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Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis is an umbrella term for a range of methodological approaches that analyse the use and functions of talk and text within social interaction. These approaches are used across social science disciplines such as psychology, sociology, linguistics, anthropology and communication studies. Discourse analysis is interdisciplinary in nature, developed from work within speech act theory, ethnomethodology and semiology as well as post-structuralist theorists such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, and the later works of philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. Discourse analysis approaches are crucial for understanding human relationships because they focus primarily on interaction: how we talk to each other and the discursive practices (talking, writing) through which relationships develop, fall apart and so on. This entry covers central features of discourse analysis, methodological issues and some of the most commonly used versions of discourse analysis.

Common features of discourse analytical approaches

Discourse analysis approaches combine a set of theoretical assumptions about what discourse is and how it is used, with a rigorous methodology that determines what kind of data is appropriate and how this should be analysed. The distinctions between different versions of discourse analysis has led to many heated debates within the field, particularly where researchers are working within a specific discipline (such as psychology).

There are, however, underlying commonalities across discourse analysis approaches. First, most theorists agree that discourse – all forms of talk and text (and for some researchers, this includes bodily movements or eye gaze within social interaction) – is central to everyday life, and thus, to human relationships. The term ‘discourse’ is commonly used to highlight the focus on language *use* rather than grammatical or linguistic features.

The second area of commonality is the assumption that discourse is social action; that social practices are performed in and through discourse. This is seen in three ways. First, discourse is treated as *constructing* or *constituting* the world. That is, discourse does not merely reflect reality, rather, it constructs reality in particular ways. When we ‘describe’ the world, we are thus building up a certain picture of the world (or person, for instance) that is open to challenge, collusion or negotiation. This is a crucial departure from many linguistic and communication theories, which argue that language is a passive medium (or ‘conduit’, or pipeline) through which ideas, thoughts and so on are accessed.

Second, social action is also produced through there being many versions of the world that can be constructed in discourse. That is, if we assume discourse constructs reality, then it follows that different discourses construct reality in different ways. For example, newspapers may report on the same event but the story is different each time. There is thus variability in talk and text, as discourse is produced in different contexts and for different functions; hence, as the function/context changes, so does the discourse. Discourse analysts argue, to a greater or lesser extent, that each version is as ‘true’ as any other; that we cannot objectively claim to know the ‘real’ version of events. ‘Reality’ may thus be regarded as a series of multiple ‘realities’ each of which are brought to life through various discursive practices. It is within this area that there is much cause for dispute among discourse analysts, as some argue that to make a relativist claim (that there is not ‘one’ truth, but many ‘truths’) means that you cannot then state which version of the truth is the ‘right’ or ‘correct’ one. Those who take a more realist line (that there *is* an underlying truth ‘behind’ discourse), however, claim to be able to take a political stance (a point of view or perspective) on an issue.

The final way in which social action is produced is through the co-production of meaning within discourse. As discourse constructs reality/ies, the location of meaning-making is treated not as an individual product (e.g. of how someone thinks) but as the

product of social interaction. A helpful analogy here is to imagine the visual illusion which flips between being two heads (sideways on, facing each other) and being a vase. Meaning, it is argued, is created in the space *between* people (the 'vase') rather than *within* the people (heads) themselves. What we 'mean' by a statement is thus not a matter of what we thought about when we said it, but how the words are interpreted and responded to by others. For example, whether or not your partner claims to 'love' you is not about their intentions or feelings, but about how they say it, and how this statement functions in the interaction. This means that discourse must be understood within an historical, social and cultural context. Again, there are differences of opinion as to how 'context' should be defined: as only the words that people say (and how they say them), whether issues such as age, gender and ethnicity should be defined, as well as broader historical or cultural contexts.

Using discourse analysis as a method

The social constructionist basis of most forms of discourse analysis means that it cannot simply be used as an interchangeable method within research (as if it were another tool in the 'toolbox of methods'). This is because, as noted above, it requires the researcher to buy into certain theoretical assumptions: that discourse constructs reality and that context is fundamental to understanding discourse in any human relationship. That aside, the steps for acquiring and using discourse analysis are broadly similar, though they are by no means a straight-forward 'recipe' in terms of analysis.

Discourse analysis research involves the audio or video recording of social interaction (e.g. telephone conversations or family mealtimes), or the collecting together of textual documents (e.g. personal diaries or health promotion literature). A large corpus of data is accumulated on a particular topic. Data collection is guided by a research question/s in a topic area. For instance, an interest in the negotiation of household tasks within a relationship might lead to the collection of either interviews with couples or families who

live together, or the video recording of the family as they discuss tasks over the dinner table. If audio or video data are used, a written transcript (i.e. a word processed copy of the talk) is produced to be analysed alongside the audio/video files, and which is used to report findings in publications.

The data corpus is then coded by searching for recurring patterns, themes or instances of a particular phenomena. This process is guided by past research and the research question. The transcript will be read many times in order to get a 'feel' for the data, and to ensure that the initial stages of coding are as inclusive as possible. Continuing the example above, this might mean selecting those areas of talk where people seem to be in conflict or disagreement over duties. Analysis of the data then requires an in-depth examination of 'discursive devices' such as use of pronouns, categories or rhetorical features (where alternative versions of 'reality' are directly or indirectly argued against). Styles of analysis vary greatly depending on which version of discourse analysis is being used, from looking closely at the way in which people take turns in talk and how the sequential organisation of interaction helps to construct the meaning of talk (discursive psychology) to considering the use of concepts such as synchronicity (the smooth co-ordination of people's talk) and shared ways of speaking (sociolinguistics and ethnographic approaches).

The resultant discourse analysis is often in the form of a set of themes and illustrative points that relate back to the research question. Extracts from the transcribed data are used to evidence the analytical points, enabling the reader to view the data directly and to decide for themselves about the veracity of the claims being made. As such, discourse analysis approaches are purely qualitative in method, but they are also extremely applied, in that findings can be used to relate back directly to the setting in which the data was collected (or similar settings).

Versions of discourse analysis

The divergent roots of discourse analysis have led to many different varieties. Here, three strands are outlined, along with more subtle variations within each, as these are most relevant for the study of human relationships.

Discursive psychology refers to a strand of discourse analysis that has emerged from the work of Derek Edwards and Jonathan Potter in the 1990's, and develops Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell's seminal work on discourse analysis in social psychology in 1987. This version examines how psychological concepts (such as emotions, attitudes and beliefs) are constructed and understood in everyday interaction. This work is particularly suited to human relationships, and has been used to examine, for example, marriage and family counselling sessions and family mealtime interaction. A slight variation on this approach is the discursive psychology developed by Rom Harré, which places more emphasis on cognitive processes (i.e. what people are thinking or mentally processing) and their role within talk. Edwards and Potters' version of discursive psychology is more agnostic about cognition. A third area within this 'branch' of discourse analysis is that known as *critical discursive psychology*, which focuses on similar psychological notions but uses a broader notion of context, taking into account cultural and historical frameworks as well as the discourse itself. For instance, research by John Dixon and Margaret Wetherell examines issues of social justice and gender within talk about household labour.

A second major branch of discourse analysis is known as *critical discourse analysis*, which is based upon broadly Marxist principles: that some groups in society have more power than others, and that oppression is mediated through discourse. Key theorists in this area are Norman Fairclough and Teun Van Dijk, and research has been carried out on topics where there is some level of inequality or abuses of power. It is this notion of power, and being 'critical' (within discourse analysis, this is broadly used to refer to approaches which

take a more realist perspective, and thus can stake a claim about what version of the ‘truth’ is more appropriate or acceptable than another) that is central to this version of discourse analysis. For instance, these approaches often focus on discourses around racism, sexism or other perceived inequalities in society. There are strong similarities with *Foucauldian discourse analysis*, which is rooted in the work of philosopher Michel Foucault, and which treats power as a more fluid concept. Here, power can be positive as well as negative, and it is closely connected with knowledge and discourse. Power is not something ‘owned’ by groups through virtue of their ways of talking; it is flexible and can be used by individuals through use of different discourses and ways of representing others.

The third main strand of discourse analysis is characterised by approaches such as interactional sociolinguistics and the ethnography of speaking. These approaches take a broader perspective on context and are interested in areas such as interethnic communication, communicative styles (fixed ways of talking that are often associated with groups or communities of people) and the notion of speech genres, where talk is characterised by particular features and functions as a consequence of being associated with a particular area of communication (e.g. conversations between parents and children over mealtimes).

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See also: *Communication processes, verbal; Communication, norms and rules; Interaction analysis; Language uses in relationships; Qualitative methods in relationship research.*

Further readings:

Dixon, J. and Wetherell, M. (2004) On discourse and dirty nappies: Gender, the division of household labour and the social psychology of distributive justice. *Theory & Psychology*, Vol. 14 (2): 167-189.

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