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Discourse Analysis: Examining Language Use in Context

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Abstract

Discourse analysis is paramount in the negotiation and construction of meaning of the social world. Discursive psychologists believe that truth is a discursive construction and that the world can be represented in an unlimited number of ways. This paper discusses the importance of context and culture in discursive interactions. The paper discusses knowledge as situated and contingent and thus an explanation of a psychological phenomenon should take into account the context or culture and circumstances of social interactions. The relevance of positioning and intertextuality in discursive interactions and meaning making processes are highlighted. It is further discussed that people's perception about a psychological phenomenon is not enduring and stable across situations and time; instead, it can change to suit the context and purpose of discourse. It is suggested that discourse analysts should systematically adduce reasons to justify and validate the value of their research claims.

Keywords

Discourse Analysis, Qualitative, Intertextuality, Positioning

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Discourse Analysis: Examining Language Use in Context

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Discourse analysis is paramount in the negotiation and construction of meaning of the social world. Discursive psychologists believe that truth is a discursive construction and that the world can be represented in an unlimited number of ways. This paper discusses the importance of context and culture in discursive interactions. The paper discusses knowledge as situated and contingent and thus an explanation of a psychological phenomenon should take into account the context or culture and circumstances of social interactions. The relevance of positioning and intertextuality in discursive interactions and meaning making processes are highlighted. It is further discussed that people's perception about a psychological phenomenon is not enduring and stable across situations and time; instead, it can change to suit the context and purpose of discourse. It is suggested that discourse analysts should systematically adduce reasons to justify and validate the value of their research claims. Keywords: Discourse Analysis, Qualitative, Intertextuality, Positioning

Traditionally, Psychologists were deeply immersed in a regimented methodological approach in the production of knowledge in which one variable was experimentally manipulated and its effect on the other variable closely observed and recorded. However, the trend has greatly shifted lately with researchers examining the performative and productive functions of language in contexts. Psychologists' turn to language gained prominence in the 1980s (Willig, 2008) as a challenge to the traditional psychology's reliance on cognitivism (Gergen, 1989). Discursive psychologists argue that people's account and the explanations they provide largely depends on the discursive contexts within which their views are produced (Willig, 2008). This paper discusses knowledge as situated and contingent and thus an explanation or interpretation of people's perception or attitude about a psychological phenomenon should take into account the context or culture and circumstances of social interactions.

Discourse is situated sequentially (Potter, 2003), in the sense that the primary context within which social interaction occurs comes first and largely shapes accounts and constructions of participants involved in discourse. It is contingent because of the variability of language use in different cultures and contexts. Discourse analysis provides a different way of theorizing language. It is more concerned with the analysis of texts and/or utterances within specific socio-cultural context and indicates a method of data analysis that can tell researchers about the discursive construction of a phenomenon (Willig, 2008).

Discourse analysts transcribe and analyze data gathered through open-ended interviews, focus group discussions, field observations and other means of data collection where talk is unconstrained by research protocols (Potter, 2003). Taylor (2001) loosely defines discourse analysis as "the close study of language in use." (p. 5). Primarily, discourse analysts espouse the principle that people construct versions of their social world through the instrumentality and functionality of language (Potter & Wetherell, 2001). Thus, discourse analysis involves a theoretical way of understanding the nature of psychological phenomena (Billig, 1997). Participants in social interaction strategically deploy discursive devices to

demonstrate their keenness and stake in conversations in pursuit of their interpersonal and social objectives (Willig, 2008).

Though some have doubted the critical and detailed study of texts by Psychologists (Kendall, 2007), some discourse analysts however believe that a pretty new style of socio-psychological research can be effectively erected on the foundations of “speech act theory” (Potter & Wetherell, 2001, p. 198). Speech-act theory is a concept of essentially linguistic and philosophy of language, which basically describes the performative function of language; that is, the use of language to perform action in a given social context. Thus, natural language and everyday language use in social contexts, for most qualitative researchers, can closely represent the psychological reality of human experiences than the hitherto regimented and formal abstract categories that psychology has adopted over the years (Polkinghorne, 1990). It has been argued in recent times that a new and transformative way of doing social psychology should be established on detailed, concrete and empirically driven analysis of actual discourse (Potter, 2012). Key principles that foreground the production and meaning making process in social interactions are discussed below.

Principle of Positioning in Discourse Analysis

In all discourse and conversational analyses, the concept of positioning has been an influential frame of thought for conceptualizing context and culture in social interactions. The theory of positioning, though introduced by Davies and Harre´ in 1990, was first used by Hollway in the Social Sciences in 1984 to analyze constructions of subjectivities in heterosexual relationships.

Positioning theory has been viewed as an interactionist concept which can be conceptualized as a discursive construction of personal narration (Tirado & Galvez, 2007) and the “appropriate expression with which to talk about the discursive production of diversity of selves” (Davies & Harre´, 1990, p. 47). In this view, people discursively construct their versions of social reality from their personally taken positions informed by discursive practices embedded in their socio-cultural environment. Discourses of people are grounded in subject positions so that when participants in a social interaction take up particular positions, they see and interpret the world from and through that chosen strategic position in terms of images, symbols, metaphors, values, story lines and the socio-cultural concepts available to them within a given discursive environment in which they are positioned (Davies & Harre´, 1990; Tirado & Galvez, 2007). In other words, there are a cluster of rights and duties available to and accessible by participants involved in social interactions in a given context which inevitably shape their public discourses in everyday conversations (Davies & Harre´, 1990; Harre´ & Moghaddam, 2003) .

It can be argued that people’s discourse and positioning in social interactions reflect, to a large extent, the available interpretative repertoires or discursive practices embedded in their given context, and can be understood by aggregating their belief systems, values and socio-cultural experiences over a period of time. It is therefore believed that a position taken by a participant in a social discourse and interpersonal interaction may be informed by the rights and duties available to him/her and thus, the assumed position limits the “repertoire of possible social acts available to the individual” (Slocum-Bradley, 2009, p. 88). In this view, positioning creates a space in which members participating in a conversation are assigned a series of specific positions (Tirado & Galvez, 2007). It is however conceded that sense of positioning in discourse is not static; it fluctuates and can easily be altered to suit the discourse environment, time space and circumstances.

In effect, positioning is negotiable and provides a researcher the opportunity and the possibility to question a positioned individual to confirm or deny an adopted position. Willig

(2008) draws a fine line between subject positions and roles in social interactions when she argues that subject positions “offer discursive locations from which to speak and act rather than prescribing a particular part to be acted out” (p. 116). She further indicates that “roles can be played without subjective identification whereas taken up subject position has direct implication for subjectivity” (p. 116). Indicatively, subject position allows participants in a social interaction to subjectively express their perceptions and attitudes about a phenomenon, which may reflect their individual and socio-cultural experiences of the discursive milieu.

Let it be reiterated here that an assumed position in discourse or social interactions is not static or enduring; it may change depending on situational factors or settings within which speakers are located. Hence, it is instructive to state that participants in social interactions do not take up positions or express their views about a psychological phenomenon completely freely without the constraints of historical and socio-cultural influences in the context from which they talk. Speakers in discourse position themselves by drawing on their experiences of culture, religion, beliefs and values to construct their versions of social reality. It is important that in the analysis of discourse of research participants, the discursive context within which people take positions is critically examined in order to have a fuller appreciation of what is said or not said about a given psychological phenomenon.

Concept of Intertextuality and Discourse Analysis

Another fundamental principle in discourse analysis is the concept of intertextuality. The concept of intertextuality, introduced by Julia Kristeva in 1986, holds that meaning and intelligibility in discourse and textual analysis are dependent on a network of prior and concurrent discourses and texts (Metapedia, January 2010). According to Bakhtin (1981), language is “heteroglossia,” that is, the interrelatedness and existence of language and discourses that involve multiple voices speaking through texts. A spoken or written language may depend on other background information within a given social context in which it is discursively deployed for its meaning. For Bakhtin, discourses or texts are dialogical, in the sense that meanings and interpretations of texts or utterances are relational. The production and the meaning of a language in social interactions are shaped by the socio-cultural experiences of speakers in their given contexts. It is further asserted by Bakhtin that there is no construction of meaning or language in discourse that is not influenced by certain social groups, discourses, conditions, classes or relationships.

The overriding focus of Bakhtin’s expressed position of language and discourse is the fact that language deployed in social discourse may lend itself to multiple interpretations and conceptualizations on the basis of socio-cultural contexts and intentions. Clearly, the principle of intertextuality is premised on the fact of meaning beyond “texts” in the strict sense of things written or spoken. Thus, the concept of intertextuality is the foundational activity behind interpreting cultural meaning in any significant social discourse and by which meaning discovery in a text is made possible (Metapedia, January 2010).

Fairclough (1992) defines intertextuality as “the property texts have of being full of snatches of other texts, which may be explicitly demarcated or merged in, and which the texts may assimilate, contradict, ironically echo, and so forth” (p. 84). For Fairclough, intertextuality accounts for the manner by which texts are produced relative to specific social and discursive practices in specific contexts; constantly bearing in mind the dynamic process of “recontextualization” and “reconceptualization” of different discourses. Thus, discourses or texts are constituted out of, and understood in relation to the historical and socio-cultural experiences of speakers in a particular environment.

Similarly, James (1986) captures intertextuality as that all written and spoken texts, signs or language emerge from a single network; what Vygotsky (1986) refers to as ‘the web

of meanings' (p. 182). To James, examining language intertextually (in context) means searching for traces, the bits and pieces of texts borrowed and sewn together by writers and speakers to generate new discourse. From the foregoing analysis, it is obvious that discourse in everyday interactions depends largely on the background for its meaning and interpretation. It is important that analysis of discourse of people should be grounded in the shared meaning provided by the discursive milieu because a "text is not an autonomous or unified object, but a set of relations with other texts" (Leitch, 1983, as cited in James, 1986, p. 35).

Rigorous examination of texts helps a researcher to conceptualize texts not as singular, unified and guaranteed productions, but rather, as emerging out of a historical and socio-cultural specific context which has certain inherent intentions (Li, 2009). The interweaving effect of language and discourse in context demands a painstaking analytical approach that pays much attention to what Li calls "textual and intertextual" characteristics of texts (p. 92). Thus, intertextuality can be conceptualized as a generative meaning-making process which allows culture to be viewed as a living process of meaning making (Metapedia, January 2010).

Graham summarizes the concept of intertextuality in the following words:

The fundamental concept of intertextuality is that no text, much as it might like to appear so, is original and unique in itself; rather it is a tissue of inevitable, and to an extent unwitting, references to and quotations from other texts. These in turn condition its meaning. (cited in Metapedia, January 2010, "Julia Kristeva's Description of Intertextuality," para. 4)

It is instructive that any analysis of spoken or written language produced in discursive interactions should take into consideration the broader view of texts in terms of meaning making and how texts may be attributable to other meanings held in the society or context within which discourse occurs.

Examining Language use in Context

The preoccupation of discourse analysts is to investigate how people, through the variability of language, represent versions of reality within discursive contexts and its implications for knowledge production. Discourse analysts contend that beliefs, attitudes, attributions and perceptions of people are not stable and enduring across contexts; rather, they are constructed in accordance with historical and socio-cultural contexts of discourse and interpersonal interaction. To fully understand the perceptions of people about a given psychological phenomenon, it is essential to understand how, within a given environment, people strategically draw on available discursive devices to negotiate and represent their reality of the phenomenon.

Discourses of research participants and how they position a given psychological phenomenon may speak volumes of their socio-cultural background. The beliefs and attitude of people about a psychological phenomenon may not be enduring but may be a function of their background information such as values, culture or religion. This suggests that, in the contextual analysis of language and the process of meaning making, the analysts ought to look for patterns within the discursive milieu. This is consistent with the theory of intertextuality which conceptualizes textual analysis as a function of a particular context or background. Taylor (2001) adequately asserts that the fourth possible and useful approach to discourse analysis is to search for patterns within much larger contexts, such as those referred to as "society" or "culture." This approach is vital for discourse analysis because it treats language as an important part of wider processes and activities in a given society.

For example, consider a homophobic who describes or categorizes homosexuality as “immoral” and “sacrilegious.” This person may not be taken up this position on homosexuality completely freely without the constraints of his/her historical and cultural context. The positioning of homosexuality in this respect, as “immoral and sacrilegious,” may be shaped by the experiences of religion, culture, traditions and social identities embedded in the larger society of the speaker, which serve as the building blocks for the construction of versions of reality. The positioning of the phenomenon of homosexuality within a given social context may be relational; it may be shaped by the conventional notions of right or wrong available to individual speakers in their environment.

Beliefs and perceptions of people about social phenomena, such as homosexuality, may be differently positioned or categorized across diverse societies depending on the socio-cultural orientations of those involved in the discourse; and thus, they can be better understood in terms of the discursive practices available to people in a particular context. This is the essence of the concept of positioning and intertextuality; that is, the immediacy of discourse, though specific to individual speakers, cannot be the sole context and consideration for the production and interpretation of language in social discourse.

The production of language and meaning making significantly depend on the context of language use and repertoires available to people involved in social discourse. As Taylor (2001) posits, values (such as beliefs) and associated philosophies or logics of society underlie language use and that one’s categorization of a phenomenon is implicated with the social consequences and effects of the classification. Stiles (2003), also acknowledges that events are unique in themselves because the meaning of events are shaped by both participants’ and observers’ cultural and personal histories and the sequence of preceding and succeeding events. Social discourse is therefore sequentially situated; the primary environment within which talk or social interaction occurs comes first and shapes what is said.

In effect, discourse analysts are able to determine whether a held perception of participants about a psychological phenomenon (such as homosexuality) is negative or positive when they consider what is normal or abnormal in a given society and context. Essentially, we are able to create and negotiate representations of the world and construct meanings in social discourse by first and foremost, examining the cultural background of discourses (principle of intertextuality) of those involved in a discourse in which they have a stake. People’s perceptions about a phenomenon are not a stable pre-existing internal state that they describe but vary and may be a function of the purpose, circumstance and context of discourse. It can accordingly be argued that the truth about a given phenomenon is not given by individual participants in a social discourse but through the lenses of their given society or context. This is because participants in a social interaction are both producers and products of culture within their social environment. It should be noted that when people state a belief or express an opinion, they are taking part in a purposeful conversation in which they all have a stake. In other words, to make sense of what people say, we need to take into account the social context within which they speak (Willig 2008). Indeed, acknowledging the relevance of social context of discourse produces a more interpretive understanding of ‘replication,’ an essential concept of scientific inquiry (Stiles, 2003).

Generally, the qualitative research approach concerns itself with the meanings and experiences of the “whole” person or local culture and context (Winter, 2000). Discourse analysts do not concentrate on internal psychological conditions, that are pre-existing and fixed, instead, they investigate how people flexibly deploy available discursive resources within their environment to create and negotiate representations of social reality (Marianne & Louise, 2002). From the view point of discourse analyst, given different purposes or different contexts, a very different “attitude” may be espoused. If people express certain attitude on one

occasion, it should not necessarily lead us to expect that the same attitude will be espoused on another; rather, there may be systematic variations in what they say (Potter & Wetherell, 2001). This casts doubt about the enduring homogenous nature of the supposed internal mental attitude of people (ibid.)

It is worth noting that discursive (qualitative) methodology of science is more exploratory and allows individuals to express their inner most feelings, beliefs or perceptions on an object of thought or a psychological phenomenon. Unlike the traditional attitude scale research method, which gauges perceptions in either “black” or “white,” discourse analysts actively peruse language in use and social interactions from all sides, always taking into consideration the significant influence of culture on people’s attitude about a phenomenon. As indicated earlier, the meaning making process conceptualizes culture as a living process. People’s discourses and texts emerge out of specific historical and socio-cultural contexts which embody certain inherent intentions (Fairclough, 1992).

Additionally, people in social interactions take different positions on a given phenomenon to either strategically disclaim certain attributes or extremely make formulations to justify a criticism (Potter & Wetherell, 2001; Willig, 2008), and these assumed positions are influenced by the socio-cultural experiences of the context in which the interactions occur. Thus, subject position allows participants in social discourse to construct their subjective experiences about a given psychological phenomenon. As a result, discourse analysts can also subjectively negotiate and represent speakers’ version of social reality to reflect the structure of language use in the context. Given the constructive and functional understanding of language, the authorship and construction of contextualized and situated knowledge is the sole preserve of a discourse analyst.

Put differently, discourse analysts are not regarded as spectators of research or an unfolding truth; instead, they are actively involved in the negotiation and construction of meaning. It should be noted that the researcher in qualitative paradigm is the instrument of credibility; that is, the effort and ability of the researcher to systematically and comprehensively provide account of the research process may validate the account of a particular research (Patton, 2001). In this view, a discourse analyst is always actively involved in the negotiations and representations of respondent’s reality of the world. A discourse analyst does not merely report people’s undistorted description of stable and enduring truth. Instead, a discourse researcher reflexively ascribes meanings to discursive devices or resources deployed by respondents in social interactions, always taking into account the context in which talk takes place. Discourse analysts believe that the detachment role of a researcher is not practicable and that analysts ought to reflexively act on the world such that the world will also act on the researcher (Taylor, 2001).

As Winter (2000) argues:

Regardless of the ethical implications of interpreting meaning from the observations of others, other than those that they would necessarily agree with, it is worth noting that an individual may often have no more “valid” interpretations of their own actions than another might make. (Interpretative validity, para. 1)

However, Taylor (2001) cautions that the influence of discursive researchers in negotiating and representing versions of reality is inevitably difficult to assess. To Taylor, the researcher is part of the social world in which the research is being conducted and that the researcher may bring some of his or her personal accounts to bear on the topic under investigation. While Taylor’s concern about a discourse analyst’s own presuppositions and its possible influence on research knowledge may be justifiable, discourse researchers reflexively search

for a pattern in talk as it occurs in a context and provide analysis on the basis of values, beliefs, ideals and the socio-cultural experiences embedded in a discourse environment. An essential part, if not the signature feature of discourse analysis, is its flexibility and reflexivity, where historical and socio-cultural experiences of both researchers and participants shape and direct data interpretation and analysis.

The position of both respondents and researchers in discourse analysis has implications for the construction and representation of social reality. One of the difficulties in writing about discourse work is that the terminologies available for describing it; namely, validity, reliability, hypothesis testing and so on; have evolved over the years to fit the requirements of quantitative research using experiment and survey (Potter, 2003). While Taylor (2001) cautions discourse analysts to be “self-aware” of their presuppositions and beliefs in their reflexivity, she notes that the researcher’s special interest and connections to the topic of research should not be viewed “negatively as bias but as a position to be acknowledged” (p. 17).

Researchers have thus, suggested that the concept of validity could be redefined to suit the circumstances of discourse analysis and to validate a qualitative research approach. For example, Potter and Wetherell (2001) call for validity to refer to the “coherence” and “fruitfulness” of research findings and the new areas of research interest raised in respondents orientation in the discursive context. It must be noted however, that the notion of validity is hard to associate with discourse analysis given the difficulty in pointing to externally agreed upon criteria that would serve as the basis for validating knowledge produced by discourse researchers.

It is important to stress that research should not necessarily be following privileged methods and procedures to count as scientific; rather, it should be able to address a research question and justify an answer. As Riessman (1993, cited in Potter & Wetherell, 2001) asserts, the validation of research cannot be limited to “neat rules or technical procedures” (p. 321). Riessman therefore suggests that validation should be reconceptualized in terms of “persuasion” and “correspondence,” that is, where researchers validate views of respondents by going back to confirm when in doubt. It is therefore important that the call by Riessman for inter-subjective consensus is taken into account in the analysis of social discourse and production of contextualized knowledge. This can be achieved by presenting a preliminary interpretation to interviewees for comments or feedback on the interview context. The research report can also be peer reviewed by presenting the data to other researchers for interpretation. For Kvale (1983), validity in qualitative research interview is the extent to which “the interviews investigate the meaning of the life-world themes of the interviewed, which they intend to investigate” (p. 191). In other words, as long as a discourse analyst is able to construct meanings to cover the themes and psychological phenomena around which an interview is conducted, the findings could be regarded as valid and scientific.

The analysis and construction of psychological phenomena may be subjective in terms of people’s assumed position in social discourses and in terms of the analyst’s interpretation of the discursive devices. Thus, the analysis of a phenomenon cannot be said to be a finality as the analyzed data can further be interpreted in respect of context and positions of other analysts. As noted by Kvale (1983), “an interpretation of meaning ends, when one has reached a ‘good gestalt,’ or the inner unity in the text, which is free of logical contradictions” (p. 186). Surely, meaning can never be permanently static because of the functionality and variability of language (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). As indicated earlier, the meaning of a social discourse is significantly shaped by a specific time space, context and circumstances of talk. It is therefore the position of discourse analysts that “the world is a ‘shifting’ and ‘negotiable’ place that cannot be understood or read, except through language and that since language is

constructive and functional, no one reading can be said to be ‘valid’ or ‘right’” (Willig, 2008, p. 108).

Conclusion

Discursive psychologists contend that our knowledge of the social world should not be treated as objective truth and that our knowledge and representation of the world are not reflections of a reality “out there;” rather they are products of our ways of constructing versions of the world through language (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1989).

People strategically draw on available interpretative repertoires to negotiate and construct meanings in social interaction. The discourse researcher also actively participates in the examination, negotiation and representation of people’s beliefs, attitudes and values about a psychological phenomenon within a historical and socio-cultural context. Thus, discourse analysts and other qualitative researchers do not operate with “variables” that are defined by the researcher before the commencement of the research process; instead, they are particularly concerned with meanings attributed to a psychological phenomenon by respondents themselves. To them, “using preconceived ‘variables’ would preclude the identification of respondents’ own ways of making sense of the phenomenon under investigation” (Willig, 2008, pp. 8-9).

Research should not be considered as selecting right ingredients (a representative sample, a standardized measurement, appropriate statistical test) and administering them in the right order and anticipating a valid and worked experiment; rather, it should be conceptualized as a means of addressing a research question and justifying an answer (Willig, 2008). Discursive researchers regard the production and explanation of a psychological phenomenon as an adventurous and exploratory enterprise that should always take into account the context and circumstances of social interactions. Discourse analysts should reflexively adduce reasons for their interpretations and categorizations throughout the process of research, from conception to publication, in order to validate their knowledge claim and enhance a possible extrapolation of findings to similar settings.

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