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Chapter 1

Introduction - discourse analysis: the turn to the text

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This book is part of a new wave of research sweeping across social psychology, and breaking down boundaries between social psychology and other parts of the discipline. The chapters collected here illustrate the way that discourse analysis can help us reformulate what it is that developmental and social psychologists, personality theorists and cognitive scientists think they are doing when they try to study what goes on ‘inside’ the individual. We argue that personality profiles for different jobs (Moir, Chapter 2, this volume), attitudes towards social issues (Marshall and Raabe, Chapter 3, this volume; Macnaghten, Chapter 4, this volume), prejudice towards women (Gill, Chapter 5, this volume), personal identity (Widdicombe, Chapter 6, this volume) and even deeply felt emotions like jealousy (Stenner, Chapter 7, this volume) are not things hiding inside the person which a psychologist can then ‘discover’ but are created by the language that is used to describe them. Psychological phenomena have a public and collective reality, and we are mistaken if we think that they have their origin in the private space of the individual.

Language organized into *discourses* (what some contributors here call *interpretative repertoires*) has an immense power to shape the way that people, including psychologists, experience and behave in the world. Language contains the most basic categories that we use to understand ourselves; affecting the way we act as women or as men (in, for example, the sets of arguments that are given about the nature of gender difference deployed to justify inequality), and reproducing the way we define our cultural identity (in, for example, the problems and solutions we negotiate when we try and define who we are as a member of a minority group). When we talk about any phenomenon (our personality, attitudes, emotions), we draw on shared meanings (so we know that the listener will know what we are [2] saying). Many discourse analysts in psychology now would say that we draw on shared patterns of meaning and contrasting ways of speaking they would call repertoires (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) or discourses (Hollway, 1989; Parker, 1992) or ideological dilemmas (Billig *et al.*, 1988). Instead of studying the mind as if it were outside language, we study the spoken and written texts (and other types of text) - the conversations, debates, discussions where images of the mind are reproduced and transformed.

The traditional methods used by psychology are not going to get us very far in identifying the semantic processes going on in language as people recreate the phenomena psychologists usually want to understand (and measure). The ‘experimental discourse’ (a set of statements, terms, metaphors and turns of phrase which include ‘subjects’, ‘control conditions’, ‘variables’

and ‘results’) is quite inappropriate here. Our problem now, a series of dilemmas we have to negotiate in the course of this book, is how to develop alternative methods as part of discourse analytic work. Although there have been attempts to set out ‘how to do’ discourse analysis (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Fairclough, 1989; Parker, 1992), there is a danger of pretending that there is a simple method for gathering discourses (as if they could appear like the rest of the data psychologists collect) and of glossing over the differences between discourse analysts. Some contributors in this book are happy to talk about ‘repertoires’ (Moir, Chapter 2; Marshall and Raabe, Chapter 3), ‘discourses’ (Macnaghten, Chapter 4; Marks, Chapter 8) or ‘practical ideologies’ (Gill, Chapter 5), while others prefer to avoid reifying these meanings (treating them as if they were ‘things’) and talk about focusing on ‘dynamic and pragmatic aspects of language use’ (Widdicombe, Chapter 6) or a ‘thematic decomposition’ which identifies ‘subject positions’ (Stenner, Chapter 7).

This refocusing of research in psychology, both in terms of the substantive issues we can address, and in terms of the variety of methods we could use, is the most important and complex contribution of discourse analysis to the discipline. In the rest of this chapter we want to outline key reference points for the development of discourse analysis, explore further how the turn to the text is useful for those who wish to transform rather than simply reproduce psychology, and then briefly raise some questions about the nature of this research, issues that will be picked up in Chapter 9 [3]

REFERENCE POINTS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF DISCOURSE ANALYTIC RESEARCH

The variety of debates in discourse research can be bewildering for a researcher new to the area who may simply be out to pick up a useful set of analytic and theoretical tools. In part this is due to the proliferation of brands of discourse analysis and their multiple origins, each of which involve different emphases or levels and styles of analysis. Indeed, it is very difficult to speak of ‘discourse’ or even ‘discourse analysis’ as a single unitary entity, since this would blur together approaches subscribing to specific and different philosophical frameworks. In so far as there could be said to be commonality, these approaches are united by a common attention to the significance and structuring effects of language, and are associated with interpretive and reflexive styles of analysis.

What the different theoretical models used by the contributors to this book share is a concern with the ways language produces and constrains meaning, where meaning does not, or does not only, reside within individuals’ heads, and where social conditions give rise to the forms of talk available. In its various forms, discourse analysis offers a social account of subjectivity by attending to the linguistic resources by which the sociopolitical realm is produced and reproduced. Such a characterization places discourse analysis as the latest successor to, or version of, approaches such as hermeneutics (Gauld and Shotter, 1977) and social semiotics (Hodge and Kress, 1988). All involve an attention to the ways in which language (as with other representational systems) does more than reflect what it represents, with the corresponding implication that meanings are multiple and shifting, rather than unitary and fixed. Not only is the relationship between what is ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ language problematized by these approaches, but the very terms and tools of our inquiry and evaluation become matters of interpretation and debate.

It is possible to identify three reference points in discourse analytic research in

psychology now. These reference points are not coherent, unitary theoretical positions or types of method. They are, rather, the clusters of writers and examples of research that are used as references to support the description and commentary on a report. Often in journals, the use of particular writers as references is a better guide to the framework being adopted than the explicit statement made by the author. In many cases, more than one reference point [4] is used by contributors to this book in order to highlight particular sets of issues.

Repertoires and dilemmas

The first reference point is that around the writers who have popularised discourse analysis in social psychology in Britain from the end of the 1980s (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Billig *et al.*, 1988). Four of the chapters look to these writers. Moir (Chapter 2, this volume) takes up one of the issues explored in *Discourse and Social Psychology* (Potter and Wetherell, 1987), that of 'personality', and, in a careful analysis of the attempts at personality profiling used in psychological models of occupational career choice, shows how the talk both confirms *and* disconfirms just as strongly the idea that people in different career paths have certain personalities. Identifying what he calls 'linguistic repertoires', Moir uses Potter and Wetherell as one of his reference points to the power of conversational context on what people say about themselves from moment to moment. The lesson here is not only that the personality typing does not work, but that the phenomenon of personality itself is something which is a function of talk: it is as variable as talk. There is a short step from this point to the idea that questionnaire and interview responses are not tapping something outside language (or inside the head). As Moir points out: interview responses are therefore viewed as discursive practices and nothing more'.

Like Moir in his analysis of career interviews, Marshall and Raabe (Chapter 3, this volume) use the notion of interpretative repertoire, and look, as Potter and Wetherell (1987) do, to three crucial aspects of language. These aspects are that: (i) There is always a variation in the accounts that people give which is more important than the 'consistency' that psychologists usually fetishize; (ii) talk has a variety of functions other than that of simply transmitting information; and (iii) our talk and writing is constructed out of existing resources. These resources are the repertoires, repertoires we do not create anew when we speak, but which we have to borrow and refashion for our own purposes. A problem is that when we borrow a repertoire it always carries more with it than we (could) think. The second key issue that Potter and Wetherell home in on is attacked again by Marshall and Raabe, that of 'attitudes'. In their analysis of political talk, they show that the functions of the discourse are more important than underlying stable dispositions. As with the [5] notion of 'personality', we are led to suspect that 'attitudes' are not fixed things inside the person but are a function of context and of repertoires.

Gill (Chapter 5, this volume) also locates her work with reference to the work on repertoires, but she argues this with a focus on the 'practical ideologies' that are called upon when people include or exclude others. The notion of 'practical ideology' is one that flows from the set of studies in the book *Ideological Dilemmas* (Billig *et al.*, 1988) where the 'ideological dilemmas' are those contrasting public and collective ideas that people negotiate when they weigh up, refer to and then discount alternative accounts. Thought itself, in this view, is 'dilemmatic', and Gill shows how the different accounts that radio disc jockeys give to justify the absence of women from radio are far from straightforward. As well as being another good example of how the traditional social psychological concept of 'attitude' will not work when we examine real talk, Gill's chapter shows how an attention to the multiple and contradictory reasons people give for

their prejudice allows a better understanding of ideology than of simply delusion or fixed ideas.

Conversation and the making of sense

The second reference point would contest the notion of ideology as a set of fixed ideas, and would then go further than this to say that the ‘repertoires’ and ‘dilemmas’ that discourse analysis sometimes pretends to discover are themselves only creations of the analyst. Two of the chapters look to this reference point. Moir (Chapter 2, this volume) is cautious in his use of the notion of ‘linguistic repertoire’ because he also uses as his reference point writers in the sociological tradition of ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967). Ethnomethodology is the study of the methodologies used by the ‘folk’ (hence ‘ethno’ - ‘methodology’) to make sense of the world, and for a researcher to pretend that they have ‘discovered’ the repertoires that govern what people say would be to do violence to what people actually say (and what they say they are saying). Moir wants to recover what sense his interviewees are making of the questions, rather than sum up what they are doing with a label he, the analyst, has imposed.

A sustained example of what is entailed by this approach is provided by Widdicombe (Chapter 6, this volume), who specifies two features of the analytic stance she adopts. While traditional [6] sociological and social psychological accounts of subcultural identity claim to identify social forces or cognitive schemas which ‘cause’ people to develop particular identities, Widdicombe argues that identity is negotiated through talk. To capture some sense of the identity that a speaker or writer (or artist or sculptor or musician even, if we opened up our idea of what a text is) is constructing for themselves, it is necessary first to develop ‘a sensitivity to the way language is used’ and then to focus on the ‘inferential and interactive aspects of talk’. The question she is asking as she picks through the inter-view transcripts are ‘What problems are presupposed by the statements made here?’ and ‘What are the solutions that are being posed to those problems?’. While there is a reluctance to discover things (like repertoires and suchlike) in Widdicombe’s work, the analysis is systematically organized around these questions. The rules of language use and meaning making are what are being elaborated here.

Structure and subject

A third reference point is that of ‘post-structuralism’ (Parker, 1989; Parker and Shotter, 1990). Here, the term ‘discourse’ is used instead of the term ‘repertoire’ (Parker, 1992). Post-structuralism is the term for an array of approaches which is suspicious both of claims to reveal a world outside language and of claims that we can experience any aspect of ourselves as outside language. Macnaghten (Chapter 4, this volume) uses the notion of ideological dilemmas and of argumentation with Billig *et al* (1988) as his reference point, but he also wants to show that ‘discourses’ (a term he prefers to ‘repertoires’) imply social relationships. Reality, behaviour and subjectivity (our sense of ourselves) is always in a text. This is why post-structuralism provokes a deconstruction of the ‘truths’ we take as given, including the ‘truths’ about experience that are appealed to by religions or by humanism. Some writers using post-structuralism use the term ‘postmodernism’ to describe what they are doing - and this is the term currently favoured in the United States by social constructionists (e.g. Hare-Mustin and Maracek, 1988; Gergen, 1991). If this perspective is adopted, then any appeals to human nature, or other non-human nature must be rejected in favour of; as Macnaghten puts it: ‘a research orientation based on a post-modernist commitment to *the socially constructed nature of reality, or the socially constructed reality of*

nature'.

The term 'post-structuralism' still carries with it positivist echoes of its history in structuralism (an attempt to discover underlying [7] universal structures to nature and culture), and Stenner (Chapter 7, this volume) therefore prefers to adopt an approach to the jealousy talk of his interviewees, which he calls a 'thematic decomposition'. His analysis of the narratives used by two people to construct themselves and their partner involves, as he says, a focus on the *storied* nature of jealousy' *and* (here is the post-structuralist reference point) a description of the 'subject positions' constructed in the talk for each person. When the post-structuralist twist to discourse analytic research is added, particularly in the use of Foucault's (1981) work, then we are able to look not only at how objects are constructed in discourse (objects such as 'personality', 'attitudes' and 'prejudices') but also at how subjects are constructed (how we experience ourselves when we speak, when we hear others speak about us, and how we still have to use that talk when we think without speech). Marks (Chapter 8, this volume) also uses post-structuralism as her reference point, and that, when combined with an attempt at radical action research, causes difficult practical moral/political dilemmas. We will return to this issue, but we want first to review moral/political advantages of adopting a discourse analytic approach.

MORAL-POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF DISCOURSE ANALYTIC RESEARCH

The 'turn to the text' has far-reaching implications for scientific, and especially social scientific, 'knowledge' (Gubrium and Silverman, 1989). There are three useful contributions that discourse analysis makes that we would like to draw attention to.

First, discourse analysis draws into psychology the work of Foucault (1972, 1980), and the way that Foucauldian ideas have been used to provide a critical account of the function of the discipline of psychology itself. Rose (1985, 1990), for example, outlines how the definition and specification of the domain of 'individual psychology' arose within discourses of social regulation and classification emerging at the turn of the nineteenth century. This legacy can be seen in contemporary practices of developmental and educational psychology and personality theory. As Walkerdine (1988) points out, the effects of psychology's birth in the wake of Darwinian evolutionary theory, tied also to the modern programme of liberal reform, reverberate on theoretically in the celebration of rationality within models of development. They are also maintained by means of the normalizing practices (of health, law, welfare and [8] education) which psychological knowledge informs. These accounts, following on from Henriques *et al* (1984), have been used to problematize the effects of social scientific, and specifically psychological, practice by revealing it as participating within prevailing social norms and interests, historically and currently (Burman, 1991).

Second, drawing attention to the discursive structures of psychological accounts works to highlight the assumptions underlying them and challenges their facticity, that is, their status as truth. So, for example, Squire (1990) identifies three main discourses structuring psychological accounts: the detective narrative (driven by the need to find out and to solve problems); the autobiographical narrative (whose confessional and subjective qualities paradoxically work to reaffirm its objectivity and validity) and the science fiction narrative (which takes over at the fringes of psychological knowledge, engaging in 'speculative' and 'preliminary' investigations and foraying into new unknown territories). A consequence of this is that questions of theory and method become blurred (a familiar 'deconstructive' move), so that the critique applies to

psychological tools as well as concepts. Potter and Wetherell (1987) correspondingly also couch their critique of psychological theory in methodological terms. They highlight how dominant psychological methods of; for example, rating scales that underlie attitude theory, fail to take account of the variability of human thought and action, and by doing so bolster a spurious model of thinking as uniform, rational, and classifiable into equal-interval categories. Hollway (1989) develops a version of this critique to import a psychoanalytic gender analysis, so that subjectivity and contradiction, long associated with the devalued and inferior thinking of women, come to be seen as not only inevitable features of; but also as vital for a more adequate understanding of; psychic life.

Third, the self-conscious attention to account and presentation, to context as well as content, gives rise to a focus on reflexivity. Reflexivity is seen as more than the condition of the psychological enterprise, of the reflective study of sentient beings. Reflexivity is also hailed as aiding accountability for discourse analytic readings by rendering interpretative resources and processes public and available for evaluation (Potter, 1988). Further, feminist uses of reflexivity have been concerned to draw attention to the participation of the researcher within research processes, and to the work of interpretation (Wilkinson, 1988). This is not simply to enrich the account, but to heighten questions of power relations in research. Focusing [9] on meaning construction and the relationship between systems of meaning can facilitate an understanding of relationships between researcher and researched. This emphasis on the contradictions between discourses as well as their internal construction helps to theorize the functions they play within the social practices that give rise to them.

Marks (Chapter 8, this volume) highlights the way in which the contradictions between discourses are, in the research process, also contradictions between the researcher and those that psychologists normally call their 'subjects'. The focus in her chapter is on the power that operates in research, and the moral/political contradictions that beset someone trying to engage in 'action research'. Despite the concern with empowerment, and the giving of voice to the participants in the study, Marks shows, through a transcript of a meeting in which the analyses of an education case conference were 'fed back' to some of the original participants, that a Foucauldian recasting of repertoires as 'discourses' cannot turn the study into one that is *necessarily* radical or progressive. What is disturbing about this account is that it is elaborating and reflecting on what is usually concealed in psychological research: what went on here is routine in traditional studies, but it patently is not enough simply to recognize the problem. This, perhaps, is an issue to do with the nature of discourse analytic research.

To summarize so far, an attention to discourse facilitates a historical account of psychological knowledge, mounts a critique of psychological practice by challenging its truth claims, and requires a transformation of our notions of what a good methodology should be like. This makes it possible to use the analytic framework to make interventions in the way psychology is constructed in culture. The current popularity of discourse analysis owes much to the ways its analytic tools can be used to inform political practice and struggles. So successful have these interventions been that discourse analysis is currently almost synonymous with 'critical' and in some cases 'feminist' research. Discourse analysis is used to comment on social processes which participate in the maintenance of structures of oppression. In psychology, for example, the approach has been used to analyse the workings of racist discourse (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell and Potter, 1992) and to explore nuances and effects of such ideologically loaded and multiply determined terms as the 'community' (Potter and Collie, 1989).

A number of practical struggles can be informed by opening up the dilemmas wrought by the crossings and conflicts of discourses. [10] To take one example, the 'human rights' discourse of normalization in mental handicap recognizes gender-appropriate dress and behaviour as conferring full humanity in contemporary social life, but renders women vulnerable to abuse (Adcock and Newbigging, 1990). Another is how the discourse of 'protection' and 'innocence' in child abuse positions 'knowing' children as culpable (Kitzinger, 1988). Also, drawing attention to the teaching of children as occurring within specific discursive practices, such as game formats, that offer particular, gendered positions and that may be responsible for children's lack of progress (rather than some conceptual deficit), generates new strategies in education curriculum development and teaching practice (Walkerdine, 1988). As a final example, competing discourses of the child as 'having problems' rather than being 'the problem', call for contrasting outcomes which relate to decision-making processes in education case conferences (Marks, Chapter 8, this volume).

We list these examples to give a picture of how discourse analysis has been taken up in useful ways to inform political struggles. However, while there are historical connections between why and how discourse analysis has come to function as political critique (perhaps due to purposes and orientations of cultural analysts and importers of post-structuralist ideas), it is by no means clear that these political motivations guiding discourse analysis are necessary. Seidel (1986) and Barker (1981) highlight how the Right intervene in the field of discourse in a deliberate way, moving from biological theories of racial inferiority to discourses that appropriate the Left's celebration of cultural difference and pluralism, but add a new twist to treat difference as synonymous with inevitable conflict: conflict between cultural groups is then presented as resolvable only by compulsory repatriation. The fact that people of such different political standpoints can use discourse analysis could be seen either as an advantage or as a disadvantage. We look at some of the problems in Chapter 9 (this volume), but for the moment we want to draw attention to the need for a researcher to be clear *why* they are doing discourse analysis.

TENSIONS IN DISCOURSE ANALYTIC RESEARCH

If discourse analytic research is to be developed as an approach which *is* critical of psychology, and is not to be absorbed by the discipline as just yet one more 'method' in its armoury, we do need alternative [11] spaces for theoretical debate and empirical work. Within the academic institutions, there are now many discourse groups, and their existence will be an important factor in the future shape of this area. All the contributors to this book have participated in the activities of the discourse analytic research group at the Manchester Metropolitan University, now the Discourse Unit - Centre for Qualitative and Theoretical Research on the Reproduction and Transformation of Language and Subjectivity.

We want to conclude this chapter by picking up points made by Figueroa and López (1991), in a review of a selection of recent discourse analytic research (including the chapters in this volume) in which they draw attention to tensions in contemporary discourse analysis. The tensions Figueroa and López identified were of four types. The first was a tension between the text and the context, in which there is the dilemma as to how far a researcher should go beyond the particular text they are analysing to arrive at an interpretation of what is happening. We need to know, for example, what the context is for the accounts that an interviewee is reported to have given, but when a researcher outlines this context, she is telling us more than the interviewee is

saying in the transcript. How the text should be located by the researcher is a question that is addressed in different ways, and to varying degrees in the following chapters. The second tension is between discourse analysis which is effectively functioning as ideology-critique and traditional positivist methods masquerading as discourse analysis. Here the researcher may be wanting to use discourse analysis critically, in order to expose a particular set of statements as racist or sexist (as legitimating exploitation) and not succeeding. Alternatively, what looks like a critical discourse analysis may in fact be just an academic exercise with no progressive intention (or progressive effect). Deciding which is which is sometimes difficult for the reader (and slipping between one and the other may sometimes be a problem for the researcher).

The third tension is between the use of conceptions of power/knowledge and a range of other approaches which are simply descriptive. In some cases, the processes of power that are being referred to in the analysis may even be explicitly referring to Foucauldian or feminist perspectives, while the actual 'analysis' does no more than redescribe what the interviewee (or other text) is saying. In some cases, the analysis may be a careful description and elaboration of implicit themes which need not necessarily be connected to an analysis of power and knowledge. The fourth and final tension is [12] that between theoretically informed work (and here the frameworks may range from dilemmas in thinking and argumentation, to accounts of everyday reasoning, to post-structuralist theories of subject position) and research in which it appeared as if it were sufficient to let the data 'speak for itself'. The contributors to this book have discussed the theoretical frameworks they are using, but how far we connect our analysis to theory is a difficult question. In some cases we may want to simply offer the account to the reader, and it functions as an occasion to give others a voice. In some cases, it will be necessary to risk not being accessible in order to produce a deeper analysis which goes beneath what appears to be said.

There are no fixed answers to these tensions, these dilemmas in discourse analysis. They are there to be negotiated in the course of the research, and they are still there now for you to negotiate as you read them, as you turn to the text.

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