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Connecting Linguistic Structures and Social Practices: a Discursive Approach to Social Policy Analysis

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ABSTRACT

There is an emerging interest within social and policy studies in the potential connections between linguistic practices and broader social processes. It is, however, difficult to find examples of research which take a fully discursive approach to policy analysis. Such a discursive approach might focus on how the use of language in the policy process is involved with social practices, such as the legitimisation of social relations or the construction of 'knowledge' of social reality. The article begins by exploring theoretical and methodological issues in relation to connecting micro aspects of language use, such as grammar and lexis, with the social construction of knowledge. It then uses discourse analysis to explore how the linguistic resources of a key British urban policy document, *New Life for Urban Scotland*, are involved with reproducing and sustaining a particular 'knowledge' or discourse about the causes of urban decline.

INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1980s, there has been an emerging interest amongst social scientists, particularly within the fields of sociology, cultural and media studies, in examining the connections between the broad structures and strategies of language use and social, political and cultural structures and processes. This interest in the consequences of how language is used is partly a product of the increasing currency of the social constructionist perspective within social science. Whilst the label can be applied to fairly diverse kinds of approaches, constructionist writers usually share a common critical stance towards seemingly natural or common sense

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'knowledge' of the world. And, crucially, constructionist perspectives are either explicitly or implicitly underpinned by the broadly Foucaultian notion that language, knowledge and power are fundamentally interconnected at the level of discourses (Foucault, 1977; Burr, 1995).

Despite the growing interest in the societal implications of how language is used, there have been few social science studies which examine the consequences of the *detail* of how language is used in particular settings or contexts (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 1994). Thus there is a virtual absence of studies concerned with, for example, how systems of power and inequality can be reproduced and legitimated through the deployment of specific grammatical and lexical resources in particular contexts. Bernstein's work on the relations between patterns in everyday speech and social class is one of the few exceptions (Bernstein 1971, 1975). In the field of conversation analysis there are also studies of the societal implications of linguistic strategies deployed in conversational settings (see, e.g., Moerman, 1988; Boden and Zimmerman, 1991). However, outside these specific examples, there remain few detailed, sociological studies of sustained stretches of language use. In particular, there is a scarcity of studies of written texts and documents (Silverman, 1993; van Dijk, 1994).

Within social policy analysis specifically, there are a number of ways in which research has drawn upon social constructionist ideas. For example, Manning (1985) and Kemeny (1992) have used constructionist frameworks to argue that social issues or problems are 'constructed' or contingent rather than pre-existing 'givens'. There is a body of work which explores the impact of stereotypical constructions of women's sexuality, of 'race' or of people with disabilities on the implementation of social policy services (e.g., Carabine, 1992; Nasir, 1996; Oliver, 1990). And, Penna and O'Brien (1996) have shown how Foucault's ideas, in particular his concepts of power-knowledge and normalisation, can be used to explore the disciplinary or normative implications of developments in social and welfare policy. However, the role played by detailed aspects of language, such as lexis and grammar, is not analysed even in these constructionist accounts of social policy processes. (Although see Jacobs and Manzie, 1996; Collins, 1997 as recent examples of policy analysis focusing on language use.)

This article explores how constructionist approaches to social policy analysis can be sensitised to the role played by language in the policy process. It proposes that such a 'discursive' approach to social policy analysis can help to uncover how the use of language is connected to broader processes and practices, such as the reproduction of social relations or the construction of knowledge. The article's specific focus is

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on how analysing language use can help to reveal how social policy is implicated in constructing and sustaining a 'system of belief' or 'ideational knowledge' about the nature of social reality. It examines how a British government urban policy document constructs credible knowledge of the processes of urban decline and regeneration. The analysis draws on recent developments within the discipline of linguistics, specifically on the work of critical linguistics and critical discourse analysis (e.g., Hodge and Kress, 1993; Meinhof and Richardson, 1993; Fairclough, 1992; Lemke, 1995).

The remainder of the article is divided into three sections plus a conclusion. The first of these sections discusses the implications of social constructionism for the analysis of public policy. The second explores the links between social constructionism and linguistic theory before discussing the repercussions of these links for the processes of research. The third part introduces the government policy document *New Life for Urban Scotland* (Scottish Office, 1988) and then goes on to analyse the use of language in the document in some detail.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM AND THE ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC POLICY

This part of the article reviews the value of social constructionism to a critical, linguistically sensitive policy analysis. It draws on a largely North American policy studies literature (Stone, 1988, 1989; Edelman, 1988; Rochefort and Cobb, 1993; Fischer and Forester, 1993). The process of public policy making has largely been understood within a broadly positivistic epistemology (Fischer and Forester, 1993; Rochefort and Cobb, 1993; Fox and Millar, 1995), at least until the implications of postpositivist epistemologies for policy studies were recognised, primarily by North American analysts (Fischer, 1993). Positivism assumes an unproblematic relationship between conventional knowledge of the nature of the world and its actual nature. As Fischer (1993) argues:

> Until quite recently, policy analysis has remained enshrouded in a neo-positivist conception of knowledge and the technocratic – or 'decisionistic' – concept of policy making long associated with it. (1993, p. 37)

Social constructionism presents an epistemological challenge to positivist theories of knowledge. It challenges the assumption that there is a straightforward relationship between 'knowledge' and 'reality' and that objective, unbiased understanding is possible. This challenge arises out of the proposition that the categories which we use to divide up, describe and give meaning to the world are socially, culturally and historically contingent (Burr, 1995).

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There are two implications of a social constructionist epistemological position which are relevant to the concerns of this article. First, a theory of knowledge which proposes that our understanding of reality is socially created points to the historical and cultural specificity of what constitutes a 'problem'. It suggests that policy 'issues' or 'problems' are defined through a process of selection and construction which is dependent on societal processes. They are not pre-existing 'givens' waiting to be unearthed or discovered by policy makers (Edelman, 1988; Rochefort and Cobb, 1993).

The second implication pertains to how the policy process is understood more generally. Policy analysts have drawn on social constructionism to argue that the policy process should be understood as a process of *argumentation*. The argumentative turn in policy analysis (Fischer and Forester, 1993) represents a paradigmatic shift in policy studies. It suggests that successful policy making depends on constructing shared or accepted understandings of the 'real' (Hoppe, 1993). Further, it implies the need to examine how particular versions of 'reality' are promoted during the policy process (Majonie, 1989; Fischer and Forester, 1993). Crucially the argumentative turn demands exploration of how language is used both to advance and to legitimise selective accounts of the character of the world.

A model of policy making which recognises the involvement of the policy process in promoting selective, contingent accounts of the nature of the world helps to deepen our understanding of the political functions of constructions of policy problems. Conceiving of policy making as argumentation takes us beyond the observation that social problems are socially constructed (Hajer, 1993) and demands analysis of the ways in which particular constructions of social problems are used for particular (political) purposes. It highlights the instrumentality of the process of problem construction not only to successful policy making, but also to sustaining systems of belief about the nature of social reality.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM AND LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

Constructionist epistemologies owe a considerable debt to linguistic theory. The theory of knowledge which underpins the social constructionist position derives from theories of the relationship between language and reality which can be traced to the work of the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure. The critical Saussurian insight is that there is an arbitrary relation between the linguistic categories humans use to divide up the world, and the real nature of the world itself (Belsey, 1980; Eagleton, 1984; Burr, 1995). Thus the categories or concepts which we use have

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no necessary or intrinsic link with the objects they purport to explain. Post-Saussurian linguistic theory therefore proposes that language is not a transparent medium which we simply use to talk about an independently constituted world 'out there', but that instead linguistic practices are profoundly implicated in how we see the world in the first place (Belsey, 1980). The theory turns conventional wisdom about the relationship between language and reality on its head: the world outside of human consciousness is not *reflected* in language, instead linguistic categories actually *construct* or constitute how reality is perceived.

A crucial development to the Saussurian conception of the arbitrary connection between linguistic categories and reality is the claim that the connections have a social origin, that they are tied into societal processes (Lemke, 1995; Burr, 1995). Foucault's work has been particularly significant in this regard, specifically his claim that linguistic practices – 'discourses' – construct or constitute social relations and 'knowledge' about social reality (Foucault, 1972; Fairclough, 1992). His later writings (1977; 1978) develop the implication of this; namely that there is a fundamental link between discourses and the knowledge which is produced by them and power relations.

However, Foucault's corpus cannot be drawn on directly as a framework in which to undertake socially sensitive, detailed linguistic analysis. The reasons for this are two-fold. First, despite the usefulness of his claims that discourses are linked to power relations, Foucault conceives of language as being driven, shaped and simply reflective of power (Fairclough, 1992). This unidirectional view of the relationship between power and language is in direct conflict with the recursive model of this relation which underpins constructionist approaches to linguistic analysis. The thesis that language both shapes and is shaped by societal practices (Fairclough, 1992; Lemke, 1995) is essential to the argument of this article. It means that Foucault's theoretical claims about the relationship between power, knowledge and language have only limited explanatory potential. A second reason why Foucault cannot be used directly is because he did not ground his theories in the analysis of real texts or talk. As a result, his work does not provide a framework for connecting the detail of individual texts or conversations with broader social practices. It does not allow microlevel linguistic events to be explained in terms of macrolevel structures and processes (Lemke, 1995).

Linguistic theory, specifically that developed recently by critical discourse analysts has, however, attempted to bridge the gap between the micro and the macro (e.g., Hodge and Kress, 1993; Meinhof and Richardson, 1993; Fairclough 1992; Lemke, 1995.) At the root of the

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claims made by these writers is the proposition that detailed aspects of language such as grammar, vocabulary, metaphor and idioms can be ideologically significant. As Fairclough (1992) argues: 'People make *choices* about the design and structure of their clauses which amount to choices about how to signify (and construct) knowledge and belief' (p. 77; emphasis added). These linguistic choices can themselves perform ideological work by cueing the reader or listener to interpret or understand what is being said in a particular way. It is this notion that language can be *made* to perform ideological work by (constrained) agents negotiating a complex web of social, cultural and historical relations which distinguishes constructionist accounts of the relationship between language and social practices from Foucaultian accounts (Lemke, 1995).

The discussion thus far has obvious implications for the processes of research, analysis and writing. In drawing attention to connections between linguistic structures and the social nature of knowledge, a constructionist epistemology raises questions about the status of analysis conducted within the paradigm. Simply, any account of how language is constructive must also be a construction (Potter and Wetherall, 1987). Furthermore, policy *analysis* as well as policy making must be conceived of as a form of argumentation (Fischer and Forester, 1993). Recognising this, Potter and Wetherall (1987) argue that it may be enough simply to acknowledge the constructive nature of research and writing in the presentation of findings. For them, discourse analysis is a more 'honest' approach than other approaches, by virtue of this acknowledgement. Other writers have embarked on additional strategies to demonstrate reflexivity, from including detailed autobiographies in order to allow readers to 'position' the writer (see Lemke (1995) for an example) to writing parallel analyses both of a phenomenon and of their own analysis of that phenomenon (see Potter and Wetherall (1987), for an overview). A technique which is often used by discourse analysts to signal awareness of the issue is to present the data, analysis and conclusions in such a way that the reader is able to assess the researcher's interpretations and claims. That is the strategy adopted in this article.

A related issue concerns the status of scholarly or 'expert' readings of texts *vis-a-vis* the 'realised readings' which a lay person may offer. Richardson (1994) suggests, for example, that a more valid exploration of the social and linguistic content of a text will be obtained if the analysis focuses on how it is read by the kinds of people to which it is addressed. This approach questions how the researcher or analyst can 'know' that their reading has any connection with the readings made by other sorts of people with different experiences and different social structural positions.

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However, following Potter and Wetherall (1987) and Lemke (1995) amongst others, it is argued in this article that scholarly analysis remains worthwhile, so long as the nature of the analysis and the assumptions on which it is based are made explicit.

This part of the article has assessed the implications of a constructionist conceptual framework for both linguistic analysis and for the research process itself. The final section of the article analyses the Scottish urban policy document, *New Life for Urban Scotland* and explores how linguistic strategies adopted in the document contribute to sustaining a particular system of belief about the causes of, and solutions to, urban decline and disadvantage.

A DISCURSIVE APPROACH TO ANALYSING *NEW LIFE FOR URBAN SCOTLAND*

Introducing New Life

New Life for Urban Scotland (*New Life*) was published in 1988 by the Scottish Office. The document sets out a framework for achieving the regeneration of disadvantaged urban areas in Scotland, noting that these are primarily large public sector estates on the periphery of the main conurbations. The document describes what it sees as the problems of this type of neighbourhood and argues that these can be resolved primarily through 'partnership' between the public and private sector and through resident involvement in the process of change. It announced demonstration regeneration 'partnerships' for outlying public sector estates in different cities to show what could be achieved by means of this new approach (Scottish Office, 1988).

Although it was published in 1988, it is of more than historical interest to explore how *New Life* constructs the causes and solutions to the 'problems' of urban change in Scotland. The policy framework established in the document has been important in the development of Scottish and, arguably, British urban policy. It represents the beginning of a move away from the private-sector focused, property-led approach which characterised urban regeneration policy through much of the 1980s (Deakin and Edwards, 1993) towards the more inclusive, multi-sectoral partnership approach which has distinguished urban policy and practice in the 1990s (Atkinson and Moon, 1994; Hastings, 1996).

New Life was published soon after the Conservative Party's third successive general election victory and belongs to the final period of Thatcherism during which policy attention turned to the problems of the major cities and public sector estates. Although the document does not argue through any explicit causal theory of decline (Atkinson and Moon,

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1994), a number of commentators identify a key thesis underpinning urban regeneration policy of this period: that aspects of urban decline and poverty are the result of a 'culture of dependency' on the welfare state, particularly amongst residents of public sector estates and that for renewal to take place, the dependency culture must be replaced by a culture of self-help and 'enterprise' (Deakin and Edwards, 1993; Kintrea, 1996; Collins, 1997). This thesis can be detected readily in *New Life* where the solution to urban deprivation is presented as resting in individual self-help, such as support of the police, parental involvement in education and small business development. The thesis clearly belongs to a discourse of urban problems which blames the victims of disadvantage for the deprivations they endure (Dean and Taylor-Gooby, 1992; Deakin and Edwards, 1993; Kintrea, 1996). Crucially, it is a discourse which can pathologise poverty and urban decline since it argues that regeneration depends on transforming the characteristics or behaviour of disadvantaged people.

The analysis which follows initially focuses on just three of the sixty-five paragraphs which make up the document. It examines the detail of the causal model of urban change constructed in the first three paragraphs of the opening 'Background' section. It then goes on to examine how linguistic strategies in the whole document distribute agency between the main protagonists involved in *New Life's* tale of decline and renewal. Whilst it has been already noted that a 'culture of dependency' thesis is understood to underpin urban policy at this time, it is argued that analysis of these features of *New Life* show that further elements of a pathological discourse[1] may be present. Moreover, it demonstrates how the use of language is involved in making the pathological explanation of decline credible to the reader.

The beginning of New Life

The 'Background' section of *New Life* is reproduced in Figure 1. This section forms the document's introduction and sets out the context for the policy measures announced in the document. Introductions are crucial in texts in the way that they orientate the reader or set the scene for them (Fairclough, 1992). Introductions may establish protagonists and contextualise them in place and time (in this case urban Scotland since the industrial revolution). They can also characterise the protagonists: that is, apportion attributes to them which morally orientate or persuade the reader to take a particular view of them (that they are good, evil, stupid etc.). This contextualisation of the protagonists and orientation of the reader towards them will contribute to how the reader interprets

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subsequent aspects of the text. For these reasons, this section of *New Life* is worthy of detailed analysis.

The analysis focuses primarily on exploring the ways in which narrative structure, grammar and wording combine as 'cues' (Fairclough, 1992) to the reader to assign a particular meaning to the excerpt. Stone's work (1988; 1989) on the narrative structure of policy problems provides a useful point of entry. Writing within a broadly argumentative conception of the policy process, Stone proposes that definitions of policy problems are the 'strategic representation of situations', invested with a narrative structure in order 'to control interpretations and images of difficulties' (1988; p. 165) and to 'lead the audience ineluctably to a course of action' (ibid.; p. 115). Telling policy problems as coherent narratives; as 'stories' with beginnings, middles and ends, with heroes, villains and innocent victims, she argues, is a powerful, 'emotionally compelling', instrument of policy making.

1. The Government's publication "Action for Cities" explained our policies for regenerating run-down urban areas throughout Great Britain. This document sets out the policies in Scotland and plans for new initiatives.

BACKGROUND

2. The industrial revolution in Scotland brought great social change. Towns and cities grew dramatically as people flocked to them to take up the new jobs available there. Nowhere was this more apparent than in Glasgow where the population rose from 500,000 in 1871 to 750,000 in 1891 and topped 1,000,000 in 1914. The size and density of inner city populations rose to intolerable levels.

3. Consequential deep-rooted problems of urban congestion and poor housing were acknowledged in the Clyde Valley Plan published in 1946. The need to reduce the inner area population and to provide for the requirements of modern industry were clearly stated. Large clearance programmes were then put into effect. New Towns were established. The plan warned that "to move large numbers of people out to the fringes of the conurbation, leaving industry where it is will only increase to a vast extent the problems of internal planning". But the overwhelming demand for better housing led to the development in the 1950s and 1960s of large peripheral estates, where all the houses had the basic amenities but where there was little else. The warning was ignored and the seeds of urban deprivation were resown.

4. By the early 1970s it was generally agreed that urban deprivation was more severe and more concentrated in Scotland, particularly Clydeside, than elsewhere in Britain. Since then both Central and Local Government have tackled the problems of the inner areas in changing ways. Tenement clearance gave way to improvement funded by the Housing Corporation and with increased help from Central Government to local authorities. New community-based housing associations began to emerge. New uses were found for existing buildings and new developments were encouraged in inner areas. Plans for comprehensive redevelopment of inner areas were gradually replaced by policies for rehabilitation. The new Regional and District Authorities set up in 1975 defined priority areas for treatment and joined with the equally new Scottish Development Agency (SDA), Central Government and other agencies to mount a major inner area initiative.

Figure 1. New Life for Urban Scotland, p. 6.

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Stone argues that it is possible to identify two story lines which are particularly common instruments for constructing 'problems' in social policy making. The first of these typical narratives she calls the 'story of decline'. This narrative usually relates a process of inexorable deterioration or forecasts impending doom or crisis. The story of decline often sets the scene for, or is interwoven into, a second narrative which she calls the 'story of control and helplessness'. This latter narrative asserts that the problems set up by the first narrative are not inevitable and that they can be controlled by human subjects: 'What had formerly appeared to be "accidental", "random", "a twist of fate", or "natural" is now alleged to be amenable to change through human agency' (Stone, 1989, p. 113). She also argues that causal theories of why social problems occur are also told as narratives. A narrative might describe causality in terms so complex that it suggests that nothing can really be done. Alternatively, the narrative may present a simple proposition of causality out of which an obvious solution appears to arise. Where causal theories propose solutions, they will usually assign responsibility or blame for the 'problem' to someone or something.

Reading the Background section of *New Life* against Stone's framework reveals an underlying, emotionally compelling structure to this tale of urban change in Scotland. By combining attention to grammar and lexis with a focus on the narrative structure of the paragraphs, it becomes clear how this tale is recounted in such a forceful and convincing way.

Thus, the second paragraph relates the history of the growth of Scottish cities. It appears to chart the dynamics of urban growth, particularly in Glasgow, between the onset of the industrial revolution until the beginning of the First World War. However, the narrative is also about a phenomena which is beyond the control of human agents and which portends imminent disaster. Thus it begins by describing the growth of cities during the industrial revolution as the consequence of mass migration to urban areas. It is a migration of uncontrolled people from the country to the cities and towns in search of employment. The lexicalisation (wording) of the paragraph constructs the migration as a phenomenon which was sudden and unplanned: 'revolution', 'great social change', 'grew dramatically', 'flocked' and 'new'.

The sentence at lines 12–16 is particularly interesting: 'Nowhere was this more apparent than in Glasgow where the population rose from 500,000 in 1871 to 750,000 in 1891 and topped 1,000,000 in 1914.' The idea that '*nowhere* was this more apparent' than in Glasgow, sets up the city's problems as an extreme case. However, the history of urban change in Glasgow is produced in other texts not as unusual, but as a typ-

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ical example of a trajectory of an industrial city (see Williams, 1973 or Donnison and Middleton, 1987). If this sentence were to be understood within a referential conception of language, it would be argued that the grammatical structure or syntax of this sentence simply charts an underlying dynamic of actual population growth. However, a constructionist conception of language would suggest that the features of this dynamic are *manufactured* rather than reflected by the structure of the sentence. Thus there is nothing intrinsic to the process of population growth in Glasgow which requires that it should be described in such a rousing way; that is, in terms of these three stages, each building on and superseding the other, and climaxing at the emotive, but arbitrary in this context, level of 1,000,000. The effect of this construction is to suggest that growth is inexorable, that it perhaps portends imminent disaster. Rewording what is actually said in this sentence into less emotive language should expose just how persuasive the original wording is. It could, for example, be reworded as follows: *'This was particularly the case in Glasgow where the population doubled between 1871 and 1914.'*

Despite the sentence highlighted above, the first sixteen lines of the paragraph do not provide sufficient cues to fully morally orientate the reader to the phenomenon of population growth. Space remains for both positive and negative evaluations of what it implies. It is not until the last sentence of the paragraph that it becomes clearer that the reader is expected to understand the process of population growth as a negative phenomenon. Thus the paragraph concludes: 'The size and density of inner city populations rose to *intolerable* levels' (emphasis added). Together with the image in the previous line about the city's population having 'topped' 1,000,000, the idea that the population has reached 'intolerable levels' is suggestive of an enduring and pervasive image of the city as containing 'an explosive force' (Williams, 1973). Thus the narrative of impending doom is told in this paragraph with reference to the idea that the accommodation of the 'masses' or 'the unruly mob' in cities makes them dangerous places, places which are ready to boil over and destabilise the social order (Mumford, 1961; Williams, 1973; Saunders, 1981).

It should be clear from this initial exploration of wording, narrative and grammar that the linguistic resources of this second paragraph do not simply describe or mirror the essential, incontestable features of the process of population growth in Glasgow. Rather, the way in which language is used constructs a selective account of the process of change. The actual growth of Glasgow is recreated as a story of impending doom, as a story of a city set to burst apart, as a 'story of decline'. Uncontrolled,

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unplanned population growth is given the status of 'problem' recalling pathological discourses of decline. Another text may have emphasised a contrasting version of the 'problem': the implications, perhaps, of unplanned, uncontrolled *industrial* growth (see Donnison and Middleton, 1987, for example). It may have stressed the problematic consequences of allowing the market to work unfettered; of capital creating 'the new jobs' (11) which brought people flocking to the cities in the first instance.

The extent to which population growth is constructed as having causal significance in creating the urban problem becomes even more apparent when paragraph three is analysed. Two metaphors cue the notion that values and behaviour are transmitted intergenerationally – another key element of pathological explanations of social problems (Dean and Taylor-Gooby, 1992). The last sentence of the paragraph claims that as a consequence of warnings being ignored about how best to manage the process of population growth 'the seeds of urban deprivation were resown' (38–9). This metaphor develops the idea that urban problems are 'deep-rooted' (18) which occurs at the beginning of the paragraph. Arguably, the notion that problems are perpetuated through the generations feeds into (and feeds off) the discourse of decline which has already been highlighted, where population growth was cast in terms of fear of the expansion of the 'mob'.

Crucially, the structure of the first sentence of this same paragraph (paragraph three) suggests that the phenomenon of population growth is being used to explain other aspects of the urban 'problem': 'Consequential deep-rooted problems of urban congestion and poor housing were acknowledged ... ' (18–19). The first part of the sentence (up until 'were acknowledged') operates as a conjunctive clause connecting the themes of the second and third paragraphs. In connecting the paragraphs thus, the text invites the reader to infer that these 'deep-rooted problems of urban congestion and poor housing' are caused by the population growth 'described' in paragraph 2. Whereas there is at least a plausible (but by no means inevitable) connection between population growth and the creation of 'urban congestion', the link between such growth and the creation of 'poor housing' is much less clear cut. In order to make sense of the connection, the reader is required to supply a bridging assumption (Brown and Yule, 1983). The necessary assumption would appear to be that population growth *causes* poor housing.

Again, there are a number of potential frameworks (or discourses) within which to understand the phenomenon of poor housing. These might give explanatory primacy to the role of the state and to the way in which it regulates the housing system, or to the market and to how the

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profit motive affects decisions to invest in particular localities. Or the discourse may explain poor housing as a phenomena caused by the people who actually live in the inadequate housing itself; in other words, it may pathologise or blame the victim. If the reader is being asked to explain poor housing as being caused by population growth then, arguably, they are being asked to make the third of these assumptions.

At this point in *New Life* (at the juncture between the second and third paragraphs), there would appear to be a considerable amount of persuasive effort or 'ideological work' (Fairclough, 1992) going on in the text. This ideological work pertains to how the reader is cued to interpret the text, and in particular to the inferences which they are asked to make in order to produce a reading which coheres or makes sense. In relation to cohesion within texts, Fairclough (1992) argues that 'text producers actively set up cohesive relations of particular sorts in the process of positioning the interpreter as subject. Consequently, cohesion seen in these dynamic terms may turn out to be a significant mode of ideological 'work' going on in a text.' (p. 177). This is a profound insight into the relationship between linguistic features of texts and the way in which readers of texts are recruited to accept credibility of the version of reality constructed by the text. Fairclough is arguing that discourses are sustained by the way in which linguistic practices cause readers to make inferences or assumptions about the character of social reality. It is precisely because the reader is required to supply connections or to *work* at making sense of a piece of discourse that they come to believe themselves to be an autonomous individual, a 'subject' which is prior to ideology. However, Fairclough argues (drawing on Althusser) that this is an imagined autonomy. Ideology works by 'constructing subjects for whom (particular) connections are common sense' (p. 177). And texts, as instances of discourse, are implicated in this ideological work. Thus the cohesive relations which are set up in texts have both social content and social implications. This suggests that the bridging assumption required to connect paragraphs 2 and 3 (that poor housing is caused by population growth) does not only cue the reader to invoke elements of a social pathological discourse in order to make it make sense, but also recruits readers into *sustaining* this discourse.

The argument that population growth causes poor housing or other urban problems is, arguably, the central theme of the excerpt. For instance, the argument is extended later in paragraph 3 when the narrative moves on in time to the post-war period and describes the creation 'of large peripheral estates, where all the houses had the basic amenities but where there was little else' (34–7). At lines 27–32 a warning from the

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Clyde Valley Plan is reproduced in which the potential hazards of housing large numbers of people on the periphery of the conurbation are pointed out. However, the narrative argues that, despite this warning, such estates were built because of 'the overwhelming demand' (32) of 'large numbers of people' (28) for better housing. The 'people' appear as an overriding force capable of 'overwhelming' the considered, 'clearly stated' warnings of the planners. Thus, the phenomenon of urban growth is linked to the overwhelming, ill-judged demands of the people; it is a phenomenon which recreates and sustains the urban problem: 'The warning was ignored and the seeds of urban deprivation were resown' (37–9).

To conclude the analysis of the extract, it is useful to return to Stone's typology of the underlying narrative structure of social policy problems. Stone suggests that a second ideal type of narrative structure is often intermeshed with the 'story of decline': the 'story of control and helplessness'. Read against such a narrative, the third paragraph does not simply argue that population growth produces problems. It also relates a history of attempts to deal with the problem and its effects. There is a shift to a more measured vocabulary which asserts the possibility that human *agency* may in fact be able to deal with the phenomenon of mass, unchecked migration. Thus, a host of verbs are deployed which only humans (or institutions set up by humans) are capable of enacting: 'acknowledge', 'publish', 'clearly state', 'put into effect', 'establish', 'warn'. It describes how the Clyde Valley Plan argued for the need to take control and 'reduce the inner area population'. However, *New Life* recounts how the planners attempts at control were unsuccessful; their warnings were overridden. Paragraph three ends by describing a situation of helplessness or disarray.

In the fourth paragraph the focus shifts to the nature of the solution rather than of the problem. The reader is informed that urban problems are not inevitable, it is simply that human effort had been organised in the wrong way. As the old ways 'give way' to new ways and organisations learn to 'change ways' and work together, solutions 'begin to emerge', control is reasserted and problems are 'tackled'. Success is represented as being contingent on organisations 'joining' together, 'helping' and 'agreeing' with one another, thus providing a rationale for the partnership approach which the document advocates. The paragraph ends by looking forward to a new era as 'a major inner area initiative' is mounted by a coalition of agencies including the 'new' local authorities, the 'new' SDA joining with central government and other agencies. This new partnership, it is implied, can address the 'deep-rooted problems of urban

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congestion and poor housing' in ways that the planners, working alone and ineffectual, could not.

Thus the linguistic resources of this excerpt from *New Life* present a selective account of the processes of urban change in Scotland. Within the account, explanatory primacy for urban decline is given to the phenomenon of population growth. Both the narrative structure in which this phenomenon is cast and its lexicalisation recall aspects of a pathological discourse, explaining urban problems in terms of fear of a 'mob' which contributes to its own problems through expansion and through the intergenerational transmission of problems.

The distribution of agency in New Life

The focus of this final part of the article is on how the capacity for agency is distributed between the various protagonists involved in *New Life*. It highlights the extent to which the residents of problematic areas are constructed in the document as lacking in agency, arguing that language is used to construct a community of actors which includes the government, the private sector and public sector agencies but which excludes such residents. Consideration is given to whether this distribution of agency in the text reinforces a causal story of decline which blames residents for the disadvantages they suffer. Here the focus is on grammar and wording rather than on narrative.

Before proceeding to examine the construction of agency in the whole document, it is worth returning briefly to the 'Background' paragraphs. It was argued in relation to paragraphs 3 and 4 of the extract, that the possibility of human intervention to reverse processes of decline is suggested through the number of verbs signifying actions which only humans can perform. However, local residents are not included in this constituency of actors: it is the planners who 'warn', local government which 'defines' priorities (60) and central government and other agencies which 'mount' initiatives (63–4). Interestingly though, one set of resident actions are represented, but in a nominalised form. Nominalisation reifies processes or actions by turning them into nouns and, in so doing may omit or obscure agency (Fairclough, 1992; Lemke, 1995). The phrase 'the overwhelming demand for better housing' (32–3) is a nominalisation since it renders a set of actions as an abstract noun. In this instance, the nominalisation makes a concrete set of actions (inner city dwellers demanding better living conditions) into an abstract concept. Crucially, it downplays the agency of the city dwellers and reinforces the construction of an uncontrolled, undifferentiated 'mob' lacking in agency and voice.

Indeed, throughout *New Life*, there is a total absence of sentences or

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clauses in which the residents of disadvantaged areas are constructed as acting in a controlled and conscious manner or as exerting, or having the capacity to exert, power over events or over other protagonists. This lack of agency is significant and contrasts with the way in which the other participants are produced as agents. In the section which details the various initiatives which have contributed to 'The Transformation of Glasgow', for example, all of the key players, with the exception of the community, are cast as agents:

> Elsewhere in Glasgow, the SDA, the local authorities, other public bodies and private enterprise have worked together to achieve far-reaching change. The private sector effort has been focused through the Glasgow Action initiative. The District Council, the SSHA and HCiS have deployed considerable resources ... The Government has recently made additional resources available ... (para. 6)

Central and local government, public agencies and the private sector are all portrayed through a number of verbs of action: to work together, to focus, to deploy, to make available; giving them the status of deliberate, conscious actors. The residents of Glasgow's declining localities are not present in the narrative. Elsewhere they appear as passive victims 'suffering from multiple deprivation' (para. 12) or, as is argued below, as the objects rather than the subjects of action.

Both the government and the private sector are constructed as having the capacity to engender particular kinds of responses or reactions from local residents. The following sentence, for example, appears in the Foreword to the document: 'It is especially important that *we* renew the self-confidence and initiative of local people and help *them* assume increased responsibility for their communities' (emphasis added). The previous paragraph of the Foreword makes it clear that *we* refers to a partnership between central government, different public bodies and the private sector. The structure of the sentence excludes 'local people' from a community of actors ('we') with a shared interest in 'renewing' particular aspects of local people ('them'). By making local people the object of the verb 'renew', their initiative, self confidence and capacity to assume increased responsibility are portrayed as dependent on the actions of the other players in the partnership.

The example above links to a more general pattern in the document. On occasion the portrayal of local residents comes close to construing them as actors. However, on each occasion, their capacity to act is made contingent on the actions of other protagonists. Even local community action and self-help are presented in such a way as to make it appear entirely dependent on government support for its existence. For example:

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'Funding of community groups through the urban programme has demonstrated the ability of people in deprived areas to help themselves' (para.39). An understanding of the ideological significance of the grammar of this sentence can be gained through experimenting with alternative formulations. For example, it is possible to express this set of actions in a way which emphasises the agentive capacities of people who live in areas of decline: *'People in deprived areas have demonstrated their ability to help themselves by forming community groups using urban programme funding.'* The original makes the funding of community groups the foreground or *theme* of the sentence, thus emphasising the agentive role of government in providing resources to facilitate these community groups. The capacity of 'people in deprived areas' to 'help themselves' is thus portrayed as a condition of government action.

Throughout *New Life* there is scant reference to the tradition of community-based activity and self-help which existed at the time, and still exists, in many disadvantaged neighbourhoods in urban Scotland. For example, in the four peripheral estates announced in *New Life* as demonstration partnerships there were already established community groups, some with long traditions of both self-help and community action (Hastings *et al.,* 1996; Kintrea, 1996; Collins, 1997). This level of pre-existing local organisation is not mentioned. In addition, the document barely mentions the role played by community-based housing associations in the successful rehabilitation of inner city Glasgow. This is despite the fact that the success of these locally based associations, particularly the success of resident involvement, was argued to be an important impetus for the approach announced in *New Life* (McCrone, 1991; Atkinson and Moon, 1995; Bailey, 1995). There are only two occasions on which community-based housing associations are explicitly mentioned in the document.

The first occurs in the 'Background' section at lines 51–2: 'New community-based housing associations began to emerge.' Here the associations are portrayed as having spontaneously 'emerged' rather than having been deliberately developed by human actors. This representation effectively erases the local initiative which, at least in part, generated a 'movement' in urban areas of Scotland (McCrone, 1991). The idea of a 'movement' (in the sense of urban social movements) emphasises the cogency of agency over structure. Interestingly, in *New Life* it is used to denote the activities of the private sector: 'The local enterprise agency *movement* in Scotland, led by the private sector ...' (para. 21, emphasis added).

The second time community-based housing associations are mentioned occurs much later in the document:

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'Housing associations have made a very substantial contribution to urban regeneration in the inner cities, largely through the refurbishment of tenements. The successful concept of community-based housing associations has now been extended to local authority estates in Glasgow where tenants have taken over the ownership of their homes and are undertaking major repairs and refurbishment work.' (para 42)

This extract is interesting for a number of reasons. First, it constructs the process by which community-based housing organisations developed on peripheral estates as taking place at some distance from the people who live on these estates: 'The … concept has now been extended …' The use of an agentless passive formulation absents human actors from the processes by which housing associations were recreated in new localities. Further, rendering the associations as a 'concept' suggests that the model adopted was already available, waiting to be discovered, rather than something which has been consciously fashioned and fought over by a range of actors.[2] Thus, the representation of the history of community-based housing associations locates it within a discourse of rational policy development rather than within a discourse of community action. Interestingly, it is possible to read the last two lines of the excerpt as constructing the residents of disadvantaged neighbourhoods as agents: they 'have taken over' ownership of their homes and are 'undertaking' repairs and refurbishment. However, once again resident action is not prioritised as the theme of the sentence. Rather their capacity for action is portrayed as being contingent on other actors or on events over which they are alleged to have no control – in this case the extension of the concept of community ownership.

There is a strong tradition within urban Scotland of working-class community action and self-provision (Collins, 1997). However, in order for *New Life* to argue that the causes of neighbourhood decline include a 'culture of dependency' on the welfare state and a lack of individual responsibility or of self-help, the document largely ignores pre-existing traditions and experiences of collective action and community self-provision. Crucially, community activism depends on the capacity for agency, autonomy and voice. In *New Life*, disadvantaged people are allowed none of these. Instead, they are problematised as an undifferentiated 'mob' which has contributed to its own problems and which must be reformed in order for regeneration to proceed. Curiously, the creation of a 'culture of enterprise' also demands conscious, agentive participants. However, it should be clear that *New Life* does not celebrate the potential of residents of disadvantaged neighbourhoods to shape their own future and the future of their communities, whether this be through community action or enterprise. Rather, it problematises and pathologises these people thus

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helping to legitimate the dependency culture thesis underpinning policy at that time.

CONCLUSION

The article has explored how aspects of the social policy process can be investigated in a linguistically sensitive manner. It has tried to show how a discursive approach to policy analysis can enrich our understanding of the systems of belief or discourses underpinning the policy process. In particular, it has demonstrated how the close scrutiny of the detail of grammar, lexis and narrative can reveal how discourses are reproduced and sustained in policy documents. Obviously, however, documents are only one element of the policy process. The same kind of detailed attention could be given to the language used in other kinds of 'texts' produced in the policy process. Thus, further work is required into the societal implications of how language is used in aspects of policy making such as in formal meetings and negotiations, in informal discussions and behind the scenes activity, as well as in policy delivery. This would contribute further to our understanding of the kinds of knowledge which is both promulgated and contested in the policy process and may also show how language use is involved in the construction of social relations.

An obvious question arises, however. What does discourse analysis actually add to our understanding of the policy process and what it tries to achieve? Other analysts have readily identified that British urban policy, at the time that *New Life* was produced, was informed by the claim that the people who live in disadvantaged urban areas contributed to their own misfortune through overreliance on the state. The analysis illustrated in this article has merely identified the presence of additional elements of this pathological discourse. However, detailed examination of lexis, grammar and narrative can, arguably, achieve at least two things. First, analysis can help to identify the actual claims, ideas and values which discourses consist of and pinpoint where these are instantiated in language use. Second, it allows consideration of how language works, particularly of how it constructs credible, persuasive versions of reality and of how these accounts relate to broader social processes and practices. Understood and used in this way, a discursive approach to policy analysis can be part of the critical, democratic agenda in policy studies. If discourse analysis can identify *what* kind of knowledge is promoted through policy and *how* it is promoted through language use, then it provides the opportunity for discourses to be both scrutinised and challenged.

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NOTES

1. The term 'pathological' is being used here to signify a complex, interrelated set of explanations of urban problems. These include the behavioural, moral rectitude 'underclass' explanations being argued for around that time by Charles Murray (see Murray, 1990) which resurrected aspects of the 'culture of poverty' and 'cycle of deprivation' theses which came to prominence in the US and UK in the 1960s and early 1970s (Dean and Taylor-Gooby, 1993). Closely linked to the underclass thesis, but not reducible to it, are pathological explanations which problematise working-class, specifically *urban* dwellers through the persistent association of this group with threats to the social order or to public health (Williams, 1973; Saunders, 1981).
2. The history of the development of the 'Community Ownership' housing associations referred to in the quotation is well documented (see Clapham, Kintrea *et al.*, 1989 and Clapham *et al.*, 1996). They present community ownership as the outcome of a process of negotiation between local residents groups, Glasgow District Council, the Housing Corporation and the Scottish Office Development Department. Local community action is given a key role: 'the existence, and the persistence, of the residents' groups has been crucial to the formation of the new co-operatives. These groups of committed local people have struggled for a number of years to attempt to obtain investment for their area' (Clapham, Kintrea *et al.*, 1989, p. 131).

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