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## Chapter 4

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### **Discourses of nature: argumentation and power**

[pp. 52-72]

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This chapter will give an account of a discourse study looking at how the category of 'nature' was constructed in a public inquiry. It will attempt to reveal four different constructions of nature: the process in which they were strategically used as arguments; and the relationship between argumentative strategies and existing sources of power. This analysis is theoretically novel in that the analytic unit used was not a repertoire', defined in terms of grammatical construction but a 'discourse', defined in terms of implied social relationships.

Although nature has long concerned people, there can be little dispute that the concept of nature recently has been gaining significance. Indeed, in a world threatened by atmospheric warming, acid rain, deforestation and global pollution, it is increasingly difficult to escape arguments which concern nature and our relationship to it. Not surprising then, that psychologists are beginning to wake up to the importance of this construct as it relates to human behaviour.

### **TRADITIONAL PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH ON NATURE**

I will begin by briefly describing existing research by psychologists on nature. This research will not be looked at in terms of content but in terms of its assumption that nature exists as a given entity, *priori* defined as wilderness.

Often when we think about nature, we think conceptually about a world which is disappearing, about places in danger of being lost, about places that used to exist everywhere but which rarely do now. And it is this concept which is taken as given in much contemporary psychological work on nature. [53]

Specifically, nature is assumed to be a *given, singular entity*, and to exist only in areas which have been *untouched by humanity*; places defined as undisturbed virgin areas or wilderness. The extract below is a typical example of a piece of research which implicitly makes this assumption through the synonymous use of the term 'nature' with 'wilderness': 'Both wilderness users and non-users have been found to share perceptions that experiences in natural environments can be highly satisfying and can offer valuable psychological benefits not found elsewhere' (Talbot and Kaplan, 1986:177). The assumption that nature can be *priori* defined as wilderness has led psychologists to equate psychological research on nature with research which focuses on the

psychological importance of wilderness's to human behaviour and functioning. To date, this research now includes: how natural environments are specified (Wohlwill, 1983); the factors which predict preferences of natural environments (Kaplan *et al.*, 1972; Herzog, 1987; Ullrich, 1983); developmental studies on nature (Ullrich and Ullrich, 1976; Wohlwill, 1983); and the psychological benefits of nature (R. Kaplan, 1977, 1984, 1985; Talbot and Kaplan, 1986).

This assumption depends on the acceptance of the *ontological* premise of realism - the premise that there exists a world separate from human experience. This premise is taken on board through the assumption that a natural environment exists whether we exist or not, and through the definition of nature as wilderness. However, the above research on nature not only proposes that natural environments exist by virtue of their untouched status, but also that we gain knowledge of them *vis-à-vis* this status. As such, the research presumes *epistemological* as well as ontological realism.

## A DISCOURSE STANCE

While it is difficult to summarize exactly what is the discourse stance, one aspect shared by a variety of discourse approaches is the assertion that all forms of social reality have a peculiarly human and socially constructed nature. Put in philosophical terms, while discourse theorists may be ambivalent to the virtues of realism in ontological forms (i.e. the possibility of a reality which exists separate from human activity and experience), they share a rejection of realism in epistemological terms. In other words, they share an assumption that 'knowledge of' can never be knowledge of an *extra*-human dimension (e.g. a word of science, objective fact, etc.), as all knowledge [54] is irretrievably connected to a reality - produced, bounded and sustained by human meanings and constructions. Ibañez (1991) describes how this 'postmodernity' promotes an essentially *human* quality in experience:

Post-modernity asserts that everything that is produced by human beings is irremediably and unavoidably just *simply human* that is, contingent, variable, relative to historically-changing human practices and ways of life. That means that we can find nowhere outside our own productions to check their value, for the standards used to check them stem themselves from our own productions.... These criteria are nothing other than *human products* and, *as such*, they are tied to human contingent decisions as well as being historically bounded.  
(Ibañez, 1991: 8, original emphasis)

This postmodernist's *constructivist* and *historical* commitment (i.e. the assertion that all accessible reality is both humanly constructed and historically bounded) leads to a heightened emphasis on the means through which human meanings and experience are manufactured -i.e. that of discourse. Here, a post-structuralist use of the term 'discourse' is deployed in which it refers not only to observable linguistic activities, but also to the world of human signs, symbols, activities, texts, etc. which together comprise a particular world view. As such, discourse analysts (or at least those who employ a postmodernist epistemology) tend to assume that our experience of reality constituted in and through discourse, and that the aim of analysis is to unravel the processes through which

discourse is constructed, and the consequences of these constructions.

## INTRODUCING THE DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

The discourse analysis to be described in this chapter will use a research orientation based on a postmodernist commitment to *the socially constructive nature of reality, or the socially constructed reality of nature*.

While the theoretical aims of the analysis were broadly in sympathy with the theory on discourse analysis as set out by Potter and Wetherell (1987, 1988), Potter *et al* (1990), Wetherell (1986) and with the approach to rhetoric and argumentation as set out by Billig (1987, 1990), the theoretical orientation did differ from that of the aforementioned authors in relation to analytic unit. Specifically, the disagreement relates to the proposal held by the aforementioned [55] theorists that discourse is constructed by our selective use of 'repertoires'. The disagreement lies not in the assertion that there exist analytic units of discourse which we use to manufacture text, nor in the assertion that different repertoires engender different outlooks, but in the assumption that a repertoire can be *primarily* located in grammar.

For the aforementioned authors, a repertoire is identified by grammatical constructions: by way of particular narrative forms, metaphors, tropes and common places which occur stereotypically when we discuss certain topics:

Any particular repertoire is constituted out of a restricted range of terms used in a specific stylistic and grammatical fashion. Commonly these terms are derived from one or more key metaphors and the presence of a metaphor will often be signalled by certain tropes or figures of speech.  
(Wetherell and Potter, 1989: 172)

This approach is criticized in its primary emphasis on grammar. An alternative analytic unit, named a 'discourse', will be used, which becomes identified in terms of the *social relationships* it implies and the *human uses* it legitimates. This alternative is argued to be more appropriate to the process of conducting a discourse analysis since it identifies the analytical unit at the level of social function as opposed to the level of individual grammar. Discursive constructions obviously use grammar but what lies central to each construction is not the use of the same grammatical terms but the social relationship encapsulated by these terms, the outlook they engender, and the activities they legitimate (whether these will be achieved or not depending, however, on the process of argumentation).

The research objectives are set out as follows. The first aim was to analyse the text in terms of the *variety* of different constructions of nature used. The concept that different constructions exist and are used in discourse is in direct contradiction to the assumption in existing psychological research that nature exists as a given entity, a priori defined as wilderness.

The second aim was to identify how these constructions of nature were used as *argumentative strategies*. For example, some of the arguments were contesting 'what nature was', while other arguments related to whether a particular case was a legitimate or illegitimate example of nature. In other words, the former arguments related to

contesting the essence of a construction of nature, while the [56] latter arguments related to whether the particular case in dispute could legitimately be categorized in terms of a particular construction of nature.

The third aim was to link the different constructions of nature to the different realities legitimated. The idea that language is *productive* is also in contradiction to a realist epistemology which assumes that language is separate from the human-independent world it addresses. A discourse epistemology alternatively assumes that language can *actively produce* a social reality as well as describe it. In this analysis, the use of different constructions of nature will be related to what they legitimated in terms of human relationships and uses.

And the final aim of the analysis was to look at the relationship between the argumentative strategies in terms of the constructions of nature used, and the material outcome of the discourse. This was achieved by first, linking the different argumentative strategies to existing structures of power, and second, by showing how the material outcome was based both on arguments which were bounded by these structures, and also by arguments which contested these structures.

## **INTRODUCING THE PUBLIC INQUIRY**

The discourse analysis is related to a public inquiry concerning a planning application for a landfill site (or tip) to be sited on the outskirts of a city. The application had been turned down initially by the county council on landscape grounds. The public inquiry was attended by council officials and community groups on one side; by the developers on the other and presided over by a government-appointed inspector.

This particular inquiry was chosen as the basis for a discourse analysis first, because it involved arguments contesting the category of nature, and second, because it was a good example of how this struggle of words would have very real material consequences. Indeed, to the developers there was at stake a business valued in millions, while for the local authorities and local communities there was at risk all the potential nuisances that would result from land-filling activities as well as the changes that would occur to the physical shape of the environment.

The main body of text used for the discourse analysis was based on the spoken and written text given in the inquiry. This text included the written evidence of the main participants, the [57] subsequent cross-examination by the opposing party and the inspector, and the final report written by the inspector comprising his findings. This was also supplemented by interviews with the main participants.

The transcripts were based on the written evidence, all the spoken text from the seven interviews and chunks of text selected from the tape-recordings of the public inquiry. The decision to select extracts from the total recordings of the inquiry was made since much of the inquiry related to technical details which bore little or no relevance to the category of nature. However, at this early stage of the analysis, every piece of text which could have been interpreted in some way as relating to the topic of nature was included in the transcripts. From the twenty-six original tapes, six tapes of selected data resulted.

Before attempting analysis, a process of coding began. The coding was simply an attempt to distinguish the bodies of text which surrounded the topic of nature from those which didn't.

It has to be acknowledged that some examples of the topic were more implicit than others. For example, many arguments used a particular construction of nature without making the term 'nature' explicit. The identification of the implicit as well as the explicit usages of constructions of nature was perhaps the most difficult part of the discourse analysis. The process of determining a coding system which allowed for this possibility lay first, in locating where the term 'nature' was used explicitly, and second, in identifying the *social relationships* implied along with the grammatical constructions which encapsulated these relationships. And when the constructions had been located via explicit usages of the category, coding procedures then also included those constructions where the same implied relationships were used but where the actual term 'nature' was not. Having highlighted all the examples where constructions of nature were used, the procedure of coding moved into the process of analysis.

## **DISCOURSE ANALYSIS: THE RHETORIC OF NATURE**

The main findings of the discourse analysis will now be discussed in three parts which broadly relate to the four objectives as set out. The first will locate the four different constructions of nature used (objective 1) in the inquiry and the argumentative strategies used within these constructions (objective 2). The second part will look at the argumentative strategies which made use of differing [58] discursive constructions (objective 2) and the third part will look at the relationship between the argumentative strategies used in the inquiry, the external constraints to the discourse and how these were related to the final outcome (objectives 3 and 4).

In this chapter there will be a number of extracts taken from the transcripts. To save repetition, abbreviations will be used. 'D' will stand for the developers, 'C' will stand for the council officials and 'I' will stand for the inspector. To refer to the source of the extracts the abbreviations 'W' will refer to written evidences given at the public inquiry, 'S' will refer to spoken cross-examination and 'V' will refer to the interviews. The extracts will be numbered in numerical order.

### **Discourses of nature and how they were argued over**

In terms of argumentative strategies over nature, the broad options open to both the developers and council officials were interpreted as follows. To the developers, there are two main strategies available: either they could argue that the existing site was already *separate from nature* and that their proposals would either restore the naturalness of the site or have no *real* effect, or they could argue that the site was a bona fide part of nature that would be unchanged by their proposals.

For the council officials, the options are limited to one clear strategy: that the existing site is a good and legitimate *part of nature*, and that the impact of the appeal proposals would change the categorical status of the area from the natural to the unnatural.

#### *Nature as wilderness*

The first discourse located in the text was named 'nature as wilderness'. It was located via a variety of grammatical constructions including the labels: virgin, original, untouched,

unspoilt; and the contrasts natural vs. artificial, natural vs. man-made. However, what mattered was not these grammatical terms but whether usage implied the definition of nature *in ways which left no legitimate place for human use*.

In terms of strategy, arguments centred on whether the appeal site was currently an example of virgin, untouched nature and whether the appeal proposals would affect this status. The extract [59] below illustrates how the developers use this construction to argue that the appeal site is already separate from nature:

*D (1):* Such major features as the concrete interchange, the deep cuttings and embankments to the north and south of the interchange now dominate the local landscape. ... These structures have already left a permanent artificial or manmade landscape; the *natural* landscape of the valley has been dramatically disturbed.  
(*W*)

This piece of text is interpreted as using a discourse of ‘nature as wilderness’ since it is the human intervention *per se* which has changed the original ‘natural landscape’ to an ‘artificial or man-made landscape’.

The council officials alternatively use this discursive construction to argue that the site currently exists in an untouched state. They achieve this by focusing on the original landform that currently prevails:

*C (1):* Viewed from the City the *natural* open hill ridge line just surmounts the roof lines of the built up areas, maintaining the countryside skirt to the City. ... it is a very simple form of folding hillside which is called the undeveloped foothills of the Haldon Ridge. ... we are dealing with an existing, unspoilt, *natural* countryside.  
(*W*)

This text is interpreted as using a construction of wilderness in using the term ‘natural’ to refer to what the landscape was like originally.

Having argued that the appeal site is already separate from virgin nature, the essence of the developers’ arguments is that the appeal site is already spoilt and as such his proposals will be of no consequence.

The council officials, having argued that the area in and surrounding the appeal site has a currently untouched, natural landform, continue this strategy by arguing that this would be changed by the appeal proposals into an artificial and unnatural landform:

*C (2):* It should also be noted that the scale of the operation is such that when the development is completed, a significant change in the *natural* landform will have taken place resulting in the loss of the existing dry valley feature. (*W*)

This text is clearly interpreted as using this construction of nature since it is the change of landform which is the problem of the development. [60]

This variety of discourse, in terms of original landform, has the added advantage that good designs for landfill sites do not change the original landform but restore artificial landforms to their original, untouched form:

C (3): Where it happened to be a large quarry, ... a great gorging hole that had been subject to extraction for a long period of time; he might have, at least, got back to what the profile of the land was once like. But, I mean, that is a more natural thing to fill in. (V)

#### *Nature as passive visual harmony*

This second discourse located in the text was named 'nature as passive visual harmony'. Examples of this construction of nature used metaphors of 'fit', and associated concepts of harmony, totality and character. But, what was first and foremost in identifying this discourse was whether the texts implied the social relationship of an 'on-looker passively viewing the visual harmony of an area'.

In terms of strategy, arguments centred on whether or not the surrounding area to the appeal site possessed visual harmony, whether or not the appeal site *blended* with this surrounding area, and whether or not the appeal proposals would *fit* into the visual harmony.

The strategy for the council officials was to argue not only that the surrounding area possessed visual harmony, but also that the appeal site was integral to this area:

C (4): ... the area still possesses a rural quality and charm which provides an attractive setting to the edge of the built up area of the City.... the meandering nature of the Brook, the abundance of trees, the character of the buildings scattered within it and the close knit historic form of the village. (W)

C (5): the application site makes an all important and positive contribution to the rural qualities and visual attractiveness of the area. (W)

The developers' strategy was also to accept that visual harmony existed in the surrounding area, but that the particular appeal site was separated both from surrounding area and from the category of visual harmony: [61]

D (2): Although the development lies on the edge of the valley of the Alphin Brook, it is clearly severed from this area by the elevated A30 dual carriageway. ... The proposals are in a locally disturbed landscape which no longer links up with the more attractive valley bottom to the north east, ... which have varied and undulating formations, but particularly with scattered but appreciative tree cover. (W)

While the previous extracts show that the category of visual harmony is at stake, no mention has been made of the term 'nature'. And, in order to expose how these are also using constructions of nature as passive visual harmony, it is necessary to look at the arguments over the impact of the appeal proposals.

In essence, the developers argue that the impact on visual harmony will be minimal because all the tipped waste will be hidden by series of carefully designed dams (called bunds) of earth which will hide the tipped waste and *blend* into the landscape. Implicit in their argument is the visual discord which would result from sighting of the tipped waste

and the visual harmony from the earth bunds:

*D (3):* During the period of landfilling it is acknowledged that the landfilling proposals will be visible within the landscape, but the method of bunding will conceal the unsightly tipping operations from all public viewpoints. The appearance of the bunds, which will be visible one at a time from a considerable range of views, will be difficult to discern in the landscape. (*W*)

The council officials alternatively argue that the appeal proposals will be evident, obvious and, by implication, unnatural. They argue this, not because they dispute that the bunds will hide the tipped waste, but because of the *visual discord* which the bunds would produce on the landscape. The specifics of the visual discord derive both from the *scale* and form of the proposals in relation to the existing landscape:

*C (6):* All his devices, to argue from his viewpoint, achieve a concealment or blend - we don't accept - they are all artificial imposed elements that are alien to the *natural* form that prevails there presently. (*W*)

*C (7):* Their configuration (re: bunds) was not particularly in sympathy with the surrounding countryside. ... Whenever you see the formation of earth bunds, it's an extremely [62] long time before the harsh angularity of these constructions is faintly softened to form a sort of blend with *natural nature* which is invariably curved and not rectilinear. (*W*)

The two previous extracts show the term 'nature' being used to refer to what a landscape looks like. In particular, they show natural landscapes to be composed of features which only include human development if they are not too big, not too angular and generally in sympathy with the existing character and charm of the landscape. And as texts D2, D3, C4, C5 share the same implied social relationships and grammatical forms as the extracts C6 and C7, it is interpreted that these former extracts were also using a construction of 'nature as passive visual harmony'.

#### *Nature as the visual harmony of activities*

The third discourse located in the text was named 'nature as visual harmony of activities'. Like the former discourse, constructions of this discourse also included metaphors of 'fit' and concepts of harmony, rhythm and balance. However, while grammatically similar to the previous discourse, this discourse of nature was recognized by the definition of nature in terms of the 'visual harmony of an environment's activities or uses'.

In terms of strategy, arguments using this construction surrounded whether the present activity of farming and the proposed activity of landfilling were natural uses. The developers' main use of this construction was to argue that the present use of the land was not natural, while that of the council officials was to argue that the present activity was a natural use while the proposed activity was not. In other words, as in the previous two constructions of nature, the developers' strategy was to separate the particular appeal site from the category of nature while the council officials' was to argue for its centrality.

In terms of the current use of farming, the two extracts below illustrate the difference between the developers and the council officials:

*C (8):* Many planning applications have been refused in the area for various reasons, notably that they were undesirable commercial intrusions into rural areas. ... The local area forms a central backdrop to Exeter and is flanked by normal agricultural users. (*W*)

[63]

*D (4):* The area of land, around and including the appeal site, comprises an area which is intensively farmed. (*W*)

The interpretation here is that a category distinction is being made between those activities which are defined as ‘rural’, ‘normal agricultural’ and ‘horticultural’ from activities defined as ‘intensive’ and ‘commercial’; and that the essence of the difference is that the former imply irregular and small-scale human intervention, while the latter imply regular and large-scale intervention.

The following extracts illustrate how this distinction is made between these two forms of activities in relation to the activity of landfilling. They show, in particular, the council officials’ argument that the landfilling proposals ‘are not like agricultural practices’ and the implicit agreement by the developers:

*D (5):* They (re: the proposed landfilling activities) involve engineering operations. I don’t know whether I would call them substantial, but yes, they are large. (*S*)

*C (9):* The site operations are not like agricultural practices, but more akin to road construction or quarry. (*W*)

Finally, the next extract shows how the category distinction can be made sense of in relation to a discourse of ‘nature as the visual harmony of activities’. In particular, one set of activities rely on nonhuman, seasonal forces while the other set of activities are constrained solely by human actions and decisions:

*C (10):* Vehicles coming to the site would also produce a regular and insensitive disturbance within the landscape which at present sees the passing of the seasons marked only by tractors and farming activities. ... The point about the ploughed fields is that it is a seasonal occurrence, and your earthworks will be undertaken in your statement on site when no other vehicles will be out. (*W*)

### *Nature as ecological balance*

The fourth and final discourse of nature located in the text was named ‘nature as ecological balance’. It was identified through concepts of harmony, diversity, sustainability and balance. However, what was crucial for identification was for the definition of nature to be made, not in visual terms, but in terms of *ecological impact*. The social significance of this construction was that all human activity could [64] not be separated from nature as all activities have ecological consequences; albeit some more

harmful and polluting than others.

Very little use was made of this construction in the inquiry as it related to the activity of landfill. Indeed, no mention was made by either the council officials or the developers within the public inquiry. Use of this construction was made however, by a community group, Friends of the Earth, in their argument against the general concept of landfill:

Landfill should also be used at the end of the recycling line. ... The long term costs of landfill are not mentioned. ... I therefore oppose the landfill site proposed as it is unnecessary, environmentally damaging, and an irresponsible waste of the county's resources. (*W*)

Importantly, while these points were not made by council officials within the public inquiry proceedings, they were made in subsequent interviews:

*C (11)*: So, you know, you try to look at waste in a different way; you try to get something out of it rather than forget it which is the landfill way. Because, once you have got a landfill site and you leave it there, there is nothing you can do with it ... so, it is very much a - bury it, and forget about it really, and don't go back to it. (*V*)

The interpretation that the aforementioned passages are using a construction of nature as ecological balance lies in their critical questioning of the activity of landfill in terms of its impact on resources and its polluting consequences (i.e. the fact that due to methane, leachate and subsidence one cannot use a landfill site productively for many years). The link between nature and the ecological consequences of human activity is made more explicit in the passage below:

*C (12)*: The philosophy is whether you want to preserve the environment you have got and make best use of it, or whether you want to keep polluting it, willy nilly, and suffer the consequences in future years. ... Whatever you do to the environment you have got to appreciate that we live in balance with *nature*. ... *Nature* has a way of fighting back. (*V*)

[65]

### **Arguments using different constructions of nature**

The previous section looked at four different constructions of nature and some of the arguments which occurred within each of these constructions. However, there were also texts which made use of different discourses of nature. These passages will be divided into one set of arguments which used different discourses which were both *competing* and in contradiction, and another set of texts in which it was ambiguous as to which discursive constructions were being used.

It was noted previously that while different discourses could be distinguished from each other in terms of what they implied *socially*, they also, at times, *shared similar or identical metaphors, similes, and other grammatical forms*. This possibility led to difficulties in determining which construction of nature was being used in texts. For

example, the following extracts illustrate this ambiguity:

*C (13):* The appeal site lies within a tract of *unspoilt* and scenically attractive area of open agricultural land. (*W*)

*C (14):* The currently *unspoilt* nature of the application site ... provides the rural backdrop which constitutes an invaluable visual amenity. (*W*)

In these passages, the ambiguity lies in the term ‘unspoilt’. If the term ‘unspoilt’ referred to an untouched state this would contradict the description of the site as ‘open agricultural’ and ‘rural’, terms which imply human usage. However, if the term ‘unspoilt’ refers to appropriate usage (e.g. not commercial or urban) then there would be no contradiction.

However, there also existed texts where the essence of the argument related to contesting one construction of nature with another. What is interesting in these cases is how this form of analysis makes sense of what otherwise appear uninteresting and banal pieces of text.

One such piece occurred in a piece of cross-examination between the developers and a council official. The piece concerned whether the area surrounding the appeal site could be legitimately described as ‘green hills’:

*C (15):* The site contributes to the integrity of the range of green hills to the west and south-west of the City.

*D (6):* It depends whether you refer to the ‘green hills’ as a planning area of ‘green hills’ or as ‘green hills’ as I understand them.

[66]

*C (16):* However, it is characterized in policy terms: the area comprises green gently undulating hills.

*D (7):* They are not always green. If I may finish, I would say that the colours change as I said in my statement, so they are not always green. They are multicoloured.

*C (17):* They are predominantly green, aren’t they?

*D (8):* Well, I accept they are predominantly green.

*C (18):* And pastureland tends to remain green throughout the year, does it not?

*D (9):* Pastureland does or can remain green. I suppose it can go yellow. (*S*)

My interpretation of this extract is that the developers and council officials are contesting the legitimacy of two discourses of nature. Specifically, the developers are contesting the official description of the area as ‘green hills’ which is taken for granted by the council officials. This description, using a discourse of nature as passive harmony, is deemed invalid to the developers as it does not take into account the seasonal changes that

currently take place in the area. In effect, the developers are contesting this construction with a construction of nature as the visual harmony of activities; a construction which in taking into account seasonal change would be more legitimate to the changes in the landscape that would result from the landfill proposals.

## **DISCOURSE CONSTRUCTION, ARGUMENTATIVE PROCESS AND OUTCOME**

This final section will look at the relationship between argumentative strategies used in the inquiry and in the Inspector's report - a report which in effect constituted the final outcome. It will be divided into two parts, the first looking at constraints to the argumentation in the inquiry, and the second looking at the effect of these constraints upon the outcome.

The major constraint to this inquiry concerned the existing planning legislation and its impact on what was interpreted to be legitimate argument. The specific effect of the legislation was to prioritize arguments using a construction of nature as passive harmony. This was achieved through the formal reasons given for refusal; reasons which stated:

the proposed development would be an intrusive element in the landscape and would adversely affect the visual quality of the [67] valley ... the proposed development would be detrimental to the range of hills comprised within the Area of Great Landscape Value. (*W*)

This was interpreted as using a discourse of 'nature as passive visual harmony', since it stressed the significance of the development in *purely visual* terms; since it implied a *passive relationship* between viewer and landscape; and finally, since it implied the unacceptability of changes which intruded into the landscape.

However, the legitimization of this construction of nature did not negate other arguments using other constructions being used in the inquiry. What it does signify, however, is that all the arguments outlined above using the other three constructions of nature had the function, not only to contest the acceptability of the proposals, but also to *contest the grounds for accepting the proposals*. The final part will analyse the official outcome in terms of the constructions of nature used by the inspector.

In the final report the inspector chose to accept the essence of the council officials' arguments and to turn down the appeal. In judging the proposals, he predominantly used arguments using constructions of nature as passive visual harmony. The next extract shows the inspector accepting the essence of the council officials' arguments in relation to visual harmony:

*I (I):* In my opinion the resulting change in the local scene would be significant and would detract from the present open rolling vista. The valley form as part of the backdrop would be lost and this part of the setting for the City would become more bland. (*W*)

However, the following extract shows the inspector also judging the impact of the proposals through a construction of nature as visual harmony of activities:

*I (2)*: In the shorter term the on-site activities, although partly screened, would be obvious from a number of points and while any noise would be hidden against the background of traffic, the activity level would be alien to this agricultural setting.  
(*W*)

The basis of this interpretation lies in the reference to the existing site in terms of the current activity of farming, and the significance of the proposed activity in terms of its 'alien activity level'. In [68] other words, the inspector is signifying the importance of the change of activities both in terms of their quality (i.e. the fact they would be 'obvious') and in terms of their quantity (the fact that 'the activity level would be alien'). The significance of these official reasons for refusal are twofold. First, it shows how arguments using constructions of 'nature as passive visual harmony', and 'nature as visual harmony of activities' were legitimate criteria for judging the proposals; and how arguments using constructions of 'nature as wilderness' or 'nature as ecological balance' were illegitimate *vis-à-vis* their absence. Second, it showed that while the wider social and institutional factors (e.g. the current planning legislation) limited and constrained the legitimacy of available arguments, the grounds for 'what was permitted to count' were not only contested within the inquiry, but to some extent changed.

## DISCUSSION

The significance of the discourse study relates both to existing research on the category of nature and to existing theory on rhetoric and discourse.

In relation to existing research on nature the discourse study is significant in its identification of four distinct discourses of nature. And, in identifying how different arguments within the public inquiry were based on quite different definitions of what nature was, the study is significant in challenging the assumption of a *pre-existing* realm of the natural.

Moreover, the discourse study is especially significant in relation to existing psychological research which currently predefines nature as *wilderness*. What the study showed was that while this construction existed and was used in arguments over the appeal site, not only did other constructions of nature exist, but it was these which were used in determining the outcome.

In particular, it was a discourse of nature as 'passive visual harmony' which was used in the interpretations of the planning policies, and that it was these along with arguments based on a construction of 'nature as harmony of activities' that determined the outcome. This finding shows that existing psychological research on nature is limited by ignoring the legitimacy of other discourses of nature.

In relation to existing theory and research on discourse and rhetoric, this study is relevant for a number of reasons. First, it is an empirical example of Billig's (1987) largely theoretical work on the process [69] of *argumentation*. In effect, it looks at the processes of argumentation over the category of nature in terms of a struggle between conflicting processes of particularization and generalization; i.e. the relationship between the particular appeal site and the particular appeal proposals to the general category of nature.

In relation to discourse theory, the study is significant in illustrating empirically a definition of discourse in terms of its implied *social relationships*. The analysis is not only an example of this theoretical approach, but also demonstrates its practical usefulness in relating different discursive constructions to a variety of uses, human activities and outlooks these legitimate.

In relation to both rhetoric and discourse theory, this study is also significant in illustrating how the processes of argumentation both *within* and *between* different discourses of nature had very real consequences on the shape of the physical environment - e.g. a case where words really did move mountains. And finally, it illustrates how these processes of argumentation were both constrained by, and determinant of; external sources of power in a framework of social relationships. In other words, arguments over nature could not be seen as free floating but constrained and limited by existing power structures of what was permitted to count.

These points can be seen as some of the benefits of the discourse analysis. However, there were also a number of limitations relating to both the theoretical approach and the operationalization of this particular discourse analysis.

One limitation of this analysis relates to the identification of examples of usages of different discourses of nature. The difficulty lay in the fact that often texts were interpreted as using a particular construction of nature when the term 'nature' was not made explicit. And, even when a rigorous coding system was worked out there were still a number of examples where it was still unclear whether a construction of nature was being used as opposed to a construction of something else.

The basis of this difficulty lay in the dominance of a discourse of nature as wilderness. This power can be illustrated in extracts below which occurred in interviews with participants of the inquiry when it was made explicit that the term 'nature' was in dispute:

*D (10):* Well, you see me smiling because er, any landscape in Britain. especially in southern lowland Britain is not natural at all; it's man-made. I mean, for example, that the valley had [70] naturally a small seasonal stream. ... So, to say it's natural - it's not natural. (*V*)

*C (19):* And the question still remains: what is a natural landscape? And we have not got natural landscapes. You know that as well as I do. (*V*)

*C (20):* There's very little natural vegetation left in this country; it's all been lost - it's biologically or ecologically called semi-natural in that it has been tampered with to a degree by man. (*V*)

From these extracts it became obvious that a discourse of nature as wilderness is singularly inappropriate as a construction to judge the appeal proposals since: (i) it doesn't distinguish between different types of human intervention; and (ii) the appeal site can in no way be accurately described as wilderness. Yet, it is a wilderness construction that is deployed when it was made explicit in subsequent interviews that the debate concerns nature. This aspect, I interpret, led to the major difficulty in the analysis: i.e. how to unravel usages of constructions of nature where those same arguments did not (or

deed could not as this would be a self-defeating strategy) make the term 'nature' explicit.

A second limitation concerned the problem of generality. While the discourse analysis showed a *variety* of constructions of nature used, and thereby the *availability* of the different constructions to the participants; it leaves aside the question of how general they are in current usage. Specifically, it leaves unanswered the question whether they are generally used across different cultures and contexts, or whether they are more limited in use to this particular culture and context.

And finally, it leaves aside the question of consequence. As instructed in this analysis, a discourse becomes identified in terms its social implications. In other words, one discourse implies particular sets of social relationship and uses, and another discourse others. And implicit in this argument is the logic that different discourses led to different consequences (e.g. different sets of power relationships produced by different psychological consequences). Yet, a discourse analysis as a methodology leaves unanswered the relationship between different discourses and the processes by which they legitimate different activities, outlooks and social relationships.

To conclude, these limitations are seen, not as unresolvable problems arising from this discourse analysis but as issues [71] brought to light via a discourse methodology. And, in order to further enquiry into our understanding of the category of nature, its different constructions and their consequences, new studies are required which will involve both the methodology of discourse analysis and its conjunction with other methods of inquiry.

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