



# The order of forest owners' discourses: Hegemonic and marginalised truths about the forest and forest ownership



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## ABSTRACT

Our understanding of the world is essentially based on shared meanings that are intersubjectively produced and reproduced in different social practices. In this study we analyse private forest owners' discourses of the forest as a social practice that produces alternative competing truths about the forest and forest ownership. We examine the order of five predefined discourses (1–5) in relation to discursive power by analysing the signs of hegemony and marginalisation within these discourses. Importantly, we also analyse the position of different kinds of forest owners within the prevailing order of discourses. Our critical discourse analysis combines qualitative content analysis with quantitative multivariate analysis (NMS) and is based on in-depth interviews with 24 Finnish forest owners.

The harmonious discourses of the forester (1) and the economist (2) demonstrated many hegemonic features. This essentially illustrates the hegemony of the economic truth about the forest and its proper use among forest owners, as economically effective wood production was emphasised in both of these discourses. The signs of marginalization were common in the discourses of the distant economist (3), the critical anti-economist (4), and the dutiful forest owner (5). Discourse 4 was characterised by an open critique of the hegemonic economic truth. Forest owners with primarily non-monetary objectives were placed in an unfavourable position in the order of the discourses.

The results reflect a wider discursive environment where economic meanings and practices prevail as the most natural and proper ways of thinking and acting. Being a forest owner is easy in Finnish society if the hegemonic economic truth about the forest functions as a natural and unproblematic part of one's forest ownership. However, discourses 4 and 5 indicate that the prevailing discursive conditions make forest ownership unfulfilling for some owners. Openness to alternative ways to understand the forest and forest ownership should thus be enhanced in research, policy, practical forestry, and the media.

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## 1. Introduction

Varying perspectives and interests make the forest a deeply political issue. Political and ideological dimensions are present and pervasive in the ways in which we understand the forest and forest ownership. From the perspective of discourse analysis our understanding of the forest is essentially based on shared meanings that are intersubjectively produced and reproduced in different social

practices. In this study we analyse Finnish private forest owners' discourses of the forest as a social practice that produces alternative competing truths about the forest, forest ownership and the proper way forests should be used. In addition to their effects on forest owners' personal understandings of the forest, these truths and their mutual relationships may have profound social and material consequences in forested rural areas.

This work is a continuation of our recent descriptive analysis of forest owners' discourses that concentrated on the identification and description of the discourses (Takala et al., 2017). In this paper we take the perspective of critical discourse analysis to examine the order of these discourses in terms of discursive power that is understood here as normalizing and naturalizing hegemony. Our

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critical orientation means that we are especially interested in the social suppression that the prevailing power relationships between the discourses potentially produce. People tend to become attached to different discourses unconsciously and automatically as a part of their everyday life (Fairclough, 2010 69–83, 126–145). This means that discursive power and its social consequences also remain unremarked most of the time. Studies that make discursive power visible are important not only to forest owners but also to all other actors that deal with forest issues.

Discourse analysis has entered forest sciences during the past decades, but this has not occurred in a consistent manner. There have been a wide variety of approaches and many different meanings for the term discourse (Leipold, 2014). The majority of the forest-related discourse studies have, to date, been descriptive, *i.e.* they have aimed to identify and describe discourses and their effects (Leipold, 2014). Forest policy discourses at a national or international level have drawn considerable attention in these descriptive studies (Humphreys, 2009; Dang et al., 2012; Pistorius et al., 2012; Manuschevich, 2016). Furthermore, different forest-related conflicts have inspired many descriptive works (Berglund, 2000; Pecurul-Botines et al., 2014; Blicharska and Van Herzele, 2015).

In the context of this study the most important descriptive studies are those that depict the Finnish forest policy discourses. It is obvious that there are direct semantic connections between the Finnish forest owners' discourses and these meta-level forest discourses. The polarization between economic or production-oriented and environmental discourses is a common finding in these studies (Berglund, 2000, 2001; Rantala and Primmer, 2003; Vainio and Paloniemi, 2012). This is not only a Finnish peculiarity. Contradictions between environmental and capitalist or neoliberal economic discourses are highlighted in national and international level forest discourse studies around the world (*e.g.* Humphreys, 2009; Pistorius et al., 2012; Holmgren and Arora-Jonsson, 2015; Blicharska and Van Herzele, 2015). However, Berninger et al. (2009) hypothesised that the polarisation between these two orientations may be especially pronounced in Finland and other countries with similarly long histories of intensive forestry. None of the Finnish studies cited above report whether these two discourses could be interpreted as hegemonic or marginalised, nevertheless. Outside the Finnish context the economic discourses are most often interpreted as hegemonic (*e.g.* Humphreys, 2009; Pistorius et al., 2012; Leipold, 2014; Holmgren and Arora-Jonsson, 2015), but in a few cases the hegemony of environmental discourses has been reported (Veenman et al., 2009; Winkel, 2014).

Instead, the discourses that emphasise the non-material socio-cultural meanings of the forest have been practically absent from the Finnish mainstream forest policy (Keto-Tokoi and Kuuluvainen, 2010 270), at least until recently. Of course, there are also socio-culturally oriented meta-level forest discourses outside of mainstream forest policy (*e.g.* in different national medias) and there is some evidence that many Finnish forest owners readily adhere to these types of discourses (Selby et al., 2007). One reason for the low status of the "soft" socio-cultural meanings in national policy may lie in the essential role that the effective utilisation of forests has played in Finnish nationalism from the 19th century onwards (Berglund, 2000; Kotilainen and Rytteri, 2011).

However, it is essential to distinguish between descriptive and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2010 30–55). Descriptive studies do not address social suppression and emancipation in their analyses, whereas these are central in the critical tradition and in this study. Critical discourse analysis has been a rare phenomenon in forest science and it has been used most often in the global South (Medina et al., 2009; Winkel, 2012; Leipold, 2014) where social and economic inequality, also in respect of forest issues, is obviously

more pronounced than in the global North. In the western world the effects of forest discourses on social actors and groups are most likely to be subtle and related more to the quality of life than to physical survival. In a recent review of discourse analytical forest research (Leipold, 2014) only one genuinely critical western discourse study was found. This particular study focused on the genderisation of the forest profession in Sweden (Lidestav and Sjölander, 2007). Critical discourse analysis has also been applied in a study of Swedish forest policy that illustrated the hegemony of economic and masculine ideologies (Holmgren and Arora-Jonsson, 2015). Thus, to our knowledge there are no studies of forest owners that adopt a critical discourse analysis outside of gender issues in the western world.

Our analysis of the five predefined forest discourses in this paper aims to find out how competing truths about the forest place Finnish forest owners in favourable or unfavourable positions, not on the grounds of their age, gender or socio-economic status, but as a consequence of their ideas of the forest. We ask: (A) what is the order of the forest owners' forest discourses, and (B) how does the prevailing order of the forest discourses enhance or restrict forest owners' possibilities to experience a fulfilling and pleasant forest ownership in Finnish society? Our societal aim is to make forest owners and any other actors that deal with forest issues in the fields like forest services, media or policy more aware of the social consequences of forest discourses and discursive power. This may have emancipatory effects on some of the actors. We also present a novel way to analyse discursive power that hopefully has value for methodological development of critical discourse analysis.

## 2. Theoretical framework

In this study, we follow the critical realist theory of critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2010; Fairclough et al., 2010). According to this tradition discourses are seen as one form of social practice that semiotically constitutes non-discursive social, mental and material elements of reality but are simultaneously constituted by them (Fairclough et al., 2010). Forest discourses are thus semiotic entities that define alternative truths about the forest and forest ownership in a dual relationship to other discursive as well as to non-discursive elements of reality. However, we do not present a detailed description of the concept of discourse or of our ontological premises in this paper (for these, see Takala et al., 2017). Instead, we describe how we understand the concepts of power, hegemony, marginalisation and the order of discourses in our analysis. Furthermore, we clarify the essential concepts of subject and subject position.

When each forest discourse produces its own kind of truth about the forest and forest ownership, we can consider forest discourses as mutually competing semiotic entities. Typically, some discourses have more power to determine what is natural, right and appropriate than others in a particular society or community (Fairclough, 2010 69–83, 126–145). The power of discourses is defined here as hegemony, which is the capacity of a discourse to make its own truth appear normal and natural in relation to alternative truths (Fairclough, 2010 69–83, 126–145). The power relationships between the discourses produce an order of discourses (Fairclough, 2010 69–83, 126–145) where some discourses are hegemonic and others are variably marginalised. Marginalisation is defined here as the inability of a discourse to make its own truth about the forest and forest ownership natural and normal in relation to alternative truths. Importantly, we should not presume that all relationships between different discourses and between discourses and non-discursive social, material and mental elements of reality were uniform by strength and quality: the reciprocal relationships can take various forms and be substantial

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