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Discourse analysis

Introduction

The term 'discourse analysis' is mostly associated with developments in social psychology in the late 20th century (e.g. Potter & Wetherell, 1987). It gave rise to the area or sub-discipline now described as discursive psychology (see entry), but the original term is still widely used to refer to a research method. Discourse analysis is relevant to critical psychologists for its association with two significant challenges. The first is methodological and concerns, broadly, the status of talk data as evidence. The second is ontological and concerns the nature and site of phenomena which were conventionally considered internal to the person, including attitudes, emotions, memories and identities. Together and separately, these put in question many of psychology's established premises and claims.

Definition

The simplest definition of discourse is as some form of language use, such as talk or writing. The analysis of discourse may initially be technical, involving close examination of details, for example, of word use, grammar or other features, like pauses or overlaps in people's talk, possibly drawing on sociolinguistics and conversation analysis. Alternatively, discourse analysis may follow a more hermeneutic tradition like that associated with literature studies, involving the exploration of images and word associations. In either case, the discourse is of interest as a practice which is social, because it involves more than one person, for example, as speaker and hearer, writer and audience, or the parties to a conversation or other interaction, and because it is necessarily governed and shaped by shared language, conventions and expectations.

A second, somewhat different definition is that a discourse refers to an aggregate of meanings and conventions, such as the established language and ideas for talking about a topic or problem like illness. Because language and knowledge are inevitably broad-ranging, such discourses are discussed in the plural (e.g. cancer discourses, discourses of ill-health). An analysis following this definition is likely to look across sources for evidence of the discourse and its practical implications. Discourses are assumed to govern and constrain what can be said, and written or otherwise communicated, and hence understood, in a continuum from language use (discourse in the first definition) to society, linked to formal and informal institutions. Other forms of data may be incorporated in the analysis as evidence of the continuum.

It is worth noting a common misinterpretation of discourse analysis as being 'just about words', ignoring other meaningful practices and/or non-linguistic features of the world, such as bodies. A discourse analyst focuses on language use either as a particular, socially important and meaningful practice worthy of study in its own right or because language, as already noted, is part of a continuum of meanings which make up a social context, and also a means of accessing them. The misinterpretation perhaps follows from another feature of discourse analysis, that is, the shift of focus away from the language user or person. Talk or writing is not explained in terms of the thoughts, intentions, experience or personality of an individual. This point is discussed in more detail below.

Key words

Discourse, context, subject position, language, practice, discursive work, resource, dilemma, rhetoric, transcription

Traditional debates

Discourse analysis is a relatively unusual approach within psychology in that it privileges the social and rejects conceptualisations of the individual as an agentic actor. It is associated with theorisations of society and social contexts as pre-existing and shaping the lives and actions of the people within them. Although such a context is assumed to be contoured by power, it is envisaged as neither hierarchical or static; its nature is emergent, given by the ongoing flows of historical and cultural change and social interaction. The influence of context is therefore never wholly predictable or reducible to the discrete factors which are explored in the conventional cause-effect models of nomothetic scientific research. Discourse analysts explore situated phenomena and meanings rather than making the universal claims associated with science, and most would challenge the status of scientific findings as truth.

Discourse analysis was originally associated with a minimally conceptualised person, reduced for example to the 'subject position' given by a social context. Although some of the major theoretical sources for discourse analysis (notably, the work of Michel Foucault) are linked to determinism, psychologists who adopt discursive approaches have tended to sidestep the issue of agency, for instance, by declaring themselves 'agnostic' about the kind of awareness and intentional activity discussed by cognitive psychologists (and others), or else by theorising a social subject who, though produced by the social situation in which she or he is located, is also to some extent active and reflective. One strand of work in discursive psychology (see entry) has developed more complex theorisations of such a subject.

Methodologically, discourse analysis is firmly associated with qualitative, not quantitative approaches. Social contexts and social life are discussed and analysed in terms of situated meanings, including the accrued associations which are attached to roles and even objects, and the practices through which such meanings are established, co-constructed, contested and so on, including within interactions, especially conversations. Discourse analysis is therefore largely an interpretive approach and its findings are presented as situationally specific rather than universal. However, psychologists in the conversation analytic tradition claim a technical approach in which a participant's situated response can provide confirmation of an analyst's observation, thereby re-establishing findings as facts rather than interpretations.

Critical debates

A key tenet of discourse analysis is that talk data (since recorded and transcribed talk is probably its most common form of language data) is considered as talk and not as evidence of something else, such as what it purports to be about (for example, what it reports or describes) or of the thoughts or intentions or emotions of the speaker. This apparently simple point involves several significant challenges to established psychology theory and practice.

First, discourse analysis challenges a model of the person which is widespread in psychology, of a universal agentic 'container' individual, explainable in terms of internal processes and events which are the source of her or his talk and other actions. Talk is analysed in terms of its functions in context and its social sources, but not as evidence of personality or psyche or any other entity 'internal' to the individual speaker. (Perhaps unsurprisingly, subsequent work informed by discourse analysis has to some extent re-instated the individual, for example, in terms of 'personal order', Wetherell, 2003, 'local resources', Taylor, 2011, or with reference to psychodynamic processes and investment, Hollway and Jefferson, 2000).

A second challenge is that discourse analysis shifts the source of a social problem, like prejudice (see entry) or racism, from the pathological individual to society as a whole or to a particular context within it. Racist talk is analysed not as the intentional expression of one speaker's wrong ideas but as an exemplification of a society's everyday practices, such as accepted ways of talking about and representing others (the first definition of discourse above), and of the historically based understandings, versions of history and rationalisations

(the second meaning of discourse above) which shape such practices. Other phenomena are similarly studied as features of a wider social context constituted by established practices or commonsense knowledge. A speaker is of interest as a means of access to these features rather than as a biographically and psychologically unique individual.

A third challenge presented by discourse analysis concerns the status of researcher. Proponents of a technical analysis (e.g. Schegloff, 1997) would claim the conventional position of the researcher as a detached observer, noting participants' own interpretations of other people's discursive actions. However, even in this limited role, the researcher will inevitably be drawing on knowledge acquired as a member of the social context under study, if only to the extent of recognising its language and everyday practices. Discourse analysts closer to a Foucauldian or social constructionist tradition regard the researcher as an insider and reflexive interpreter, acknowledging her or his own position within the context under study (Wetherell, 1998; Wetherell, 2001).

For critical psychologists, discourse analysis is important for its emphasis on social context, and its explorations of how the workings of power are implicated with social processes, practices and knowledges (Edley, 2001). It avoids reductive explanations in terms of pathological individuals and admits of change and variation across sociohistoric circumstances. This has been particularly relevant to the study of persistent inequalities and the subtle and changing language use which may reinforce them (e.g. Wetherell & Potter, 1992).

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Online Resources

Discourse analysis: A bibliographic guide

<http://discourseanalysis.bokee.com/inc/20050120231555563641.pdf>

What is discourse analysis? <http://www.restore.ac.uk/lboro/resources/links/da.php>

LIST OF KEY WORDS

dilemma
discourse
discursive work
Language
Practice
resource
rhetoric
transcription

LIST OF NAMES MENTIONED

Billig, Michael
Edley, Nigel
Foucault, Michel
Hammersley, Martyn
Hollway, Wendy
Jefferson, Tony
Potter, Jonathan
Schegloff, Emmanuel
Taylor, Stephanie
Wetherell, Margaret