lower level of analysis: that of policy *practice* (see section 3.4).

line of explanation focuses on the socio-historical contextual contingency of the events, and the ways in which earlier developments (particularly during the twentieth century) produced different sets of sedimented discourses regarding food policy in the aforementioned national regulatory contexts. As those sedimented discourses constitute the dominant frame of reference in the production of meanings around food-related events and phenomena, we can expect them to shape the interpretation of current food scares.

In addition to this variation across national contexts, the second dimension of variation concerns variation across the discursive positions/premises from which people make sense of ‘food safety’ and related notions of ‘quality’. For instance, one could expect that the discursive premises from which scientists consider food (safety) differ from those of economic experts or environmentalists. In other words, ‘safe food’ denotes different things in different discourses: whereas in an environmental discourse, ‘safe food’ may refer to particular environmentally-sensitive production methods, a technical-scientific discourse may construct the meaning of ‘safe food’ as produced under a particular technical regime, such as Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP), as low-risk and hygienic. This second dimension necessitates a lower-level analysis of discursive meaning, as well as particular kinds of data (see section 3.5).

A more conventional policy-analytical account may suggest focusing on the main participants within the policymaking process, or the central roles or actors therein: the policymaker, the scientist, citizens, and the industry (see, for instance, Lindblom 1993; Ham and Hill 1993 for frameworks of this kind).<sup>25</sup> Such accounts would, first, assign particular ‘interests’ to those actors, and, second, scholars in that tradition would expect them to act in a particular way in the policy process. In contrast, the present discourse-analytical account suggests that such a strict and rigid categorization in an analysis of the policymaking process is problematic, as it obscures the fluid and dynamic nature of the policy process and artificially divorces a particular policy problematic from its discursive context. Moreover, we cannot take different categories of roles as given *a priori*: The expectations that are associated with particular roles, the rules and self-understandings that come with them, and the particular ways in which they are enacted fundamentally hinge upon the discursive context in which they become articulated and the institutional arrangements present. For instance, in 2001, the European Commission allocated equal grants to national governments for the purpose of rebuilding ‘consumer trust’ in food

---

<sup>25</sup> Charles Lindblom does emphasize the political (or policy) agency of what he refers to as ‘citizens’. Although this is a useful conceptual step towards a post-elitist perspective regarding the policymaking process, he fails to consider the relational identities developed through discursive practices. In contrast, the present study suggests to understand institutions (policymakers, scientists) as dynamic stages in which the ‘audience’ is *always already* present in the minds and self-understandings of policymakers (for instance, when they are seen to take on a consumer-activist language).

(safety). Judging from the different actor constellations that were eventually charged with the task on a national and regional level, it appears that the notion of consumer trust in food (safety) is contextually contingent, as divergent constellations (between public and private actors) emerged that were considered responsible for consumer trust and food (safety) (see COMM 2002b).

The remaining parts of this chapter further unfold the theoretical foundations of this thesis, the corresponding methodological toolkit, and the discourse-analytical framework. At the same time, the conceptual reflections in this chapter serve in particular to illustrate the usefulness of such a framework beyond the empirical field of food (safety). The chapter proceeds in four main steps in descending order of generality: In section 3.2, I provide a general introduction to discourse analysis, focusing on the fundamental tenets underlying an approach of this kind, its epistemology and ontology, and questions relating to causal explanation and interpretation. Section 3.3 consists of three parts: Section 3.3.1 explicates the philosophical background against which a political theory of discourse developed and the particular relevance of *structuralist* linguistics and deconstruction. Subsequently, sections 3.3.2 and 3.3.3 discuss the central elements of *poststructuralist* policy analysis.

Section 3.4 of the chapter focuses on the development of a poststructuralist policy *analysis* and introduces the central concept of *dislocation* (Laclau 1990). After explicating its relation to the notion of agency, the concept is supplemented with Hajer's (2003) concept of 'institutional ambiguity', which, in this study, I consider a descriptive rather than an analytical concept. In order to develop the concept of 'institutional ambiguity' into a more operational explanatory notion, section 3.4 additionally introduces the concepts of practice and *performance*. These notions, first, serve to bridge the conceptual and empirical gaps between 'dislocation' and actual changes in policy (discourse). Second, the notion of performance, as it is developed here, serves to emphasize the dimensions of authority and agency in times of ambiguity. The final section (3.5) builds on the aforementioned discussions and, on that basis, explicates the concrete framework of analysis and the set of methods employed for the purpose of this study. In addition, critical methodological issues and challenges encountered during the research process are sketched out.

### 3.2 The central underpinnings of discourse analysis<sup>26</sup>

It is important to note that there is no such thing as ‘*the* discourse analysis approach’. Rather, the field of discourse analysis in the social sciences is broad, and research projects vary considerably in terms of assumptions, methodology, and their projected aims. Although generalizations are difficult, it can be said that discourse-analytically oriented researchers focus on texts and meaning therein. Importantly, however, *text* is conceptualized in different terms (Howarth 2000), which frequently leads to misunderstandings between discourse analysts and, for instance, positivist or critical realist scholars, but also misunderstandings *within* the field of discourse analysis (see, for instance, Silverman 2001; Wetherell 2001 for an overview of different strands). Similarly, *language* and its functions, in human interaction, society at large, or both, are conceived of in different ways. Jacob Torfing (2005: 5-6), for instance, distinguishes between three ‘generations’ of discourse analysis: first, those employing a purely linguistic notion of ‘discourse’; second, a strongly linguistics-informed school termed ‘Critical Discourse Analysis’ (see Wodak and Weiss 2003, 2007 for examples; see Billig 2003 for a critical review); third, the interpretive, poststructuralist-informed school of thought which informs this study and will be further elaborated in this chapter. There is a considerable consensus, at least within the poststructuralist school of thought, that language is *constitutive* of what is referred to as ‘reality’ rather than a neutral means of communication or representation.

Given the common charges leveled at or misunderstandings associated with discourse-analytical approaches, it is crucial to spell out some of the key ontological and epistemological assumptions that inform the interpretive discourse-theoretically informed approach employed for the purpose of this study.<sup>27</sup> First, *ontologically* speaking, discourse analysts deny the existence of an objective reality and, rather, assume ‘the existence of multiple, socially constructed realities instead of a single reality, governed by immutable natural laws’ (Hajer and Versteeg 2005: 176). Yet, as Laclau and Mouffe emphasize, this objection should not be understood as a denial of the material existence of objects. Rather, discourse analysts are interested in the attribution of (diverse) meanings to objects or events. For instance, earthquakes or the falling of a brick from the sky can be interpreted as ‘God’s acts of wrath’ or as natural phenomena (Laclau and Mouffe

---

<sup>26</sup> For the purpose of this study, I refer to discourse analysis as an analytical approach informed by discourse theory. By discourse theory, I mean the collection of poststructuralist thought among whose exponents are Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (e.g. 1986).

<sup>27</sup> Other approaches grouped under the heading ‘discourse analysis’ include conversation analysis, frame analysis, realist discourse analysis, and critical discourse analysis (e.g. Billig 2003). For a concise overview, see Howarth (2000: 2-5).

1985: 108). Similarly, a forest can be valued for its aesthetic qualities, or considered to be of intrinsic value, or an obstacle to modernizing transport routes. Equally, ‘safe food’ can denote ‘clean food’, ‘natural food’, or food produced under constant scientific supervision. Laclau and Mouffe (1987: 84) are worth quoting at length in this context:

[W]hat can we say about the natural world, about the facts of physics, biology or astronomy [...] The answer is that natural facts are also discursive facts [...] for the simple reason that the idea of nature is not something that is already there, to be read from the appearances of things, but is itself the result of a slow and complex historical and social construction. To call something a natural object is a way of conceiving it that depends upon a classificatory system. Again, this does not put into question the fact that this entity which we call stone exists, in the sense of being present here and now, independently of my will; nevertheless the fact of its being a stone depends on a way of classifying objects that is historical and contingent. If there were no human beings on earth, those objects that we call stones would be there nonetheless; but they would not be ‘stones’, because there would be neither mineralogy nor a language capable of classifying them and distinguishing them from other objects.

The different meanings attributed to events, discoveries, and phenomena – such as food scares - will most certainly have implications for the kinds of policies that are developed in the respective fields. Consequently, studying the impact of a given event, or a set of related events (for instance, the occurrence of a disease that can potentially affect food (safety)), will require a methodology that pays attention to how – sometimes conflicting - meanings are attributed to those events, and how those processes of meaning-making shape policy. In addition, it is important to note that existing ‘material realities’, such as funding streams, institutional arrangements, or past policy reforms, may ‘suddenly’ acquire a new meaning when a given event reshapes the perception or understanding of the observer.

The poststructuralist conception of the function of language in informing meaning and identities of subjects and objects implies a critique of both *empiricism* and *positivism* (Howarth 2000: 1-3). Empiricism argues that valid observations are to be based on direct and unmediated experiences of the external world which are readily translatable into words and statements. The positivist tradition builds on empiricism in its epistemology and suggests that science can only progress by way of producing objective knowledge thus derived. As far as the guiding aims of positivist scholarship are concerned, law-like theories about the socio-political world are typically valued, and in some strands, such as rational choice theory, the construction of predictions and causal explanation are held to be a core aim of science (Glynos and Howarth 2007). The

discourse-analytical approach taken here rejects these assumptions, which are to a significant extent derived from the natural sciences.

Positivists and empiricists would perhaps argue that discourses should be understood as ‘frames’ or ‘cognitive schemata’, or ‘the conscious strategic efforts by groups to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action’ (Howarth 2000: 3). The research objective could then be to measure the effectiveness of those discourses in bringing about certain ends (ibid.). Conversely, discourse theorists ‘[insist] upon the contextual particularity of a putative explanation [and its] presupposed, contestable framework of concepts and assumptions’ (Glynos and Howarth 2007: 12). In addition, poststructuralist discourse analysts subscribe to the social constructivist paradigm and, following Heidegger, maintain that we cannot ‘step outside’ the world that ‘we are thrown in to’ to start with (Howarth, Norval, and Stavrakakis 2000: 3, footnote 11). Therefore, in *epistemological* terms, they deny the achievability of unmediated access to ‘facts’ and the possibility ‘to explain phenomena and events in objective universal terms’ (Howarth 2000: 126). Instead, ‘discourse theory is concerned with understanding and interpreting socially produced meanings rather than searching for objective causal explanations’ (Howarth 2000: 113).

This is not to say that discourse analysts do away with the aim of explanation. Yet, discourse-analytical research projects do differ from positivist research both in the means and in the objective of analysis. Poststructuralist discourse analysts reject the notion of uncovering the ‘inherent’ and intrinsic properties of objects and subsuming what is particular, for instance in the form of case studies, under generalizable, or even universal laws and causal relationships. Instead, the aim of explanation in discourse analytical research projects is to investigate ‘how the discourses, which structure the activities of social agents, are *produced*, how they function, and how they are changed’ (Howarth 1995: 115, emphasis in original).

In addition, discourse analysts construct inquiries into the specific ways in which meanings and identities are constructed, contested, and reproduced. Notably, in research projects of this kind, the aim is not to reveal ‘real facts’ about the subject of investigation. For instance, the undeniably material qualities of a football include its volume and the material from which it is produced, and, as such, it merely constitutes a leather object of a particular shape and size. However, it is only within the rules of the football game, and the particular spatial context in which it is used, that it acquires its meaning. As Laclau and Mouffe (1987: 82) put it:

If I kick a spherical object in the street or if I kick a ball in a football match, the physical fact is the same, but its meaning is different. The object is a football only to the extent that it establishes a system of relations with other objects, and these

relations are not given by the mere referential materiality of the object but are, rather, socially constructed. This systematic set of relations is what we call discourse.

In addition to becoming aware of the historicity and contingency of particular sets of meanings, discourse analysts have produced considerable contributions to studying the emergence and demise of social movements and the role of identities therein. Importantly, the discourse analyst does not only pose questions regarding the *construction* of identities, but also investigates the *blocking* of (alternative) identities through political frontiers and antagonisms that in some contexts could partly account for the emergence of intense conflict. The simultaneous construction and blocking of identities also finds expression in contexts where marginalized discourses come to challenge the predominant, more institutionalized discourses. For instance, Stephen Griggs and David Howarth (2002b; cf. Howarth and Griggs 2004) investigate discourses within protests against the construction of an additional runway at Manchester Airport (UK). Here, different groups are identified that tried to articulate their various identities, such as environmentalists, ‘eco-warriors’, and ‘economic modernizationists’ (Griggs and Howarth 2004). In that context, middle-class people allied with ‘eco-warriors’, for instance. A political frontier was created between the latter groups, on the one hand, and proponents of the runway construction, on the other hand. Rather than considering these developments as merely a conflict of ‘pre-given interests’, a discursive analysis makes it possible to see how the various groups perceived each other as blocking their respective identities, such as those of ‘home-owner’ or ‘business entrepreneur’. An investigation of the production of meaning around events (or plans such as a runway construction) serves to challenge the dominant view that conflicts are reducible to divergent, presumably given, and fixed interests.

Perhaps one of the main weaknesses in this school of thought is the lack of carefully conducted comparative research.<sup>28</sup> While the poststructuralist discourse-analytical school has laid crucial theoretical foundations for the analysis, of, for instance, social movements, empirical research has generally been scarce. Howarth (2005) regrets the lack of comparative discourse-theoretical research whilst he recommends caution as to avoid the pitfalls of positivist ‘large-n’ research. Nonetheless, he insists that comparative research can make phenomena more

---

<sup>28</sup> The ‘Essex school’ of discourse theory has traditionally focused on constructing a theoretical programme. See, however, Howarth, Norval, and Stavrakakis (2000) for a collection of empirical work employing various elements of the said theoretical programme (including psychoanalytical approaches), Howarth and Torfing (2005), and Finlayson and Valentine (2002). Stephen Jeffares (2007) employs the notion of the ‘empty signifier’ in policy analysis; Stephen Griggs and David Howarth (2006) use discourse theory in their analysis of airport construction protests. Kateryna Pishchikova (2006) develops an original discourse-analytical framework based on the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin. Yet, particularly comparative and ‘multi-case study’ research have been neglected in this school of thought.

intelligible and that, by ‘desedimenting’ and ‘defamiliarizing’ our common understanding of phenomena, one is able to draw attention to their contextual contingency and peculiarity (ibid: 333) while at the same time allowing us to pinpoint the decisive factors in the phenomena we seek to understand and explain. Howarth (2005) emphasizes, however, that comparative research within the discourse-theoretical research program should not imply the comparison of seemingly identical practices or institutions that are treated as entirely equivalent units. Instead he calls for comparing practices or objects that share certain family resemblances, rather than given ‘essences’ (ibid.).

In a useful fashion, he advocates two conditions to be satisfied in discourse-theoretically driven comparative studies. First, the problems and questions to be addressed must be carefully specified in order to clarify how the specific puzzle to be tackled inspires the practice of comparison. Second, thick descriptions of interpretations or particular phenomena are necessary before engaging in comparative research, as an explanation of why similar structures or conditions give rise to different outcomes must be problem-driven and grounded on the interpretation of particular cases. In line with these recommendations, this thesis has specified the underlying puzzle and highlighted its inductive origins - the initial observation that ‘food safety’ can take on different meanings across contexts. As for the second condition that Howarth recommends, the empirical chapters of this thesis do not only employ a longitudinal approach but also aim to distill the specific, context-dependent moments of transformation of the meaning of food (safety), rather than beginning with an assumption of the relative importance of a given ‘crisis moment’, as previous studies have often done, most prominently when dealing with the case of BSE.<sup>29</sup>

Particularly in the study of Europeanization, a field to which this thesis seeks to contribute, few conceptual and empirical advances have been made in discourse analysis in recent years, as chapter two suggested. Neither are the epistemological, ontological, and methodological choices sufficiently explicated in this group of research, and some scholars insist that ‘sometimes discourses matter, sometimes they do not’ (see, for instance, Schmidt 2002; Schmidt and Radaelli 2004). Such scholars do not only hold on to a positivist-empiricist and instrumental notion of discourse, but also insist on aiming for ‘objective scientific knowledge’ and, in some cases, ‘law-like’ theories. The present thesis rejects these latter notions and instead seeks to contribute to this field of study by constructing a contextually sensitive poststructuralist discourse-analytical

---

<sup>29</sup> Flyvberg (2005) and Freitas, Schwartz-Shea, and Yanow (forthcoming) provide useful discussions of the methodological concerns about case study and comparative research in interpretive policy analysis.



framework that is suitable for conducting thorough empirical research that is *both* comparative and contextualized in a Europeanization perspective.

This study is also situated in what has become known as ‘interpretive policy analysis’. In essence, this field of study adheres to the constructivist ontological and epistemological principles outlined above. In addition, by focusing on the constitutive role of language in policymaking, as well as the socially constructed nature of boundaries between, for instance, ‘scientists’ and ‘policymakers’, and the role of organizational culture (cf. Nicolini, Gherardi, and Yanow 2003), interpretive policy analysis has contributed to a different understanding of the policy process. Such an interpretative discourse analytical approach, therefore, admits to partiality and the ways in which policy analysts themselves construct and reconstruct problems in the very process of their research activities (cf. Fischer and Forrester 1993; Hajer and Wagenaar 2003; Yanow 1996; Wagenaar forthcoming). In addition, interpretivism refutes the aim to search for causal relations between actions or phenomena and, rather, calls for a focus on the (subjective) meanings and frames of reference that form the basis for social action, including those within official organizations (Hajer 1995: 43, fn. 8). Dvora Yanow (1996: 5) expresses this succinctly from the perspective of interpretive policy analysis:

Humans make meanings; interpret the meanings created by others; communicate their meanings to, and share them with, others. We act; we have intentions about our actions; we interpret others’ action. We make sense of the world: we are meaning making creatures. Our social institutions, our policies, our agencies, are human creations, not objects independent of us.

In light of the foregoing, it is important to note here, however, that this does not legitimate complete relativism in scientific inquiries. Rather, it implies a different set of criteria that grant validity to the research process and the conclusions one draws. In addition, the discourse analyst is expected to reflect on her positioning in the whole research process, as she finds herself to be *always already* in a particular discursive position from which she is designing and carrying out research projects.

In terms of methodological soundness, the criterion of *validity* denotes the idea that research results should bring us closer to the ‘real world out there’. From an interpretative research perspective, there seems to be a tension between examining the meanings people produce and attach to events and objects, on the one hand, and gaining access to truth or falsity, on the other hand. Since this research project is situated within a constructivist perspective, the socially constructed and dynamic nature of (what in other approaches is referred to as) ‘reality’ is emphasized. In the context of this study, this means, for instance, that attention is drawn to the

often divergent and highly contextually contingent meanings people attach to events, objects and moments, and how this, consequently, brings to the fore different discursive interpretations of a crisis, and hence different sets of ‘responses’. If one takes *generalizability* to be a sub-criterion of validity (external validity), my research aim in this regard is to facilitate understanding for similar situations. This is to say that it is indeed possible to make careful and context-sensitive inferences from what is observed here, for instance, regarding responses to crisis or risk situations particularly in domains where health seems at risk.

In regard to the methodological criteria of validity and reliability, Howarth (2000: 142) points out that the peer community of researchers constitutes a key forum in which the relevance and scientific value, as well as the reliability of findings and the methodical nature of a given research project are evaluated. Furthermore, peer researchers may stimulate further research and theoretical refinement. Scholars in the discourse-analytical tradition equally emphasize the need to conduct empirical inquiries in a systematic manner, and recent work has further illustrated not only the benefits of using a variety of sources, ranging from archival research to qualitative interviews, media analysis, oral history, and analysis of images, events, and debates both on a micro- and a macro-level, but also the potential of software technologies using ‘two sets of eyes’ (Zutavern 2007), where the researcher’s own readings are supplemented by an ‘electronic set of eyes’ in discourse analysis. Furthermore, if we follow Fischer and Forrester (1993) and conceive of policy analysis as ‘argumentative practices’, it is possible to evaluate discursive accounts of events ‘not only for their truth or falsity but also for their partiality, their selective framing of the issues at hand, their elegance or crudeness of presentation, their political timeliness, [or] their symbolic significance’ (Fischer and Forrester 1993: 2-3, cited in Hajer and Wagenaar 2003: 15).

Having discussed the fundamental underpinnings of discourse analysis (as it is used here), the discussion below seeks to illustrate the plausibility of invoking linguistic categories for political analysis and proceeds as follows: First, I explain how the term ‘discourse’ emerged from linguistics, then I clarify what post-structuralism is, and, finally, I discuss more specifically the poststructuralist discourse-theoretical school of thought in order to identify the particular traits relevant for this study.

### **3.3 From structuralist linguistics to poststructuralist discourse theory**

#### *3.3.1 Saussurean linguistics and deconstruction*

Given the diverse understandings of the function of language, it is crucial to recount the (structuralist) background against which a poststructuralist linguistic and political theory of discourse developed. Laclau (2000) identifies three moments in the structuralist tradition during

the twentieth century: the work of Ferdinand de Saussure; the scholarship within the Copenhagen and Prague schools; and finally, the variety of poststructuralist critiques, such as those coming from semiotics (e.g. Roland Barthes), ‘deconstructionism’ (e.g. Jacques Derrida), and psychoanalysis (e.g. Jacques Lacan).<sup>30</sup> The discussion below focuses mainly on the work of Saussure (1981), Derrida (1978), and Laclau and Mouffe (1985; Laclau 1990, 1993), given their particular relevance for the theoretical framework on which this study is based.

The Saussurean theory of language relies on a set of basic elements. First, while originally linguistics was concerned with a (*diachronic*) analysis of the historical evolution of language, Saussure (1981) focused on the (*synchronic*) aspect of language that confronts individual speakers. Saussure based his philosophy of language on the distinction between *langue* (a social system of rules for combination and substitution, illustrated, e.g. by the fact that on a chessboard the rules remain the same if marble is exchanged for wood; Saussure 1981: 110; cf. Torfing 1999: 87) and *parole* (actual, individual instances of speech and writing). Second, by focusing on the synchronic aspect of *langue*, Saussure chose for a view of language as *static*, not taking into consideration the changes that language undergoes throughout time.

Third, within the linguistic system, according to Saussure, the *sign* constitutes the basic unit, a concept which, in turn, rests on the binary distinction between the *signifier* (the sound/image, the word in the literal sense) and the *signified* (what is being said). The relation between the signifier and the signified is captured in the term *signification*. Fourth, to Saussure (1981), language was form, not substance, and the linguistic system was seen to be structured along differences, rather than on positive terms (e.g. the term socialism makes sense only in relation to other terms, such as ‘feudalism’ and ‘capitalism’; cf. Torfing 1999: 86-7, Saussure 1981: 110ff.). In other words, single words are not presumed to bear any essential, given meanings. This presumption proved to be highly influential for the development of deconstructionism, which is discussed below, and particularly for a rethinking of the relationship between identity and difference, for instance in feminist scholarship.<sup>31</sup>

As indicated above, these categories and theoretical insights strongly shaped the evolution of poststructuralist discourse theory and analysis. Yet, as discourse theorists were concerned with a political notion of discourse, and the mapping of a linguistic system onto the social level in order to better understand the dynamic aspects of socio-political life, three key limitations in

---

<sup>30</sup> For a detailed introduction to these scholars and their contributions to poststructuralist discourse analysis, see Howarth (2000).

<sup>31</sup> A final and related distinction is expressed in the notions of *paradigmatic* relations (substitutions among words) and *syntagmatic* relations (the combination of words in a sentence), respectively. This distinction is not of direct relevance to this study, but see Torfing (1999) for an elaborate account of its relevance to discourse theory.

Saussurean linguistics first had to be overcome: First, to Saussure, the linguistic system was a closed and self-contained totality with a unifying centre, an assumption that risks essentializing meanings and identities. In contrast, Derrida (1978) questions the notion of a centre, an origin or an essential foundation. He contends that the system is structured by a play of differences (which Derrida expresses in the neologism *différance*) but that ‘there is something missing from it: a centre which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions’ (Derrida 1978: 289, cited in Torfing 1999: 86).

Second, Derrida problematizes Saussure’s insistence on the binary model of the relation between the signifier and the signified, and conceives this insistence to originate from the ‘logocentric’ Western metaphysical tradition of conceptualizing meanings in binary, oppositional terms (such as man/woman, speech/writing, theory/practice, objective/subjective, or body/mind). As a consequence, Derrida argues, the meaning of one term derives its meaning only in opposition to, and from the other term. In addition, he argues that constructions of this kind will imply the elevation of one term (speech, male, objective, etc.) into a position of superiority vis-à-vis the other. This critical assessment corresponds to Laclau’s (1993: 432) critique of the *isomorphism* in structuralist linguistics, or the idea that a sign only corresponds to one signified. According to Laclau and Mouffe (1985), there is *no inherent structure* to language; hence there are no *essential*, definitive meanings to be identified. Instead, signifiers are open to re-inscription and reinterpretation.<sup>32</sup>

Third, Laclau (1993, 2000; cf. Howarth 2000: 30; cf. Laclau and Mouffe 1985) takes issue with elements of Saussure’s work that he finds to be ‘subject-centered’. From Saussure’s conception of discourse as representing anything longer than one sentence, as well as his frequent reference to the ‘human mind’, Laclau concludes that Saussure’s notion of *parole* would imply dependence ‘on the whims of an autonomous conscious subject’s mind’ (Laclau 2000: 20). In contrast, Laclau contends that ‘[t]he way in which the speaker put[s] sentences together [...] [cannot] be conceived as the expression of the whims of an entirely autonomous subject but, rather, as largely determined by the way in which institutions are structured, by what is ‘sayable’ in some context, etc.’ (Laclau 1993: 433, cited in Torfing 1999: 89). According to Laclau, Saussure’s conceptualization of language still hampered the development of a political or

---

<sup>32</sup> In the case of food safety, for instance, the meaning and interpretation of the term have not only undergone considerable changes in the past 50 years, but they continue to be interpreted in diverse ways, depending on the context in which the term is uttered, for instance, environmental discourses, biology, regulatory discourses, discourses around agricultural reform, or discourses (critical) of globalization.

sociological theory of discourse as well as Saussure's own aim of developing a more general *semiology*, a science of signs in society (Laclau 2000).

Derrida's critical reading of Saussure is worth presenting in more detail here. Derrida (1976) contextualizes his reading of structuralism in what he refers to as 'Western metaphysical thought'. He points out that the oppositions in Western thinking 'consist of a privileged essence (an "inside") and an excluded or secondary term (an "outside")', which is merely accidental or contingent' (Howarth 2000: 37). However, rather than viewing the 'outside' as threatening the 'inside', Derrida contends that both elements are indeed the conditions of possibility *and* impossibility for each other (Derrida 1976: 313-316; cf. Howarth 36-37). As Rodolphe Gasché (1986) remarks, 'since concepts are produced within a discursive network of differences, they not only are what they are by virtue of other concepts, but they also, in a fundamental way, inscribe that Otherness within themselves' (1986: 128). Therefore, instead of being determined by a positive essence, the nature of a concept crucially depends on the excluded term with which it forms a (binary) opposition. Its meaning depends on the conceptual chain into which it has been inserted, and its function depends on the context in which it is cited.

In his deconstructive readings, Derrida seeks to reveal *dis-unity* within apparent coherence and unity in Western metaphysical thought. In doing so, he proposes a 'double-reading' of binary oppositions (e.g. signifier/signified, presence/absence, outside/inside), and points to radical incongruities in lines of arguments, and sometimes even a single word. Whereas Derrida, throughout his work, denies that deconstruction could be understood as a 'method' and insists on the particularity of every instance of reading, the identification of 'incoherencies' and 'incongruities' came to be a central feature of poststructuralist discourse analysis, which will be further defined in the next subsection.

### 3.3.2 Towards a delimitation of poststructuralism

Having sketched structuralist linguistics and some of the key criticisms directed against this school of thought, we are now closer to defining and delimiting the poststructuralist notion of discourse employed in this study.<sup>33</sup>

As indicated above, at least three features distinguish the poststructuralist conceptualization of language, and consequently discourse, from its structuralist predecessor. First, the questioning of closure, structure, and the fixity of meanings set poststructuralism apart from structuralist

---

<sup>33</sup> Poststructuralists would most certainly reject the very idea of a definition or a canonization of their 'school of thought'. It is also crucial to point out that poststructuralists would not understand themselves as 'opponents' of structuralism; rather, it is frequently emphasized that critique and deconstruction always take place *with* and *against* the writings of the (original) author.

philosophy. Second, poststructuralist discourse theory rejects the distinction between the ‘linguistic’ and the ‘non-linguistic’ aspects of discourse (cf. Howarth, Norval and Stavrakakis 2000), and instead follows the Derridean idea that ‘there is nothing outside the text’ (Derrida 1974: 158). Hence, discourses are conceptualized as ‘systems of meaningful practices that form the identities of subjects and objects’ (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000: 4). Third, in poststructuralist discourse theory, language is not seen to merely reflect ‘reality’ or express meaning in a neutral way, but, rather, it is seen as constitutive of our perception of the world. As Wittgenstein (1953) expressed it, there is no such thing as a ‘private language’.<sup>34</sup>

With these presuppositions, poststructuralism represents a shift away from the classical humanist tradition of the rational, self-conscious subject, whose identity would rest on a positive essence (Weedon 1997: 21). With respect to re-conceptualizing and understanding the ‘subject’ and the formation of her ‘socio-physical’ identity, poststructuralism has also drawn on Lacanian psychoanalysis (Glynos and Howarth 2007; Glynos and Stavrakakis 2005; Laclau and Mouffe 1985) and concepts of power, primarily those of Michel Foucault (e.g. Butler [1990] 1997). The next subsection briefly introduces some of the key terms in discourse theory, such as the notion of hegemony, antagonisms, chains of equivalence and difference, nodal points and the notion of the empty signifier, as well as the inextricable relation between language and practice.

### *3.3.3 Key terms in discourse theory*

One of the fundamental theoretical insights that Laclau and Mouffe (1985) adopt from ‘deconstructionism’ is the notion that the production of language and meaning can never rely on complete or, as Laclau (1990) puts it, ‘fully sutured’ contexts. This argument further implies the (im)possibility of any given (alliances of) discourses to completely and indefinitely constitute identities. As a consequence, there will always be attempts to hegemonize a field of discursivity (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Howarth, Norval and Stavrakakis 2000: 15). Moreover, there are always several discursive hegemonic projects at work, often projecting overlapping yet also conflicting meanings and identities. The degree to which some discourses, and not others, will penetrate the social field will vary; some will turn into ‘myths’, others into ‘social imaginaries’ (such as the Enlightenment, or the positivist understanding of progress; Laclau 1990).

Regarding the discursive formations that may accompany the struggle for discursive hegemony, Laclau and Mouffe (1985, especially pp. 127-33) additionally differentiate between ‘chains of equivalence’ and ‘chains of difference’, thereby emphasizing the construction of ‘social

---

<sup>34</sup> Wittgenstein’s theoretical contribution of ‘language games’ was of great influence to poststructuralist thinkers such as Laclau and Mouffe (1986). See, for instance, Howarth (2000) for a discussion of the early and later Wittgenstein.

antagonisms' and the presence of 'Us vs. Them' configurations.<sup>35</sup> In a 'logic of equivalence', different elements (or groups) manage to weaken their internal differences, thereby linking up in an 'equivalential chain' in opposition to an antagonistic force. Rosa Buenfil Burgos (2000), for instance, illustrates how in the context of the Mexican revolution, 'the people' organized themselves as the collective 'oppressed' vis-à-vis the Church, the incumbent President, the government, and entrepreneurs. Similarly, in instances where feminists join in a chain of equivalence with civil rights activists, black groups, or ethnic minorities, the particularity of the respective agendas is weakened, and they acquire a 'more global perspective' (Laclau 1996: 57). In contrast, the 'logic of difference' works to dissolve those equivalential chains and prevents the organization of groups along two antagonistic poles (Howarth, Norval, and Stavrakakis 2000: 11). Howarth (1997), for instance, has employed the latter concept to account for the emergence of the Black Consciousness movement in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s. The state, in this case, tried to weaken the anti-apartheid alliances between these groups by emphasizing the particularity of their respective demands. It is important to note that the logic of equivalence and the logic of difference are always at work simultaneously, given that, for instance, social movements do not exist in a vacuum but, by articulating their own identity, necessarily refer to and construct the identities of others (Laclau 1996; cf. Howarth, Norval, and Stavrakakis 2000).

In order for identities to become temporarily fixed, discourse theory proposes, an unstable discursive centre functions to temporarily fix a set of discursive relations. To begin with, a particular sign only becomes meaningful by virtue of the particular elements to which it stands in relation. Those may well be relatively stabilized, that is, bound together in a particular discourse. In order to account for the logic of this temporary fixation of meaning theoretically, Laclau and Mouffe (1985; Laclau 1996) introduce the concept of 'nodal points', which are 'privileged signifiers or reference points [...] that bind together a particular system of meaning' (Howarth, Norval, and Stavrakakis 2000: 8; cf. Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 112). In medical discourses, they suggest, signs such as 'scalpel' and 'tissue' acquire their meaning in their relation to the nodal point of 'the body', while in nationalist discourses, 'the people' can function as a nodal point (*ibid.*). I shall use the concept of nodal points in my analysis of the Europeanized food (safety) policy discourse in order to account for the (temporary) fixation of meaning at the EU level in view of the heterogeneity of meanings we find at the national level.

An essential quality in a nodal point, in order for it to reach hegemonic success, is its 'emptiness', as Laclau argues that '[p]olitics is possible because the constitutive impossibility of

---

<sup>35</sup>These concepts are not of particular relevance to this study and will therefore not be discussed in detail here.

society can only represent itself through the production of empty signifiers' (Laclau 1996: 44).<sup>36</sup> An empty signifier has two primary discursive functions: First, it provides a given discourse with a relative fixity and unity, such as in the signifier 'justice' in the case of Provisionalism in Northern Ireland (Clohesy 2000: 83). Second, it may represent the impossible ideal through which a particular discursive formation may come to stabilize and attempt to fill the discursive space, such as in the notion of 'order' in a Hobbesian world (Laclau 1996: 44). Put simply, since any discourse and identities come to be defined in relation to *what they are not*, specific nodal points can be considered as empty and this feature makes for their success. In this thesis, I use the concept of nodal points to account for the quality of the transnational policy discourse in bridging the divergent meanings of food (safety) across the studied countries. Rather than their emptiness, I shall emphasize the malleability and elasticity that the particular nodal points feature at the transnational level.

It becomes clear now that one of the most important tenets in poststructuralist thought consists of the idea that the linguistic system is characterized by a fundamental ambiguity, and that meanings are only temporarily fixed, relational, fluid and transient. Importantly, to Laclau and Mouffe, it is the incompleteness *in principle* of structure that characterizes socio-political life, and indeed makes change possible. Any attempt to define and impose closure on a 'system' will hinge upon the (implicit) definition of an 'outside'. Translated to the societal level, this would then be reflected in the ways in which identities, and any definition of the self (e.g. a 'European', a 'woman' and so forth), hinge upon the definition of an Other (e.g. a 'non-European', a 'man'). This openness *in principle* of structure makes possible a 'constant flow of signifiers' (cf. Howarth 2000; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Torfing 1999). Translated onto a societal level, this openness and ambiguity make possible agency, changing alliances, and the continuous negotiation of meanings and identities. This conceptualization of agency stands in stark contrast to both *structuralism* and *rationalist* accounts, as will be discussed in section 3.4.2.

The points of critique directed at structuralism led to the development of an alternative and indeed *political* theory of discourse. This new conceptualization of 'discourse', as mentioned above, relied on the mapping of the linguistic system onto the socio-political level. Hence, *discourses* came to be understood as *concrete horizons of meaningful practices that inform the identities of subjects and objects* (Howarth 2000; Foucault 1980 [1972-1977]). At this level, discourses represent 'concrete systems of social relations and practices that are intrinsically political, as their formation is an act of radical institution, which involves the construction of antagonisms and the

---

<sup>36</sup> For an elaboration of the concept of 'empty signifier', see Laclau (1996).



drawing of political frontiers between “insiders” and “outsiders” (Howarth, Norval, and Stavrakakis 2000: 3-4). In addition, in discourse theory, the *discursive* denotes a ‘theoretical horizon within which the being of objects is constituted’ (Howarth, Norval, and Stavrakakis 2000: 3). Put differently, discourse theory assumes that all objects are always already meaningful in that they are objects of discourse from the start and depend upon ‘a socially constructed system of rules and significant differences’ (ibid.).

The later Ludwig Wittgenstein stressed the inseparable connections between *practice* and uses of *language*. His notion of ‘language games’ (or ‘forms of life’) denotes a number of (analytically) separate, though interrelated, systems of meanings. These allow one to express not ‘objective’ representations of the world, but a shared collection of rules, which, by offering a specific common context, make certain uses of certain words and actions meaningful. By constructing a conceptual relation between language and practice, Wittgenstein emphasized the performative dimension of language, as well as the material dimension of discourse (cf. Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 108). This conceptual emphasis influences the understanding of ‘discourse’ as it is employed in this study in important ways: Discourse is not simply language-in-use but, rather, discourses are materially identifiable in institutions, practices, and clusters of actors. As a consequence of the discursive divergence of meanings and identities across contexts, there will be differences in these materially visible, tangible arrangements of objects and subjects, as will be illustrated in the subsequent chapters of this thesis. The paradox of this divergence of meaning vis-à-vis the apparent convergence at the transnational level then becomes an even more urgent object of inquiry, which will be addressed in chapter seven.

This subchapter has given an account of the development of poststructuralist discourse analysis and explicated some of the key terms used in the discourse-theoretical scholarship that is relevant to this study. The next section illustrates in more detail the usefulness of invoking linguistic categories for political analysis, and in particular seeks to build conceptual bridges between them in order to turn theoretical concepts such as dislocation (Laclau 1990) into more employable notions. Furthermore, some of the concepts that are traditionally central to political analysis – such as ‘agency’ and ‘rationality’ – are discussed.

### **3.4 Poststructuralism and political analysis: building bridges**

#### *3.4.1 Policy, discourse, and practice*

As many critics of discourse analytical approaches suspect an insufficient capacity of discourse analysts to study what scholars in the positivist tradition may refer to as ‘real things’, it is useful to add here that some discourse analysts, such as Hajer (1995), emphasize the institutional

dimension of discourses. He observes that '[i]f a discourse is successful [...] it will solidify into an institution, sometimes as organizational practices, sometimes as traditional ways of reasoning' (Hajer 2005: 303). Importantly, this process, referred to as 'discourse institutionalization' (ibid.), or what Howarth (2000) would perhaps call 'discourse sedimentation', will not be of a linear nature, nor will it produce a coherent and ultimate outcome. Instead, the struggle to hegemonize the discursive field - or 'field of discursivity' (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; 2001: 111) - and the very impossibility of discursive closure (that is, a representation of totality) implies that the policy process is dynamic and marked by contestation about meanings. This conceptualization stands in stark contrast to other well-established approaches to policy analysis, such as rationalist and behavioralist schools, which frequently present the policymaking process as a linear process consisting of the rational identification of problems, followed by a well-defined decision-making process, and finally implementation.

Maarten Hajer (1995) conceptualizes discourse as 'an ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to a phenomenon' (1995: 44). This collection of categories functions to make discourses appear coherent and a given discourse is bound together by discursive categories that become subject to investigation in discourse-analytical research projects. Hajer further draws attention to *discursive practices*, which are, in his view, constitutive of discourses in that they represent 'embedded routines and mutually understood rules and norms that provide coherence to social life' (Hajer 2005: 302). On the concrete, empirical micro-level of an organization or institution (e.g. of a given consumer association), they may be seen to consist of its declared aims, the range and nature of its activities, its involvement in coalitions and alliances, its political contacts and networks, and the means by which it directly or informally enters policy processes. One can similarly analyze governmental institutions, in their declared aims and objectives, the ways in which they declare to pursue these (e.g. 'independence', 'transparency'), and the specific underlying policymaking routines. Even the very establishment of, for instance, a food safety agency with public food safety help-lines can be seen as a discursive practice in that it makes possible the identification of the individual as someone who may legitimately be concerned about related issues, and who is in the position to make complaints (cf. Bröer 2006, 2007).

Writings in the tradition of organizational studies can further contribute to our understanding of practice and the role of concrete settings, within and across national and institutional boundaries, where meaning and 'organizational knowledge' are produced in interaction. These 'contexts' also entail particular sets of (organizational) identities. As Anna de Fina, Deborah Schiffrin, and Michael Bamberg (2006: 2) put it:

[I]dentity is neither a given nor a product [...] rather, it is a process that (1) takes place in concrete and specific interactional occasions, (2) yields constellations of identities instead of individual, monolithic constructs, [and] (3) does not simply emanate from the individual, but results from the processes of negotiation.

As some of the leading scholars in the field of practice and organizational studies, the following authors are worth quoting at length. Nicolini, Gherardi, and Yanow (2002: 3) conceptualize organizational knowing as

situated in the system of ongoing practices of action, as relational, mediated by artifacts, and always rooted in a context of interaction. Such knowledge is thus acquired through some form of participation, and it is continually reproduced and negotiated; that is, it is always dynamic and provisional.

Practice, these authors propose, constitutes both ‘our production of the world and the result of this process’ (ibid.: 8), and is ‘always the product of specific historical conditions resulting from *previous* practice and transformed into *present* practice’ (ibid.: 8, emphasis added). More specifically, one may translate organizational knowing as ‘self-understandings’ and often overlapping identities (e.g. as a nutrition expert, as a consumer advocate etc.), and the routines and standard operating procedures by which these identities are enacted.

Jeannette Hofmann (1995) similarly puts forward the concept of *implicit theories* in her analysis of German technology policy in the mid-1990s. According to this author, policymakers draw on ‘established ways of thinking and collective stocks of knowledge, which, on the surface, appear timeless and self-evident’ (Hofmann 1995: 127). ‘It is precisely for their allegedly neutral and factual character that implicit theories are so widely accepted’, she argues (Hofmann 1995: 129). These *implicit theories* (or ‘tacit knowledge’, Polanyi 1966 [1983]) can be seen as resources with which policymakers make sense of changing situations, and on which they draw in their judgment of, for instance, a need for change and how to formulate this need. Implicit theories and organizational knowing can then be seen as the discursive resources that policymakers will draw on when they are forced to redevelop their identities as a result of dislocatory experiences, such as food scares, that cannot be dealt with within the existing institutional and regulatory practices at a given time. It becomes clear now that practice theory is not dissimilar to discourse theory and the concept of *discursive practice* (Howarth, Norval, and Stravakakis 2000), but it offers a concrete language to the non-specialist as well. Such a perspective, as chapters four to seven will show, helps access the meaning-making work of administrators, policymakers and other ‘experts’.

The assertion that the (re-)production and contestation of meaning and the openness of the discursive field are at the core of the policymaking process raises a set of questions with respect to the topic of this research: First, how do meanings shift, for instance, regarding the concept of ‘food safety’, and how do such shifts relate to policy change? How does a discourse of Europeanization come to be seen as legitimate, or how is such a transnational understanding of ‘food safety’ imposed authoritatively? Third, what is the role of agency in the process of renegotiation, or: how much leeway do policymakers themselves have in reconstructing their rules and routines, and what are the channels through which they can do so? As I will argue next, the discourse-theoretical notion of *dislocation* and its implications for the notion of agency aid us considerably in explaining changes and continuities in policy discourse.

### 3.4.2 *Discourse, agency, and dislocation*

In the structuralist conceptualization, agency is understood as limited by a predetermined structure, while poststructuralists emphasize the instability of structure and the impossibility of closure, as discussed in section 3.3. At the other end of the ‘structure/agency spectrum’, rational choice theory proposes that ‘when faced with several courses of action, people usually do what they believe is likely to have the best overall outcome’ (Elster 1989: 22).<sup>37</sup> At the core of such an approach lies the projection of the image of *homo economicus* onto the political subject, or *homo politicus*, as a subject who constantly evaluates options in terms of cost and benefits.

The notions of ‘interests’, ‘preferences’, and ‘agency’ are, of course, central to the political science literature (cf. McAnulla 2002). In rationalist approaches, ‘interests’ and ‘preferences’ are often understood as *given*, both in models of individual behavior as well as at the level of the nation-state (where certain ‘national interests’ are assumed). In contrast, discourse analysts posit that interests and preferences are socially constructed in competing hegemonic projects, fluid, and subject to change. Put differently, interests are not treated as exogenous to social theory. As regards empirical analyses, strategy and ‘interests’ should therefore be considered *within* the particular discourses in which they become constructed, articulated, and reproduced.

As far as the notion of agency is concerned, Stuart McAnulla (2002: 271) observes that ‘the debate concerns the issues of to what extent we as actors have the ability to shape our destiny as against the extent to which our lives are structured in ways out of our control’. Against a conception of politics in which the basic unit for explanatory endeavors is the ‘rational’ and calculating individual who recognizes and acts upon her own, pre-determined ‘interests’,

---

<sup>37</sup> For a concise overview of rational choice approaches, see Ward (2002). For a contextualized discussion, see Hollis (2002), especially chapters 2, 3, 6, and 11.

discourse analysts emphasize the historical and cultural contingency of socio-political systems and actors' self-definitions within them (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Laclau 1990). This key assumption leads poststructuralist-oriented scholars to use the terms 'agency' and 'strategy' carefully, with reservation, emphasizing the contextual contingency of any form of rationality or instrumental strategy (cf. Griggs and Howarth 2002a). To be clear, such reservations do not imply the impossibility of *agency* or *strategy*. In the present thesis, for instance, strategies and (socially constructed) interests are key targets of inquiry, as particularly in episodes of flux and dynamism interests will become open for redefinition and hence produce various sets of strategies and coalitions. Yet, importantly, a discourse analytical approach emphasizes an anti-essentialist conception of agency in the sense that agency and strategy must always be considered within the contingent discourses that make them possible.

Similarly, poststructuralism acknowledges that the notion of *rationality* is far from universal: Martin Hollis provides an example of native Yoruba tribe members who carry boxes covered with cowrie shells as representations of their heads or souls, in order to protect the latter against witchcraft (Hollis 1973: 34). He suggests that 'perhaps [...] the natives find rational what we find irrational, in the sense that they have a different notion of "being a reason for"' (Hollis 1973: 44). Thus, our conceptions of what it means to act rationally are highly contingent on historically specific conditions and their associated values; in other words, 'when we speak of such practices as "superstitious", "illusory", "irrational", we have the weight of our culture behind us' (Winch 1979: 84).

The anti-essentialist conception of agency (and rationality) employed in this study rests on the key theoretical concept of dislocation (Laclau 1990). A dislocation constitutes a moment in which the structural openness of the social system is revealed.<sup>38</sup> Dislocations shatter and disrupt sedimented understandings, meanings, and identities, and thus reveal their ultimate contingency. However, moments of dislocation are not only traumatic but also *productive* moments, as they open up possibilities for new identities to be constituted. In other words, dislocations constitute particular historical junctions where identities and discourses are disrupted, but also provide the necessary ('structural') foundation on which new identities can emerge and new discourse form or previously marginalized discourses come to re-emerge, or both (Torfing 1999: 148-9; Laclau 1990: 41-3). That way, previously fixed signifiers, concepts, and terms such as 'food safety' become destabilized, disconnected from the meanings they have borne in particular contexts, and become open for 'resignification'. Ernest Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) refer to these as

---

<sup>38</sup> A frequently cited example is the extension of capitalist relations into new spheres of life (Laclau 1990). See also Stavrakakis (2000) for an analysis of the emergence of Green ideology as a result of a crisis (dislocation) of the Left.

‘floating signifiers’. It follows that new discursive constellations may consist of an amalgamation of old and new discourses, that there is never pure continuity, nor pure change, but rather, previously marginalized discourses as well as former discourse coalitions will leave discursive traces in the dominant frame of reference at a given time. In other words, a disentanglement of different discourses reveals that ‘new’ discourses are, in fact, the result of renegotiated and re-combined previously existing ones.

A key point emerges from these theoretical postulates: Rather than expecting either complete change or complete continuity in discursive frames of reference, there are always *both* change and continuity at play. Historical articulations of meanings and identities will always hinge upon an already existing grammar of meanings, and, as this empirical study will show, even though meanings become contested and subverted, institutionalized *minimal remainders* (Derrida 1977: 192-254; cf. Norval 2000: 224, fn. 26) will provide a certain continuity.

The concept of dislocation has been used before to analyze the impacts of food scares, especially those in the UK (Jasanoff 1997; Roslyng 2006). Mette-Marie Roslyng draws on the concept in her analysis of the UK salmonella crisis in the 1980s as well as the BSE crisis of 1996 and considers the breakdown of the previously hegemonic discourse on ‘food safety’ in the UK by means of a media analysis. Her analysis, however sophisticated, is less focused on policy discourses and lacks a focus on the materialization of discourses, of practices, of actual performances. As a result, we find few insights there regarding the ways in which meanings become negotiated as well as contested, and importantly, how and on what basis new meanings come to be integrated in a new policy discourse.

Jasanoff (1997: 222ff) conceptualizes the BSE crisis in Britain as a ‘civic dislocation’, or a ‘mismatch between what governmental institutions were supposed to do for the public and what they did’.<sup>39</sup> In addition, she (1997: 223) views as a symptom of the ‘dislocated state’ the fact that ‘trust in government vanished and people looked to other institutions—the high street butcher, the restaurant, the media, the supermarket—for information and advice to restore their security’. It seemed as though ‘the gears of democracy had spun loose, causing citizens, at least temporarily, to disengage from the state [...] [t]he resulting disarray could be observed on many fronts’ (ibid.).

While Jasanoff’s use of the concept of ‘dislocation’ remains underdeveloped, we may draw on Laclau’s (1990) understanding of dislocations as inevitable, traumatic, and productive for an analysis of changes and continuities in policy discourse. In order to fully exploit the notion of

---

<sup>39</sup>Jasanoff (1997) does not discuss the origins of her use of the concept, nor does she refer to Laclau in her study.

dislocation, we must first recall the poststructuralist contention that horizons of meaning in the socio-political world are never completely filled and that meanings and identities are only temporarily fixed. As the definition of a totality (e.g. a society) always hinges upon the exclusion of other discourses, this totality is constantly threatened by its constitutive outside, its antagonistic forces (Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

While the notion of dislocation as developed by Laclau (1990) bears explanatory potential, it remains abstract to those who would ask: 'How do I know a dislocation when I see it?' To overcome this gap between theory and empirics, the concept of dislocation could be usefully supplemented with Hajer's notion of the institutional void (or institutional ambiguity). As developed in Hajer's work (cf. Hajer 2003; Hajer and Wagenaar 2003), the concept of institutional ambiguity bears more descriptive power than either Jasanoff's (1997) conceptualization or that of Laclau and Mouffe (1985): Hajer defines institutional ambiguity as a situation in which 'there are no clear rules and norms according to which politics is to be conducted' (Hajer 2003: 175). He usefully emphasizes the institutional dimension of such moments and proposes that, in situations of such ambiguity, 'institutions are [...] unable to resolve problems in a manner that is perceived to be both legitimate and effective' and hence, 'new spaces' may be created that feature an 'ensemble of mostly unstable practices that emerge in the struggle to address problems' (Hajer 2003: 176). Such a perspective then leads one to concretely examine moments of dislocation in the form of shifts in the particular shapes of institutional arrangements, as well as in the ways in which policy actors work within and against those arrangements on a micro-level in ambiguous organizational-discursive contexts. To conclude, the conceptualization of institutional ambiguity as a symptom of dislocations makes an analysis possible that answers to both explanatory and descriptive aims. Moreover, such a conceptual step turns the notion of dislocation into a more operational and employable notion, when one is concerned with policy analysis.<sup>40</sup>

### *3.4.3 Towards a performative approach*

As mentioned above, a dislocatory experience will necessitate the reconstruction of horizons of meaning. In such situations of (institutional) ambiguity, people and organizations do not only experience trauma; rather, dislocatory experiences also produce moments of creativity and

---

<sup>40</sup> My concern with the said gap between theory and empirics is driven by the aim of adapting discourse theory for the sake of a policy-analytical approach. For other research questions, such as those concerning the role of social movements, other conceptual bridges may be in order.

agency. This section seeks to discuss in more detail the function of such moments, as well as the particular shape that agency can take in such instances.

In instances when new institutions and agencies are set up policymaking involves both the reinvention and improvisation of roles and rules of behavior, and the creative enactment of those new ‘rules of the game’. Producing knowledge regarding the practical functioning of newly established organizations can add to our understanding of the relative hegemonic success of particular sets of discourses that inform identities and practices in recently established organizational contexts. In this study, I propose a particular focus on the *practices* that emerge in the aftermath of dislocatory moments, when the power of routine fails to provide order in an ambiguous and dislocated policy context. While this study generally understands policymaking to rely on repeated performances of the involved actors, moments of dislocation and institutional ambiguity provide a valuable context in which to study such performances, as the empirical chapters in this thesis will show.

Starting with a most general definition, a performance may be understood as *an act, utterance, gesture, event, or instance of writing in which a particular version of ‘reality’ is asserted, reproduced, or contested*. Yet, as Richard Merelman (1969) points out, a definition of this kind would apply to any social act. Indeed, such a broad definition is insufficient in capturing the performative aspects of the policymaking process. The remainder of this section clarifies the conceptual needs of this study and thus moves towards a more refined notion of performative policymaking.

I propose three inter-related meanings of performance in descending order of generality. First, policy discourse – be it reports, surveys, speeches, or consultations – are performative in the sense that they ‘do something’ (cf. Austin 1965; Searle 1969); for instance, they produce particular understandings of ‘the consumer’ as a target group (e.g. ‘the consumer has a right to choose’), or enforce an understanding of Germany as a BSE-free country, or they construct a meaning of organic products as healthy food. This first element of performance then consists of the mobilization of particular sets of meanings that create a particular understanding of objects and subjects.

Second, with time, these new horizons of meanings lead to the institutionalization of particular practices, roles, and rules of behavior (e.g. particular institutional constellations and modes of cooperation between public and private organizations, but also discourses of the sort, e.g., ‘the government cannot tell people what to do’). For example, practices such as science *blogs*, whereby the Chief Scientist at the UK Food Standards Agency (hereafter FSA) writes regular online reports on his activities but also responds to news topics, indicate the formation



and institutionalization of a new ‘stage’ on which new identities and self-understandings are formed and performed.<sup>41</sup>

Third, these newly constructed rules and roles of behavior can only take hold if they are enacted (e.g. in the staging of events such as consumer panels or conferences, or a minister’s visit to cattle farms, or the installation of a consumer research unit within a ministry). In this sense, a performative approach can also help us make sense of publicly arranged instances of the enactment of roles. For instance, in moments of ambiguity, a minister may have to improvise, when she is unsure of what is expected of her. She may then choose to visit a cattle farm in order to stage her affinity with animal welfare. An example from a different context would be the staging of the Danish consumer protest against Shell during the Brent Spar conflict.<sup>42</sup> Hans R. Jensen (2003), for instance, understands the actions of Greenpeace and the related consumer boycott as a ‘political game’ that was staged by the different partners in the environmental discourses, in coalition with the Danish press. He argues that ‘the plot of the political spectacle was [...] invented by the environmental action group Greenpeace, but it was adapted to the stage by indecisive politicians, spokesmen for public authorities, and private companies who [...] realized the potential of being active in this game (Jensen 2003: 77).

The introduction of such dramaturgical notions into socio-political analysis can be traced back to scholars such as Erving Goffman (1959), Kenneth Burke (1969), and J.L. Austin (1965). In 1969, Merelman remarked that ‘through the efforts of Goffmann [...] [there] has been systematic recognition that all social life demands understanding through the fusion of sociological and dramatic categories’ (1969: 219). In addition, he asserted that ‘dramatic theory can provide us with a perspective on politics that highlights formerly obscured aspects of the political process’ (Merelman 1969: 239). At the same time, he recognized the need to narrow down what we mean by ‘dramatic’ or ‘theatrical’ in order for those notions to be of use for the analysis of social and political life.

To start with, Merelman draws attention to two aspects that set politicians apart as social actors. First, using the analogy of a prize-winner, he points out that politicians speak and act vis-à-vis a large ‘audience’. Second, the agendas and policy questions that politicians are charged with are frequently understood as ‘matters of life and death’, not unlike those of a surgeon

---

<sup>41</sup> See <http://www.fsascience.net/> [acc. 2 December 2007].

<sup>42</sup> Brent Spar was an oil storage and tanker loading buoy in the Brent oilfield. Operated by Shell, it became an issue of public concern in 1995, when the British government announced its support for the disposal in waters off the west coast of Scotland which Shell had applied for.

(Merelman 1969: 218). He suggests the Cuban missile crisis as an example situation in which those two aspects were particularly visible and revealed the dramatic impacts of politics.

Merelman further proposes a range of analytical and empirical distinctions for the purpose of explaining the emergence and 'life course' of political ideologies and leaders. His basic starting point is the notion that 'dramaturgical mechanisms are consciously and unconsciously adapted by political actors to their purposes' (Merelman 1969: 221).<sup>43</sup> Beginning from this assumption he inquires: 'When will dramatic mechanisms be most effective and, therefore, most frequently employed in the political arena?' (ibid.: 228). Among the number of factors shaping political performances that the author lists, two are of particular interest in the context of this study. First, Merelman assigns a particular function to *issues*:

[I]ssues which are not easily fitted into existing political cognitive maps or which defy normal political alignments encourage the appearance of dramatic mechanisms. Such issues lie temporarily 'free', uncontrolled by traditional political organizations (1969: 230).

Merelman's understanding of the role of particular issues in unsettling institutionalized 'cognitive maps' and political organizations fits well with the concept of dislocation and institutional ambiguity, but additionally points to the level of the individual as situated in a wider political (and organizational) context. Second, Merelman's emphasis on the aspect of style, adds to our understanding of the staging of policy when it comes to issues that emerge rapidly and when, as a consequence, policy actors have little time to develop clear party positions. As I understand the argument, policy makers then have to improvise and develop new ways of convincing their 'audience'. John Gummer's sharing of a beef burger with his daughter in front of UK media could be seen to constitute an example of such an effect.

Merelman's approach, therefore, rests on the attention to literal performances observable in individual politicians. A poststructuralist understanding of the aforementioned dramaturgical notions, however, may help provide a more nuanced understanding of the function of theatrical elements in the policy process. The next subsection further develops such an approach by redirecting attention to the fluidity of meanings and institutional identities and the chronic dimension of performativity, rather than limiting our focus on literal performances.

---

<sup>43</sup> The variety of dramaturgical techniques include: personification; identification appeals; symbolism; catharsis; suspense; and, within the latter category, a further distinction between climax, peripety, and unmasking (Merelman 1969: 222ff).

#### 3.4.4 Performance, speech acts, and the act of writing

Following the preliminary introduction of a performative approach above, this subsection, first, exposes the limits of dramaturgical notions as they have so far been employed in policy analysis and, second, introduces the contributions of poststructuralist linguistics and feminist writings to a better understanding of policy as a performative process.

To begin with, Merelman, in my view, tends to overemphasize the notion of strategic performances on the part of politicians, at the expense of, first, more subtle enactments of discourses and, second, the importance of improvisation on the part of actors.<sup>44</sup> In addition, he appears to limit theatrical analyses to those acts performed in the public sphere, thus in the presence of a concrete, visible (TV or radio) audience. For example, he excludes bureaucracies when it comes to performance, as they ‘regularize political procedures and impose a set of more or less inflexible roles and rules on organizational participants’ (Merelman 1969: 231). In contrast, a broader, poststructuralist-informed conceptualization of politics confines neither the policy process nor the performative to the insides of institutions or the realm of public appearances. In fact, bureaucracies are core sites on which meanings are produced and enacted.<sup>45</sup> While institutional rules of behavior certainly shape the policy process, those rules themselves can become subject to discursive renegotiation, and are never fixed. Finally, by imposing such a strict analytical vocabulary onto the empirical field of research, one risks diminishing the very potential that an analysis of the performative dimension in policymaking may bear.<sup>46</sup>

More recently, a group of scholars have sought to highlight the performative dimension in policymaking by conceptualizing politics as sets of ‘staged performances’ (Laws and Hajer 2003; Hajer and Versteeg 2005; Hajer 2006; Hajer and Uitermark 2008). Hajer understands performance theory as an approach that seeks to ‘explore the ways in which social processes can be understood in dramaturgical terms’ (Hajer 2006: 48) and draws on the works of Goffman and Austin on ‘how to do things with words’ (Austin 1963; Goffman 1959). Austin’s taxonomy of speech acts contributed considerably to the poststructuralist re-conceptualization of language as

---

<sup>44</sup> See my example earlier of a minister staging a visit to a cattle farm. While such instances are interesting, to my mind, they mainly serve to illustrate attempts by politicians to ‘find their feet’ again when it is unclear what is expected of them. Moreover, given the insufficient frequency of such publicly staged instances, their systematic analysis becomes difficult.

<sup>45</sup> I use the terms ‘enactment’ and ‘performance’ interchangeably primarily for aesthetic reasons. Beyond this reason, however, the phrase ‘enactment’ could at times be problematic in the sense that it may suggest that discourses and meanings are simply ‘out there’, whereas ‘performance’ more strongly emphasizes agency.

<sup>46</sup> But see the work of Stephen Hilgartner (2000), which is discussed below. In his conceptualization of *Science on Stage*, Hilgartner uncovers previously neglected aspects of performativity in the policy process, such as the performative role of scientific advice, as it is (re-)produced in reports, recommendations, and similar policy practices.

a constitutive force. In opposition to the logical-positivist insistence on the true/false categorization of statements, Austin conveys that there is no correspondence between language and reality for the linguistic analyst to examine. Rather, ‘the total speech-act in the total speech-situation is the *only actual* phenomenon which, in the last resort, we are engaged in elucidating’ (Austin 1963: 148, emphasis original).<sup>47</sup>

Hajer and Versteeg (2005; cf. Hajer and Uitermark 2007; Hajer 2005) draw on Austin’s work in innovative ways, making it fit to be applied to policy analysis and particularly micro-level analyses by introducing the idea of politics as an art, and the concepts of *dramaturgy* (*setting, scripting, staging*; cf. Hajer 2006: 49). Hajer and Versteeg (2005) understand performance to be an enactment of discourse not only through the use of language, but also by the act of speaking itself, the way the ‘speaker’ conveys her message to the audience, and the way the audience ‘receives’ it. In addition, the objects involved in performances are of importance, as well as the setting in which such an interchange takes place (Hajer and Versteeg 2005; cf. Hajer 2006).

In drawing analytical distinctions between discourse, dramaturgy, and deliberation, David Laws and Maarten Hajer (2003; cf. Hajer 2005, 2006, Hajer and Uitermark 2008) emphasize the importance of shared understandings and mutually understood rules of interaction. In addition, they recommend that the policy analyst look at concrete settings and how these affect the quality of what is being said. In addition, Laws (2008) highlights the ‘microfoundations of deliberative governance’ and thereby examines stakeholder involvement practices that take place in new settings and feature ‘new forms of talk’ (2008: 3). While these approaches contain important and innovative elements, two issues remain insufficiently discussed: first, the problematic idea of context in Austin’s work, which is in tension with the poststructuralist understanding of an open and instable structure, and, second, once again, the potential of poststructuralist philosophy to overcome the structure/agency problematic, as discussed in section 3.5.1.

Let us first consider Derrida’s critical reading of Austin, particularly concerning the role of *conventions* and *context*. While Austin argues that language relies on conventions as a means of social communication and interaction, Derrida contends that the *iterability* of a sign/signifier actually depends on its ability to *break* with context and to be inserted into new contexts. He asserts that

---

<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, he proposes a more precise classification of speech acts: the *verdictive*, which is ‘an exercise of judgement’, the *exercitive* as ‘an assertion of influence or exercising of power’, the *commissive*, which constitutes itself as ‘an assuming of an obligation or declaring of an intention’, the *behabitive* as ‘the adopting of an attitude’, and the *expositive*, which is uttered for the purpose of the ‘clarifying of reasons, arguments, and communications’ (ibid: 163; 151-2). These classifications are not pertinent to the approach taken here but offer interesting points of observation for those devoted to the study of micro-level interaction.

[e]very sign [...] in a small or large unit can be cited [...]; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering and inscribing itself in infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable. This does not imply that the mark is valid outside of a context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any center or absolute anchoring [*ancrage*] (Derrida 1988 [1977]: 12).

In this way, Derrida takes issue with the Austinian notion of the ‘total context’, which arguably denotes a definite, almost structuralist understanding of context. Importantly, it is the very *iterability*, or instability, of a signifier that makes it so powerful. A case in point would be the notion of ‘food quality’, the meaning of which can range from nutritional benefits to ‘naturalness’ to hygienic qualities. As such, a concept can be *reinserted* into various discursive contexts and it can then acquire a plurality of meanings, facilitating change.<sup>48</sup>

The *iterability* of meanings implies an aspect of creativity and agency that is so far missing in accounts of ‘politics as performance’. More specifically, we could understand moments of ambiguity, in combination with the *iterability* of meanings, as facilitating *empowerment*. Such an understanding – which makes possible a conceptual navigation between ‘structure’ and ‘agency’ - may add to the theoretical and empirical scope of this scholarship. The work of Judith Butler (1997), which is often neglected in the recent body of scholarship on performance, is insightful here. She critically incorporates elements of both Derrida’s and Austin’s work into her theoretical framework for understanding the reproduction of the notion of gender. First, it is important to note that Butler does not view performativity and repetitive acts to be merely bearers of structures.<sup>49</sup> Rather, she allows for a certain degree of agency in regard to performativity in the sense that constructed notions such as that of gender are always open to *resignification*. Therefore, her account of performativity further allows for a kind of reversal of performativity, as she radically re-conceptualizes gender as ‘a free-floating artifice’ (Butler [1990] 1999: 10), as a consequence of which *male* or *masculine* could, in effect, just as well signify *female* or *feminine* (*ibid.*). Moreover, she develops a notion of ‘linguistic agency’ (Butler 1997: 15) and suggests the possibility of ‘counter speech’, through which ‘words can become disjoined from their power to injure and recontextualized in more affirmative modes’ (*ibid.*). Hence, drawing on Derrida, yet with a stronger normative tone, she conveys that the effects of speech and the constitution of subjectivity are never final (Butler 1997: 19).

---

<sup>48</sup> The empirical chapters of this thesis will, for instance, examine the discursive functions of the concept of the ‘food chain’ and the ways in which its very flexibility has been a source of empowerment.

<sup>49</sup> See also Laclau’s notion of ‘creative subjectivity’ (Laclau 1993, cf. Torfing 1999: 88-9), by which he highlights that, within a given discourse, the subject does have agency in the (re-)construction of meaning (and, therefore, her identity).

Butler's work is relevant here in two ways. First, such a 'performativity' perspective helps to expose the constructed nature of actor-categories such as 'the consumer' or 'the policymaker' – indeed, those identities must be seen as dynamic and relational, and contingent upon particular contextual conditions and the settings in which they are performed. In other words, these categories do not entail 'essential' or inherent meanings, but they are of a performative nature. When cited and re-articulated in new or changing discourses, however, they take on the form of notions, such as 'being a consumer' (rather than a citizen) or a 'good policymaker' who works in a transparent and open fashion. Second, Butler's notion of re-signification, or re-citation, is useful in the study of Europeanization, as in that process events, stories, experiences are re-narrated, concepts (such as 'the internal market', 'scientific expertise', 'food quality') are re-cited and may then take on a different – Europeanized – meaning.

As far as the concrete policymaking process is concerned, how can one analytically access the (re-)development of subjectivities and identities, as well as the (re-)production of meanings and, therefore, the production of new policy discourses? To begin with, one needs to pay attention to the modes of interaction between what is seen as separate (and disparate) 'actors' in these processes. These interactive practices may be implicit or explicit, literal or metaphorical, but in either event, they can be understood to produce collaborative policy authorship, be it between scientists and administrators, or citizens and administrators, or both. In order to analytically delimit our field of study, we require a concept that suits our methodology as well as our methodical needs: The metaphor of the *stage*, it is argued here, may fulfill those needs, and help us access the practical functioning of ambiguous, newly established institutions. Moreover, drawing on the concept of institutions as stages improves our understanding of the dynamic and relational ways in which policy is formulated and re-negotiated. Moreover, by conceptualizing institutions in this manner, one can expose the misleading construction of the binary distinction between 'actors' and 'audiences'.

In such a vein, Stephen Hilgartner (2000), for instance, proposes an analysis of scientific advice as 'public drama'. He asserts that science plays a crucial role in contemporary society that often remains underestimated (for instance, in policy-analytical accounts). Governments, he points out, 'find expert advice to be an indispensable resource for formulating and justifying policy, and, more subtly, for removing some issues from the political domain by transforming them into technical questions' (Hilgartner 2000: 146). Hilgartner is particularly concerned with scientists' struggle for credibility, and takes as a case study the American National Academy of Sciences. His analysis concentrates on the modes of operation in this institution, and he concludes that the Academy's influence and importance in policymaking rests on its ability to

come across as credible, or, as one may put it, have its truth claims accepted as legitimate. In his understanding of scientific advice as public drama, Hilgartner further draws a distinction between ‘front-stage’ and ‘back-stage’ with respect to the work of scientists - a distinction that is useful particularly from a normative perspective, if one is concerned with, for instance, the lack of transparency frequently associated with medical recommendations or nutrition advice (see also Nestle 2003), as it highlights the ambiguous conditions under which scientific expertise is formulated and performed.

What he refers to as ‘stage management’, the success of which makes for a successful performance, comes close to Merelman’s (1969) understanding of the ‘selective management of impressions’, or perhaps Gieryn’s (1983) notion of ‘boundary work’. Importantly, the activities around ‘stage-management’ will always imply an act of power; for instance, in the case of nutrition reports (see chapters one and two in Hilgartner 2000), the flow of information may be managed to an extent that divergent opinions are hidden away behind a seemingly coherent and uniform policy report.<sup>50</sup> Such an understanding of policymaking brings more insight to policy analysis – certainly with respect to this study – as it brings to light the importance of performativity on institutional sites (or stages), rather than limiting the notion of performance to public appearances, as Merelman (1969) suggested.

In more conventional accounts (e.g. Lindblom 1993; Ham and Hill 1993) one may understand the policymaking process to consist of a process of negotiation between actors with divergent interests and qualities. Neo-pluralist scholars such as Charles Lindblom conceptualize policymaking as a process of competition between interest groups (while emphasizing the disproportionate influence business interests have in the policy process). Similarly, Ham and Hill (1993: 188) propose that

[t]he study of the policy process is the study of conflicts between interests, as embodied in the pluralist model, the study of individuals and groups securing positions within the autonomous state and then being able to make choices in both the making and the implementation of policy and the study of action constrained by strong, but not unalterable, structural forces.

Regarding the present study, scholars of the latter tradition would take as a point of departure a set of core actors, or participants, in the policymaking process. More specifically, such accounts may propose to distinguish between categories such as ‘policymakers’, ‘scientists’, and interest groups – in particular citizens and the industry. The interaction between the former

---

<sup>50</sup> See also Bruno Latour’s work (1999) on scientific practices and ‘enactment’.

and the latter two would then be characterised by essentially divergent interests. This juxtaposition frequently manifests itself in the concern with the undue influence of corporate power in policymaking, for instance in environmental policy (cf. Blowers 1993).

This study does not suggest that the differentiation between groups is entirely 'unrealistic'. Rather, it wants to raise and address a set of concerns: First, distinctions and categorizations always risk reifying particular categories and the related identities. Second, the distinctions between policymakers, scientists, citizens, and the industry produce a technical notion of the policymaking process that neglects the crucial importance of the production of meaning therein. I suggest to move towards a more open, fluid, and dynamic understanding of the policy process. To that end, the working practices in this field of policymaking are understood here as scripts that assign particular roles, rules, and responsibilities to the social actors concerned. Such a conceptual move makes it possible to take seriously both the person who writes policy and the particular setting in which she finds herself performing – without, however, holding on to the constructed distinction between the person and the role she is expected to fulfil in a particular context. Rather, the policymaker, scientist, industry representative, or consumer advocate can be understood to simultaneously (re-)produce those expectations (the script) associated with her role in the policy process.

Yet what happens when the script no longer makes sense to either actors or audience? What if the script, and the artifacts on that stage, are no longer useful and convincing enough for telling a story? What if the rehearsed routines and the actors' training no longer satisfy either their artistic ambitions or the audience's expectations? In moments of dislocation, instability, and ambiguity, the rehearsed relations between the actors on stage, the assistants backstage and the audience no longer 'make sense'. In particular, the elements of authority implicit in these relationships are called into question.

Such moments, *dislocating* the relationships between the different sides of the stage – exposing them as inseparable - will require a period of adjustment: Scripts may have to be re-written, actors will have to improvise, and the audience may claim a say in this process, re-articulating their expectations. This process will take time, evaluation, rehearsals, new artifacts, a new script, perhaps a new director, perhaps even a new theatre, a new stage. And with every performance the interpretation of the *script* changes slightly, actors continue to improvise, and the quality of the performance depends on the perceptions and the changing expectations of the audience. Such dynamics manifest themselves, for instance, in the process of Europeanization: Events such as the dioxin crisis in Belgium in 1999, or the discovery of BSE in continental Europe in 2000 and 2001, came to be (re-)told using a *transnational script* rather than a 'member



state' script. That way, the earlier events in the UK (e.g. the announcement of the link between BSE and nvCJD) also became *re-narrated* in a transnational script and hence took on a different meaning (see chapter seven).

But who engages in script-writing, and 'counter-script-writing' (Hajer and Uitermark 2008)? How can we account for changes and continuities in scripts? The terms 'script' and 'writing' must be carefully approached. On the one hand, there is literal authorship behind policy papers, new legislation and so forth. On the other hand, the notion of authorship can also be used as a metaphor for agency: Writing and text conceptualized in a broad way can alleviate the contested and value-laden connotation of the term 'agency'. Writing is necessarily a *creative* process that *simplifies* impressions, ideas, and stories that authors perceive to be a reflection of 'reality'. Writing (policy) is also a way to delimit and control the flows of interpretation of events, phenomena, and interaction. Moreover, writing – whether in academic or literary practice – takes place with an audience in mind and at the same time constructs and (re)produces that very audience – again, a performative process.

As poststructuralist philosophers have argued convincingly, there is no single meaning to text; the author does not exist (and write) in a vacuum, and neither does the reader exist (and read) in isolation. Any text, therefore, has multiple authors and multiple readers (cf. Ede and Lunsdorf 2001). For instance, the idea of 'putting the consumer first' and the simultaneous growth or re-emergence of consumer advocacy discourse in the non-governmental societal sector is a co-productive, performative process. First, the ways in which the consumer as an audience is constructed (as responsible, informed, rational, or disadvantaged) deserves particular attention in the empirical case studies. Secondly, and simultaneously, the ways in which *texts* (broadly understood) are taken up and enacted by groups such as consumer advocates or environmental groups can be seen as moments of agency and contestation: for instance, the ways in which such groups have experienced a sense of re-empowerment in the German context (see chapter four).

In addition, when using 'writing' and 'authorship' as both literal and metaphorical concepts, they can help describe and understand new practices employed in empirical cases. Examples are practices such as open board meetings (cf. Loeber and Hajer 2006; Laws and Hajer 2003), the aforementioned introduction of 'science blogs' at the UK FSA, an emphasis on making policy documents publicly available, as well as, for instance, changing details such as the font used in FSA policy documents in order to display a 'more modern, less conservative' image.<sup>51</sup> Similarly,

---

<sup>51</sup>The font used was changed from Times New Roman to Arial – a 'more neutral, modern' font (EN3-S).

interviews with officials in newly established institutions indicate that work environments have been deliberately changed in order to encourage and reflect a ‘new approach’ to policymaking: In England, for instance, (and to some extent in the Netherlands) the practice of using open-plan offices has become wide-spread, as has ‘hot-desking’, an organizational practice whereby employees will not have their own fixed workplace but will have to swap desks regularly.<sup>52</sup>

The introduction of such practices could be understood as a performative act, in the sense that the said officials, scientists and so forth thereby enact and reproduce an organizational identity that is informed by specific discourses, such as discourses of ‘transparent governance’. Indeed, it seems to be considered self-evident by interviewed bureaucrats, policy officials, and some scientists that the deliberate creation of these settings will encourage more openness and better coordination between departments.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, the aim to improve coordination and cooperation between science units and consumer policy units can be seen to reflect a changing notion of policy authorship: a co-authorship. In addition, it is frequently emphasized that this ‘more modern, less conservative’ approach also implies a gradual de-emphasizing of organizational hierarchies: Even senior civil servants and directors take part in hot-desking, which could be understood as a manifestation of joint script-writing.

Again, the relationship between the emergence of innovative working practices and new settings can be conceptualized in terms of performance and interaction in order to overcome the difficult distinction between ‘material’ realities (buildings, objects, tools) and ‘ideas’ (such as the popular slogans of transparency and openness) by way of conceptualizing these as interacting and mutually reinforcing objects of analysis. As a preliminary step, we can understand the ‘citizen category’ to constitute the ‘audience’ of the policymaker, scientist, and the industry. However, this would imply a rather passive notion of the consumer-as-audience. In contrast, the empirical chapters of this thesis reveal the centrality of the notion of being a consumer and its discursive function in the overall policy discourse following the dislocatory experiences of primarily BSE, but also other food scares, such as the salmonella affair in the 1980s in the UK, Foot-and-Mouth Disease, and instances of chemical food contamination. Given the constitutive role of the notion of being a consumer in policy discourses across the studied contexts as well as its quality as a nodal point in the process of Europeanization, the construction of a binary relationship between ‘audience’ and ‘stage’ does not hold.

---

<sup>52</sup> This practice probably originated in the industry but has become transferred to ministries as well.

<sup>53</sup> See also chapter five for similar practices at the Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR) in Germany and chapter six for the case of the Netherlands Food and Product Safety Authority (VWA).

Having explicated what ‘policy discourse’ *means* for the purpose of this thesis, as well as the central concepts to be employed here, below I move on to explaining how I will access and *analyze* policy discourse in the empirical chapters.

### **3.5 How to analyze meaning: from concepts to methods**

This section serves to clarify in more specific terms the methodology employed in this study, focusing on four aspects: data collection; the process of ordering or ‘making sense of’ the collected data; and the identification of discourses and related analytical choices. Finally, I address the challenges encountered in the research process. Before engaging in the more technical discussion, a recapitulation of the research questions, as well as their underlying assumptions, is useful here.

#### *3.5.1 Research questions*

In chapter one, the central and interrelated research questions posed in this study were constructed as follows:

- 1. How has food safety been taken up as a policy issue in England, Germany, and the Netherlands since the 1990s?*
- 2. How can we explain the different ways in which food safety has been taken up across the national contexts?*
- 3. How can we explain the emergence of a transnational policy approach, given the divergence on the national level?*

In order to approach these questions in an effective way, this study employs the notion of dislocation (Laclau 1990) as the central explanatory notion, the more descriptive concept of institutional ambiguity, and the notion of performativity in order to account for policymaking on several levels.

For the purpose of examining the diverse ways in which food scares were interpreted in England, Germany, the Netherlands, and the EU, the empirical chapters of this thesis are guided by the following four questions in descending order of generality and abstraction:

1. What does food safety mean?
2. What discourses have shaped the meaning of ‘food safety’, and what notions bind those discourses together?

3. How do those discourses inform the policymaking process, and what kinds of discursive formations do they produce between policymakers, scientists, citizens, and the food industry?
4. How, by what means, and with what effects are the diverse meanings associated with food (safety) performed?

In the construction of a concrete analytical framework, a set of conceptual and empirical steps were decisive. First, as indicated above, more conventional policy accounts take particular roles, functions, and associated interests in the policy process as given – that of the policymaker, the scientist, citizens, and the industry. Yet examining these spheres as *separate* stages and categories would conceal the fluidity of the policy process and the structural need to produce meanings in interaction. Even more so, a study of dislocatory moments and acute institutional ambiguity necessitates an approach within which one can capture the discursive resources that agents draw on, rather than merely the agents themselves. In other words, the present study begins by identifying key *discourses*, rather than key *actors* in this policy field.

Although I do not call into question the ‘real existence’ of, for instance, the food industry or institutional arrangements that may either link or divide ‘science’ from ‘policy’, I contend that it is *discourses* that *make actors*, and not vice versa. The objects of analysis, therefore, are (1) the different meanings of food safety, (2) the discourses which inform these meanings, (3) the notions that make up these discourses and their particular qualities and functions, and (4) the related discursive constellations.

### *3.5.2 Data collection*

For the purpose of studying the ways in which food scares were taken up across contexts, I drew on two sorts of data. First, given the diachronic nature of this research, access to policy documents and some archives was essential in order to obtain an adequate understanding of some of the practical changes in policy programs. Therefore, prior to the commencement of the interviewing phase, an overview of institutional arrangements and rearrangements was produced by way of official documents available online, as well as secondary literature available on the topic. From this material, research questions were formulated, and gaps and incoherencies were identified. This material provided the background for the first round of interviews conducted in Brussels in the context of the European Commission, the European Food Safety Authority (which, at the time, was moving to Parma, Italy), as well as lobby groups and NGOs.

The present study, however, is less concerned with an evaluation of particular policies or the unfolding of technical details - it is concerned with the (re-)production of meanings and the force of discourse in mobilizing changes in policy discourse and different discursive

constellations. This concern, second, implied the need to access personal accounts of the various developments in order to gain an understanding of the taken-for-granted definitions, assumptions, and observations of policy authors as well as their self-understandings. In this process it was also important to preserve the ‘messiness’ (Law 2004) of accounts and the richness of personal experiences. While on occasion, dates and technical pieces of information had to be cross-checked (frequently by using Lexis-Nexis), generally speaking, ‘truth’ was not what I sought to find in my interviews. Rather, it was important to access the identities and self-understandings of policy authors and how they project them through every-day accounts. By trying to parse the logics they perform through their every-day practices, I arrived at important insights regarding the performative aspect of policymaking.

For the purpose of this study, fieldwork was conducted over the period of just over one year, from October 2005 to December 2006. The active research phase was conducted in several stages, which included both systematic document collection and over 60 in-depth interviews with policymakers, scientists, NGOs, journalists, quasi-governmental organizations (e.g. publicly funded consumer organizations), retailers, and journalists. A detailed list of the conducted interviews can be found in appendix A, while an index of the newsletters analyzed can be found in appendix B annexed to this thesis. Where possible, the interviews were conducted in the native language of the respondent, in German, Dutch, and English, respectively. Most interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed and anonymized; unless indicated otherwise, full transcripts are available. In an attempt to minimize the ‘lost in translation’ effect, all translations into English of interviews and other non-English primary sources were undertaken by the author herself and done as literally as possible.

The diverse national and professional backgrounds of interviewees in the EU context further made it possible to gather information concerning the national regulatory nodes, as – interestingly enough – a number of interviewees had not only worked for their respective national food safety authorities but also for private agencies and, in a few select cases, for food safety agencies in other EU member states. As a consequence, the accounts of those respondents frequently included references to industry practices as well as arrangements and regulatory practices in other countries.

An initial round of interviews was conducted in Germany, in Berlin and Bonn, with officials, scientists, and NGOs, as well as the Central Consumer Organization (Verbraucherzentrale) and the Information Center for Nutrition, Agriculture, and Forestry, Aid (*Auswertungs- und Informationsdienst für Ernährung, Landwirtschaft und Forsten*), which could be described as a quasi-

non-governmental organization (QUANGO).<sup>54</sup> A second set of interviews was conducted a few months onward, taking advantage of possibilities for ‘snowball sampling’. In the third stage, interviews were conducted in the Netherlands over a period of two months, with officials, scientists, retailers, NGOs and one QUANGO. Again, snowball sampling partly structured the choice of respondents. Then, interviews relating to the English case were conducted over a period of three months while on a visiting fellowship at the University of Warwick, with respondents in several governmental bodies, consumer groups, and journalists.<sup>55</sup>

### 3.5.3 Ordering the data

As indicated above (section 3.4), the point of departure of this study consists of a conceptual and empirical concern with the established distinctions between a set of actors in the policy process: policymakers, scientists, citizens, and the industry. This study takes issue with these categories in three steps, as follows.

To begin with, these categorizations were derived from influential scholarship on the policymaking process (cf. Ham and Hill 1993; Lindblom 1968, 1993) and, in the first instance, were used ‘generously’ (in the Derridean sense of a reading) as an ‘ordering device’ with respect to the data collected for this study. We can understand this as both a conceptual exercise and a *pragmatic move*. The notion of this set of roles, first, made the data more accessible, especially when drawing from a diverse range of written and spoken data, such as consumption research, policy practices including public participation, new labeling techniques, regulatory change in the field of food and farming, campaigns by environmentalist groups, and so forth.

Second, the analytical distinctions facilitated an initial, systematic examination of the data, as they make it possible to study how the same categories (e.g. the consumer) take on different meanings in different contexts. The discourses that inform the rules of appropriateness and shared understandings in the respective spheres were inductively distilled from the raw material collected for this study. This step formed the most crucial element in this research. After multiple readings, the data was re-ordered, moving from the assumed actors to an empirical distinction between a set of discourses. We can understand this step as a *deconstructive move*.

Third, particularly the large number of in-depth interviews conducted helped to assess the relative stability of discursive practices, and to explain changes and continuities in these, for

---

<sup>54</sup> The latter two organizations both receive public funding and could be considered to work at arm’s length from the Ministry of Food, Agriculture, and Consumer Protection (BMELV).

<sup>55</sup> The fellowship was sponsored by the EU GARNET mobility program (within the EU Sixth Framework Program) and hosted by the *Centre for the Study of Globalisation and Regionalisation* (CSGR) at the Department for Politics and International Studies (PAIS), University of Warwick.

instance, in the ways the respondents (for instance policy officials and scientists, but also consumer advocates) describe their working practices as ‘normal practices’ or ‘novel practices’, and the extent to which they consider their working practices to be institutionalized. At the same time, these categorizations facilitate an evaluation of the modes of interaction between these actor categories, such as those enacted in practices like conferences or participatory policy practices but also more indirect modes of interaction such as surveys and consultations.

By these means, this study points toward the analytically problematic nature of these seemingly stable categorizations. These categorizations, I argue, obscure the fluid and dynamic nature of the policymaking process, and a rigid framework based on them conceals the fundamental role of discourses that function to dissolve the boundaries among actor categories. Below, table 3.1 provides an overview of the most pertinent discursive constellations in which actor categories are brought together in the respective national contexts (*rms*) in this study.

**TABLE 3.1 Policy discourse across contexts: clusters of practice**

	<b>Environmental sustainability</b>	<b>Good Governance</b>	<b>Consumer Protection</b>	<b>Market efficiency</b>	<b>Public health</b>
<b>EN</b>	<b>PSCI</b>	<b>PSCI</b>	PSCI	PI	<b>PSCI</b>
<b>DE</b>	<b>PSCI</b>	<b>PSC</b>	<b>PSCI</b>	PI	PSCI
<b>NL</b>	PSCI	<b>PSCI</b>	PCI	<b>PSCI</b>	<b>PI</b>
<b>EU</b>	PSC <sup>UK-D-NL</sup>	<b>PSCI</b> <sup>UK-NL-D</sup>	<b>PSCI</b> <sup>UK-D</sup>	PI <sup>NL-UK</sup>	<b>PSCI</b> <sup>UK-D-NL</sup>

**Categories:** P = Policymakers  
 S = Scientists  
 C = Citizens (e.g. consumer advocates, environmental groups)  
 I = Members of the food industry

In bold: more recent/re-emerging discourse

In superscript: national discourse resonating strongly in Europeanized discourse

The *columns* represent the most prominent discourses that are empirically derived in the analysis presented here across the different contexts and time periods covered, keeping in mind that these discourses vary in their strength and relevance in the different contexts – as the empirical chapters (four, five, six, and seven) will demonstrate. Since the present policy discourse remains the primary focus of this study, ‘new’ or re-emerging discursive elements are highlighted in bold.

Although the columns could also be seen as intuitive categories in the domain of food (safety) policy, the table is not intended to provide a formalistic and rigid framework – instead it should be considered as a reflection (and reproduction) of the discursive field in which food policy becomes formulated in the respective contexts. It serves to indicate the most pertinent discourses, keeping in mind that these may conflict as well as overlap. As suggested in the table, the main discourses identified across the contexts covered in this study consist of the ‘environmental sustainability discourse’, the ‘good governance discourse’, the ‘consumer protection discourse’, the ‘market efficiency discourse’, and the ‘public health discourse’.

#### *3.5.4 Identification of discourses*

My analysis of spoken and written material consisted of what Derrida termed a ‘double-reading’. First, a *generous* reading allowed me to construct an overview of institutional and policy-related changes; additionally, it served to get a sense of the kinds of issues on the (official) political agenda in the field of food (safety) policy. A similar reading of selected news clippings added to this process. A second, more critical reading involved a ‘discursive repositioning’ on my part: taking a step back in an effort to expose the incoherencies, inconsistencies, as well as the repetitive themes in the studied material. By this process it became possible to discover alternative meanings and to identify the discursive foundations that shape those meanings. As a ‘side effect’, this also involved a repeated (literal) reordering, re-filing, and reconsideration of the categorizations initially used. In other words, the data began to show the fundamentally constructed nature of the categories and distinctions so commonly used both in academic scholarship and in every-day policy talk.

I sought to use and analyze equivalent material across the three national contexts, as far as the nature of material (e.g. newsletters of official food safety agencies) was concerned, as is indicated in appendix B of this thesis. By gradually identifying separate (though frequently overlapping) discourses, I constructed ‘maps’ for the purpose of re-approaching and specifying my research questions. Using the spoken and written material, a set of discourses were distilled inductively by focusing on the identification of key signifiers, repetitive themes, references to



past and future developments, and what respondents referred to as key events. Those discourses are indicated in the columns of table 3.1. In addition, the accounts provided by the diverse respondents frequently led me to reconsider the scope and nature of the written material, and to gather additional material from other, earlier sources, such as conferences that had taken place in the more distant past or committees that had already been dismantled.

The discourses identified in this study (see section 3.5.3 and table 3.1) may be understood as analytical constructions of the author and the result of multiple readings of the empirical material. Those discourses – which vary in strength and composition across the countries studied – play a two-fold role here: First, the categorization reflects an attempt to ‘order’ my impressions and insights, and to make sense of the different conflicting and overlapping stories told by respondents and introduced and reinforced in policy documents. Second, the distinctions function as analytical devices inasmuch as they can be used as ‘vignettes’ to mark change and continuities in policy discourse across the cases.

It is crucial to discuss the criteria on the basis of which particular actors appear in the cells of the table above. First, an initial a word count of various terms (for instance, the term ‘consumer’ in documents related to scientific advice regarding nutrition) directed my attention to a particular discursive constellation (for instance, between ‘scientists’ (‘S’) and ‘citizens’ (‘C’)).<sup>56</sup> It is important to note, however, that this strategy merely served to help order the vast amounts of data in the initial stages – they should hence not be considered as an attempt to capture discourse or discursive formations in quantitative, decontextualized terms. Rather than evidence to back up causal claims, I consider them devices for orientation in light of the amounts of material collected for this study.

The second, and more important way in which I identified clusters between scientists (‘S’), policymakers, (‘P’), members of the industry (‘I’), and citizen groups (‘C’) consisted in the repeated in-depth analysis of the textual material itself. The ‘snow-balling’ technique employed in the interviewing process added to my insights: For instance, when scientists referred me to consumer associations, or bureaucrats referred me to researchers or scientific reports (be it in the natural science, social sciences, or agricultural sciences), it signalled a merging of roles between those seemingly distinct actor-categories in the enactment, renegotiation, or contestation of a particular discourse. Similarly, interview partners were asked about their routines and modes of interaction with others whom they considered policy actors. Within such clusters, therefore, the seemingly disparate actors in the policymaking process come together in a

---

<sup>56</sup> Examples of these kinds of data in key documents from across the studied contexts are included in appendix C.

particular *relational* position or equivalential position. By articulating the same discourse – even though on different ‘stages’ – these actors produce a shared version of reality, for instance, an interpretation of what BSE stands for or of the value of organic farming. In such clusters, one can thereby also see clues concerning how and why particular discourses may become institutionalized by assessing the relative strength of particular clusterings and examining the political efficacy of particular sets of notions. For instance, the notions of the ‘food chain’ and the ‘stakeholder’ have had particular discursive weight in the mobilization of an EU policy discourse because they bridge categories that otherwise seem disparate, such as the industry and citizens. The relative stability of these bridges relies on the qualities of the notions – for instance, the notion of being a member of a chain makes cooperation appear necessary and inevitable, and creates a sense of interdependence’.

Table 3.1 (above) is intended to serve as a guiding device for the reader, as it portrays the analytical framework of the overall study, which includes three national contexts as well as the transnational level of the EU. As far as EU policy discourse is concerned, this study seeks to grasp the mechanisms by which a shared language is constructed in that arena and the nature and particular content of that vocabulary in light of the diversity of interpretations we find in the national contexts. The latter are summarized in individual tables in the respective chapters, which indicate the particular content – key notions – which give particular meaning to the most prominent of the five discourses in England, Germany, and the Netherlands, respectively.

Moreover, a key aspect of this analytical framework consists of the attempt to capture Europeanization as a fluid, dynamic, and multi-sited process that relies on the re-narration of events, their performative *re-citation*, and the simultaneous development of a set of shared understandings. To that end, chapter seven disentangles the different discourses that inform the present dominant policy discourse in that context. Consequently, an important step in this study was to identify the relative strength of discursive interpretations found on the national level in the EU context. For instance: what imprints has the English version of the ‘good governance’ discourse left on the institutional discourse and practices at the level of the EU, or indeed vice versa? Whenever a given national discourse appears to have a particularly strong resonance in the process of Europeanization in this policy area, this is indicated by a superscript in the fourth row of table 3.1.

### *3.5.5 Analysis as an iterative process*

Interpretive discourse-analytical research has to navigate carefully between retaining the ‘messiness’ (Law 2006) of the collected material and constructing an intelligible story that does

justice to, first, the methodological standards pertinent to this type of research (see section 3.2) and, second, the self-understandings of respondents. As Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin (1998: 13) put it lucidly:

[Analysis] is both science and art. It is science in the sense of maintaining a certain sense of rigor and by grounding analysis in data. Creativity manifests itself in the ability of researchers to aptly name categories, ask stimulating questions, make comparisons, and extract an innovative, integrated, realistic scheme from masses of unorganized raw data.

As mentioned before, the discourses presented in this study can be considered as analytical constructions that rely on the ‘ordering processes’ carried out during fieldwork and on ‘making sense of’ large amounts of data. Two issues must be noted here regarding the ontological status of these constructions. First, they are distilled from different and sometimes overlapping streams of argumentation in the material. Second, the analytical constructions rely on the contextual positioning of the researcher who finds herself in a particular subject-position to begin with. Nonetheless, the empirical results presented here constitute the outcome of systematic and extensive empirical research, while the ‘messiness’ of the raw material is retained by means of highlighting both differences and overlaps in what is offered here as ‘discourses’ that inform policymaking.

Strauss and Corbin (1998: 13) describe the process of analysis as ‘the interplay between researchers and data’. As far as qualitative, interpretive research is concerned, this understanding seems very fitting, as it touches upon at least two key experiences of researchers in this tradition. First, the production of theory and empirics in the present study should be considered to consist of an *iterative* process, wherein the author moves back and forth between building theory, improving her understanding of the empirical stories to be told, and the improvement of the analytical framework. Second, the inductive work required to produce an adequately ‘messy’ (Law 2004) yet sufficiently accessible account demands self-reflectivity but also ample interaction with different ‘audiences’ – both academic and practical. In that sense, interviews for instance, should not merely be regarded as a data-gathering activity but as a feedback mechanism as well.

### *3.5.6. Challenges and reflections*

It is useful here to also briefly raise some of the challenges encountered in the course of the empirical research process. As mentioned earlier, social-scientific research on the subject matter of food (safety) policy has been booming in recent years. This has also led to a sense of ‘being over-interviewed’ on the part of the respondents, which hampered access to institutions and

organizations during the fieldwork carried out for this study. In addition, organizational culture considerably affected the availability of respondents, such as at the European Commission. Moreover, the 'habitus of the expert' (cf. Bogner et al. 2002) often set the tone in interviews, not least because a majority of interviews had to be conducted in *office-ial* settings. In such contexts, gender and age played a significant role, too, in the sense that these aspects appeared to pre-define the situation and hence the mode of conversation. Whereas on many occasions, this effect is reflected in the style of the transcribed conversation, in other cases, the effects of body language and gestures, unfortunately, escape the limited power of transcription.

The interviewer-respondent relationship was typically less problematic to establish in those interviews conducted either outside offices (such as at a museum, a botanical garden, and in the homes of respondents) or those conducted over (organic) lunches. In all cases, the setting certainly affected what could be said, the sorts of questions and answers that appeared legitimate, and the degree of formality on the part of respondents. Moreover, my own role as an academic researcher took on different meanings in different settings: At times, it seemed more suitable to present myself as a 'naïve' researcher, whereas at other times a recognition of my own increasing 'expertise' helped to make conversations more balanced and more efficient. Finally, the researcher's own perceptions and normative stances will inevitably influence both the fieldwork process and the analysis, as it is impossible for her to 'step outside' her own discursive subject position (see also section 3.2 of this chapter for an explication of these epistemological aspects).

But what does it mean to study policymakers in crisis? How does the nature of organizations impact on the research process? Respondents in governmental (as well as supranational, EU-based) institutions tended to anticipate that a 'standard account' was expected from them. At the same time, their self-understanding as (important) officials was reinforced by the very fact of finding themselves in an interview situation. The presence of a recording device which separated the two conversation partners was ambivalent: At times, the 'professional' image with which it provides the interviewer facilitated a rapport. At other times, it predefined and restricted what could be said by the respondents. Occasionally, this led respondents to tell me non-secrets: Whilst insisting to go 'off the record', they were telling me things that I could most likely find out through an online search, a phone call, perhaps even in some of the secondary literature. These experiences, however, could also be seen as a finding, as they indicated the organizational culture in an environment that is technocratic and at the same time considered more important than national authorities by those who work there.

A final point of reflection regards the ‘messiness’ of doing research and the need to find a balance between a comparative angle and an analysis of the dynamic process of Europeanization. This careful balance is not least reflected in the tables produced for the purpose of this study. By constructing such comparative overviews one may run the risk of imposing a ‘straightjacket’ on the vast amounts of raw material, while I would argue that it is precisely the *messiness* of the data that enriches the potential of the analysis and could be seen to indeed reflect the fluid nature of boundaries both between national contexts and between that of the EU vis-à-vis the member states. An awareness of these issues, as it is commonly expressed in interpretive analyses, may protect us from some of the pitfalls of positivist approaches, where *a priori* assumptions at times produce analytical frameworks that become too rigid to really do justice to valuable empirical material. As far as the present study is concerned, the iterative nature of analysis and writing up made it possible to return to ‘raw material’ with a fresh eye at regular intervals, and the comparative nature of the study allowed for a regular ‘retuning’. Finally, as the tables in every chapter summarize and highlight visually in bold script, I also highlight the ways in which particular notions reappear across discourses. In this manner, I also indicate the fluidity and flexibility of the inductive analytical framework employed here.