How to conduct a psychological discourse analysis

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview to conducting discourse analysis (DA) as used in Discursive Psychology. The purpose of this paper is to fill the gap left by there being a lack of useful accounts of how to conduct and write up this type of discourse analysis. It begins by outlining the discursive psychological approach and its claim that analysts should focus on what is accomplished in talk, rather than addressing what this talk may tell us about people's cognitions. Following this theoretical introduction there is a step by step guide to conducting discourse analysis. This eight-point guide covers 1) deciding on an appropriate question for discourse analysis, 2) picking appropriate data sources for analysis, 3) generating a corpus, 4) transcribing the data, 5) preliminary reading - searching for the action orientation, 6) generating results - discursive devices and rhetorical/interactional strategies, 7) building a case to support the findings, and finally, 8) report writing.

Key words: Discourse Analysis; Discursive Psychology; Guide; Qualitative Methodology

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide a clear introduction to the psychological research method called discourse analysis. The paper will begin with an explanation of this specific version of discourse analysis and its association with the psychological theory called Discursive Psychology (DP). Following that a step by step guide to conducting discourse analysis is offered. Throughout the paper examples of good practice in published discourse analysis, and further sources of information for those interested in the method, are presented.

This guide is intended for researchers and students who are new to the discursive psychological method. While many qualitative research methods textbooks (e.g. Lyons and Coyle 2007; Forrester 2010; Silverman 2011) and some general methods texts (e.g. Coolican 2009) contain chapters on how to do discourse analysis, there are few attempts at providing a clear overview of the method in a way that compares with the treatment/discussion of other qualitative methods (such as IPA, e.g. Smith et al. 2009; and Thematic Analysis, e.g. Braun and Clarke 2006). While there are explanations of what DP is about (e.g. Edwards and Potter 1992) and why it is such a beneficial method (e.g. Augoustinos and Every 2007), there is no established 'how to'

key text or step-by-step procedure for discourse analysis (although Wiggins and Potter 2007, recommend some steps). This is much to the detriment of the usage of the method, making the method inaccessible, especially amongst undergraduates and those new to it to the extent that Harper et al. (2008: 193) refer to the 'mystifications of discourse analysis' and state that

> Of all qualitative approaches, DA is probably one of the most complex to learn. In attempts to get to grips with the field of discourse studies, students read a wide variety of material, but many, especially in the early stages of their research, find the literature confusing. Some also find the absence of discussion about how discourse analysts actually conduct an analysis both surprising and mystifying.

While these authors accept that there are a range of introductory texts, such as those mentioned above, they also claim that these can be overly general and that there remains a lack of useful accounts of how to conduct and write up a discourse analysis. The purpose of this paper therefore is to fill that gap.

1.1. Discursive Psychology - The Framework of Discourse Analysis

Potter (1996: 130) described discursive psychology as a paradigm, stating that it is 'a whole perspective on social life and research into it'. Discursive Psychology (Edwards and Potter 1992) is a psychological theory that is critical of the way in which cognition is understood in psychology. While DP does not reject the existence of cognition, it does claim that psychologists cannot accurately *access* what people 'really think' as people are always involved in some kind of social interaction when they speak. As a result of this, discursive psychologists claim that what can be presented as an accurate display of cognition (such as 'I saw *x*' or 'I felt *y*') is actually somebody *doing* something in that interaction. A simple example of this may be that a speaker's utterance 'it's wet outside' may be doing more than simply reporting on a cognition; in this case it could be performing the social act of requesting a lift. By pointing to the uncomfortable weather conditions, a speaker may indirectly be 'requesting' to be driven in the addressee's car if the context allows for that indirect speech act to be performed. If someone were then to respond to the first speaker by saying 'it is wet, would you like a lift?' it could clearly be shown that the initial statement is interpreted (or in DP terminology 'oriented to') by the second speaker as a request. By focussing on how speakers respond (or orient) to one another, claims about how what speakers are doing with their talk can be supported with evidence, with the evidence taking the form of how initial utterances are responded to.

Discursive psychologists have regularly demonstrated that people's attitudes will vary according to the social situation that they are in (Potter and Wetherell 1987). While this variation may be problematic for psychologists attempting to access 'accurate' cognitions, this variation is to be expected in DP. In fact, discursive psychologists have argued that the apparent stability of attitudes in psychological research can be explained as a result of the methods that are used (such as attitude scales) which systematically reduce the opportunity for this normal variation to take place (Speer and Potter 2000). Another criticism of attempting to uncover 'attitudes' comes from the use of denials in talk (which discursive psychologists call 'disclaimers', Billig et al.

1988) in which people may deny that they are saying something that could be heard as an example of what they are denying (a classic example of this is 'I'm not racist, but' followed by something that may be seen as racist). In such a case it is difficult to determine whether or not the speaker is 'really' racist.

To illustrate the DP position, Edwards and Potter (1992) proposed the 'Discourse Action Model'. The first point of this model is that in DP 'the focus is on action, not cognition' (Edwards and Potter 1992: 154) and what is *accomplished* by people's talk rather than their thoughts and perceptions. This is a key tenet of discursive psychology and a radical shift away from dominant approaches in psychology as well as other qualitative methods.

2. *How to Conduct a DP Discourse Analysis*

The purpose of this brief introduction to DP was to illustrate the theory (and paradigm) that this approach to discourse analysis is used for. This is important as DP determines the type(s) of questions that discourse analysis can be used to address. At all points throughout a DP discourse analysis the analyst should make sure that they focus on the action orientation of the text being analysed. The outcome of the analysis must comment on what is being accomplished in the text.

The next part of this paper outlines a suggested step by step guide for conducting a DP discourse analysis. It is worth noting that Potter and Wetherell (1987: 168) point out that doing discourse analysis is 'like riding a bicycle', that 'it is not a case of stating, first you do this and then you do that' (1987: 168) and that 'there is no analytic method' (1987: 169). However, they do not do this to be difficult or to make analysis appear mysterious; they say this because conducting a discourse analysis is a difficult thing to explain. Therefore, this step by step guide must be seen as just that - a guide - with suggestions to follow to conduct a discourse analysis. While this guide is aimed at providing a useful starting point for novices, the best way to become familiar with, and successful at, discourse analysis is to throw yourself into the data and practice.

The stages of discourse analysis are:

1. Deciding on an appropriate question for discourse analysis
2. Picking appropriate data sources for analysis
3. Generating a corpus
4. Transcribing the data
5. Preliminary reading of the data - Searching for the action orientation
6. Generating results - Discursive devices and Rhetorical/Interactional strategies
7. Building a case to support the findings
8. Report writing

Each of these points will now be addressed in turn.

2.1. Deciding on an Appropriate Question for Discourse Analysis

This step may appear obvious, but this is the stage where many novices can fail to make sure that their question, and subsequent analysis, match discursive psychological theory. Any attempt at this point to try to find out 'what speakers think' about, or 'what speakers' attitudes are' about a topic cannot be addressed by DP discourse analysis. Instead, a suitable questions could be something like 'how do people justify *x*?', 'how do people argue for *y*?', or 'how do people accomplish *z*?'

Some good examples of questions for discursive projects include: 'What is the writing and talk of 'ordinary', 'everyday' people relating to 'asylum-seekers' being used to do?' (Lynn and Lea 2003: 430); how do 'children interpret and construct bullying in the peer group'? (Teräsahjo and Salmivalli 2003: 136) and what is the 'precise nature of the 'myths', 'stereotypes', 'discourses' and 'practices' discussed in the heterosexism literature, and how they are constituted in talk and action'? (Speer and Potter 2000: 547). Lea and Auburn's (2001: 14) analysis of the talk of a convicted rapist 'concentrates on the practical ideologies on which the offender draws in order to describe and explain his actions'; in a similar vein, Seymour-Smith, Wetherell and Phoenix (2002: 254) addressed the

> ways in which health care professionals (doctors and nurses working in general practice settings) represent and make sense of their male patients. Using discourse analysis, [they] examine how this group constructs masculinity and investigate their accounts and versions of what 'men are like.

These are examples of topics to which discourse analysis can be applied, as long as the focus of the inquiry is on some kind of action orientation.

Before moving on to sources of data, there are some potential problems with choosing topics for analysis that need to be addressed. While discourse analysis can be used to effectively critique problematic patterns of speech (as is the case in the examples stated above) discourse analysis can also be used to support speakers by understanding the arguments they make. This is the case in Clarke and Kitzinger's (2004) analysis of talk by gay and lesbian parents about their right to adoption and Leudar et al.'s (2008) analysis of refugees' attempts at resisting the negative arguments that are made about them. As with all qualitative methods, discourse analysis is also inappropriate for trying to look for differences between groups. Although what exactly is meant by describing a specific group becomes something worthy of analysing for what this description may accomplish. It is also inappropriate for trying to determine some kind of causation.

2.2. Picking Appropriate Sources of Data

As discourse analysis is concerned with what is accomplished in interaction, the most appropriate sources of data are those that contain some kind of interaction. This may be different from other qualitative methods as it means that conversations rather than stand-alone texts are preferable (although also acceptable). This nevertheless means that a wide range of data can be used to conduct discourse analyses including (but by no means limited to) mundane conversations (e.g. Stokoe and Edwards 2006) media data, (including

televised discussion programmes, e.g. Goodman 2010) and a range of 'institutional talk' (e.g. Lea and Auburn 2001 on the talk of convicted offenders).

There is debate within DP over whether or not data should be generated (for example through interviews and focus groups) for the purpose of discourse analysis (Goodman and Speer 2015). Potter (1997: 150) defines such data as 'contrived' and claims it is 'subject to powerful expectations about social science research fielded by participants; and there are particular difficulties in extrapolating from interview talk to activities in other settings' and instead favours 'naturally occurring talk' (1997: 148) which is data that has not been influenced in any way by the researcher. The examples listed in the previous paragraph would all meet this standard. However, Speer (2002) has argued that data cannot clearly be split into these two types ('naturally occurring' and 'contrived'). Speer claims that all situations can to some extent be seen as contrived *and* natural. Any institutional data can be viewed as contrived, equally, all data is also natural as it will involve real people speaking in real social situations, who will be 'naturally' generating action orientated talk. This is true even if that social situation has been constructed/created for the sake of research. Those who do not have a problem with, or who value, 'contrived' data may well generate data for analysis by conducting interviews (e.g. Leudar et al. 2008) and/or focus groups (e.g. Goodman and Burke 2010). There is no right or wrong response to this debate, just as long as the focus is on the interaction in the data, although it is good practice to (briefly) explain why the chosen approach has been used.

2.3. Generating a corpus

Once the sources of data have been decided upon, the next stage is to generate a corpus of data. The corpus is the collection of all the appropriate data that will be analysed. Not all of the corpus will make it in to the final report, but it is necessary to look at a wide range of data to base the analysis on. There is no set size for a data corpus, however, the size of the corpus needs to be appropriate for the size of a project. While a large amount of data may sound impressive, discourse analysis is also very time consuming so it is important not to become 'swamped' with too much data. Instead, the analyst should aim for an appropriate amount of data that is determined by the scope of the project, the type of data being used and the amount of available data. Published reports range from inclusion of a single case study (for example using one internet discussion forum or one television programme) through to hundreds of hours of data. Decisions about data should therefore be made according to the research aims, with examples from published reports being Lynn and Lea (2003) collecting over 2000 newspaper reports about asylum seeking over a ten-month period, Speer and Potter (2000) drawing their analysis from over 600 pages of data that had been transcribed, and Wetherell and Potter (1992) conducted 82 interviews in their seminal 1992 study of race talk. As with the sources of data it is good practice to explain the criteria for inclusion of data in the corpus; indeed, having a clear rationale for this can be more important than the amount of data collected.

The criteria for including data in a corpus will depend upon the research question, so again it is important to be clear about exactly why particular data

has been included for analysis. It may be that the analyst is interested in a particular controversial topic, in which case all news features relating to that topic over a period that it was prominent in the media could be selected, or it may be that interviews or focus groups where a particular topic is debated, is chosen.

2.4. Transcribing the data

This can be one of the most time-consuming parts of the analysis. It is sometimes suggested that approximately ten minutes need to be allowed to analyse one minute's worth of talk. While this task may seem to be laborious, it is useful as it is an extremely good way of becoming familiar with the data, which means that the early stages of the analysis are being conducted throughout the transcription process. One advantage of using internet data is that it does not require transcription (although the disadvantage of this is that the benefits of becoming familiar with the data are lost).

There are different levels of detail that a transcription can include. The most detailed, which can be seen as something of a 'gold standard' is that used by conversation analysts which is called the Jeffersonian convention, named after the conversation analyst Gail Jefferson. Details of these conventions are outlined by Atkinson and Hertiage (1984: ix-xvi). This level of transcription has the advantage of providing the most information about the talk being transcribed (such as length of pauses, emphasis, loudness of speech, intonation and overlapping talk) but also has the disadvantage of being the most time consuming to transcribe and is also quite difficult to read for those not familiar with it. A transcription along these lines may also include more detail than is necessary.

Some analysts may choose not to use the Jeffersonian detailed transcription method, which has the advantage of being easier to transcribe and also more accessible to readers, but has the disadvantage of losing potentially important meaning from the talk. Some analysts opt for a middle ground considered a 'simplified version' (Clarke et al. 2004) of the Jeffersonian approach which contains some of the detail while remaining more accessible for readers. Once more there is no right or wrong approach here, instead the analyst should choose the most appropriate approach for the current research project and explain why. All transcripts should be line numbered so that the analyst can refer to specific parts of the data in the analysis.

2.5. Preliminary reading - Searching for the action orientation

As with all types of qualitative analysis, it is necessary to read and re-read the data until the analyst becomes familiar with it. There is no short cut to this time-consuming part of the analysis, nor is there one correct way to go about it. As this is discursive analysis what an analyst will be looking for at this stage is what is being accomplished in the data - that is the *action orientation* of the text. Exactly what to look out for at this stage will depend on the specific research question being addressed. It is worth noting that there are likely to be a whole range of action orientations being displayed in any data; this is to be expected, so it is important that the analyst focuses only on what is relevant to the research question at hand.

At this early stage of analysis, the analyst may want to note down any initial thoughts about the data. It may be a good idea to copy and paste any relevant and interesting aspects of the data - which will become the extracts - into another file.

2.6. Generating results - Discursive devices and Rhetorical / Interactional strategies

By this point the analyst should have a good idea of what interesting action orientations seem to be occurring in the data so it is now necessary to begin generating appropriate outcomes for a discursive analysis. While there is, again, no exact set way of doing this, there are a number or types of findings that are suitable for discourse analysis. These are called 'discursive devices' and may also be referred to as 'rhetorical strategies', 'interactional resources' or 'rhetorical resources'. These are ways of making arguments which may achieve (or can be seen at least as attempting to achieve) some kind of action orientation, that *accomplishes* something in the interaction. There is a wide variety of these devices/strategies that can be identified in data. These may be strategies that have been identified in previous analyses or ones that appear to be new and/or unique to the specific data and research question.

Examples of the range of strategies that discourse analysts identify include Lynn and Lea's (2003) findings (in relation to their question regarding what talk about asylum seekers is designed to do) that *asylum seekers are portrayed as consisting of two distinct types* ('bogus' and 'genuine'). This strategy is shown to cast doubt on the legitimacy of all asylum seekers and is used to argue against asylum seekers' rights while presenting the writer as reasonable. Similarly, Speer and Potter's (2000) analysis of talk about homosexuality showed speakers attempting to *deny prejudice* and displaying a lack of understanding of the subject; both strategies were designed to present the speaker in a positive light. Another example of this kind of device is the use of *'honest phrases'* (Edwards and Fasulo 2006) such as 'to be honest' and 'actually' which can be used to make the speaker appear to be honest when engaging in potentially in controversial talk.

2.6.1. Interpretative repertoires

As well as these types of strategies, there are some specific types of strategies that some analysts, and especially those who identify as more critical discursive psychologist (such as Wetherell and Edley 1999 and Lynn and Lea 2003) rather than those who identify more with the recent work of analysts such as Edwards (e.g. Edwards and Fasulo 2006) and Potter (e.g. Potter and Hepburn 2010) include what are called 'interpretative repertoires', 'ideological dilemmas' and 'subject positions'. Interpretative repertoires (Potter[1] and Wetherell 1987) can be described as 'a recognizable routine of arguments, descriptions and evaluations found in people's talk often distinguished by familiar clichés, anecdotes and tropes ... 'what everyone knows" (Seymour-Smith et al. 2002: 255). This means that they are 'out there' concepts that can be drawn upon in people's arguments to help strengthen and make them persuasive. Repertoires can therefore be identified in talk and drawing upon these can be demonstrated to be performing actions. As can be seen in the

following examples, these actions can include advocating for gay and lesbian rights, accounting for bullying and doing prejudice towards asylum seekers.

Repertoires like this include Clarke and Kitzinger's (2004) finding that gay/lesbian parents draw upon a repertoire that they called 'love makes a family' in which speakers attempted to normalise their (less common, homosexual) family by drawing on the common idea that love is important in family (rather than the sexuality of the parents in this case). Terasahjo and Salivalli (2003) in their study of children talking about bullying identified the use of (amongst others) the repertoire of '*bullying as harassment*'; the easily recognised ideas that bullying is problematic. When looking at the ways in which health care professionals represent male patients Seymour-Smith et al. (2002) showed how the 'common sense' notion that men do not like talking about emotions was drawn upon.

However, it is rarely the case that only one interpretative repertoire is in use; instead a range of contradictory repertoires can often be found, sometimes in direct opposition with one another. This is to be expected, as discursive psychologists are interested in, and would expect to find, variation. Therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that Clarke and Kitzinger (2004) identified an additional repertoire which drew on the idea that heterosexual relationships are normal and natural, while homosexual relationships were presented as not so. Terasahjo and Salivalli (2003) identified alternative repertoires where bullying was presented as justifiable because the victims were often 'weird students' who did not behave in acceptable ways and where bullying was seen as simply children playing. Goodman (2007) identified two competing repertoires where asylum seeking families were presented as 'loving families' (in a similar way to the repertoire Clarke and Kitzinger 2004 identified) but also as animalistic and lacking love. In line with the discursive psychological approach to context and variation, analysts should look to identify why a particular strategy is being used at any one time and should also identify occasions where different (and possibly even contradictory) repertories are used by the same speaker to achieve different interactional goals.

2.6.2. Ideological dilemmas

This variation in the use of repertoires leads to the next phenomenon that analysts may be interested in: ideological dilemmas. Ideological dilemmas occur when people attempt to negotiate competing ideologies, often in the form of competing interpretative repertoires. One example of this is that even the directly opposed repertoires of asylum seeking families being 'loving families' and 'animalistic' were both drawn upon and negotiated, so that both were presented as simultaneously acceptable, in one extract in Goodman's (2007) analysis. Ideological dilemmas can also be identified when speakers use disclaimers; they have commonly been shown to be used when people make claims that could be heard as prejudicial (e.g. Billig et al. 1988). Ideological dilemmas can also highlight any competing ideologies that appear to be present in the data. For example, Dixon et al. (2006: 190-191) show how there is an ideological dilemma over the limits of what is deemed to be acceptable behaviour regarding drinking in public spaces with the spaces being presented as both areas for both 'public order' and 'playful deviance'.

2.6.3. Subject positions and identity

Another feature of talk that discourse analysts may look for is that of 'subject positions'. This relates to how speakers (and writers) construct themselves and others in discourse. Discursive psychological theory moves away from viewing identities as something fixed and stable within an individual and instead 'allows for an analysis of 'when' and 'how' identities are invoked and constructed in conversation' (Abell and Stokoe 2001: 418). This means that attention can be paid to the ways in which speakers construct varying identities, and to what end. For example, Stokoe (2003) showed how women drew upon the identity of 'mother' to defend against accusations of being a noisy neighbour. It is not just individual identities that are 'positioned' in discourse, but also group identities. Goodman and Speer (2007) have shown how there are ongoing arguments about what is meant by the term 'asylum seeker' as how they are positioned can determine how they should be treated. They show how opponents of asylum seeking attempt to re-categorise asylum seekers as 'illegal immigrants' who do not deserve to be in the UK.

2.7. Building a case to support the findings

By this point in the analysis the researcher should have identified a number of discursive and rhetorical strategies that address the chosen research question. It is likely that there are now a number of examples of these strategies; most likely too many to be included in any report. Therefore, it is now time to select all the examples of the chosen strategy (or strategies). The analyst may find it best to copy and paste extracts (examples from the transcript) into a new document under separate headings that address each of the strategies identified.

It is not enough, however, to simply present a collection of extracts that all contain a strategy that the analyst has identified. Instead the analyst will need to pick the extracts that best illustrate the strategy being discussed and then describe them in detail. Each extract requires a description of the action orientation of what is being said in the talk, it is not enough to simply describe what is being said. A useful trick to help make sure that the action is being addressed is to use verbs in the description (e.g. 'here the speaker is *accusing* someone of x by *presenting* y as z'). As well as commenting on the actions being accomplished in a particular extract, it is also good practice in discourse analysis reports to refer to existing discourse analytic work that has identified similar strategies that have been used, perhaps to similar effect. This does not mean that the findings are not unique, as similar discursive devices can be used in a range of situations (examples of this could be the use of a disclaimers, delicacy, 'three-part lists', or drawing on interpretative repertoires) although this may also be used to suggest that the particular strategy can be generalised to show that it performs similar actions (see Goodman 2008). This does mean that to produce an especially thorough analysis the analyst will need to be familiar with a good range of discursive research into the area that they are researching.

There is no space in this paper to demonstrate fully how such a case should be built, and instead readers are encouraged to look at a range of examples of discourse analyses (including, but not limited to, those referenced here).

2.8. Report writing

The final stage of any qualitative analysis is the write up. A discourse analysis write-up will share many features with any other psychological reports: it will begin with an abstract (that should the written last), have an introduction section that provides context for the topic area, and a rationale for the research question (stage one; this may well require an introduction to DP and its critique of the cognitive approach to provide context for the research question). It is not the case that the literature review can only address discursive research, although it will almost certainly be necessary to refer to some. Next comes the method section which should include information about the specific type of discourse analysis used; data selection (stage two) and collection (stage three); how the data was transcribed (stage four) and how the strategies were identified (stages five and six).

The next section contains the results. By the time that stage seven has been completed there should already be the beginning of a results section. However, to complete the analysis, it should begin with a brief overview of the findings being discussed. (There is no correct number of strategies to cover in one report, as reports vary from discussing one in detail (e.g. Edwards and Fasulo 2006) to looking at three or four connected strategies (e.g. Lynn and Lea 2003). Then each section of analysis should be addressed in turn, with each having a brief introduction and a selection of extracts with a description of the action orientation(s) they contain to illustrate the findings. There should then be a brief summary and/or conclusion for each section.

The final section of a discourse analysis report is the discussion which, like any other psychological paper, should include a brief overview of the findings; implications for the literature (both discursive and non-discursive); practical implications; limitations and suggestions for future research.

3. *Concluding Remarks – High Quality Analysis*

This paper is intended to provide a guide for conducting a discourse analysis. As should have become apparent throughout, however, is that to conduct a good DP discourse analysis will require a lot of time at all stages and a detailed and focused description of the action(s) that are performed by the strategies identified: it is a focus on action that makes for a good analysis. Other features of a high-quality analysis include a good selection of extracts, drawn from an appropriate corpus of data and a good demonstration of familiarity with related and relevant discursive strategies. This requires a large amount of reading of the discursive psychological literature. Nevertheless, discourse analytic findings are often particularly insightful and the analytic process, while lengthy, can be very enjoyable.

Notes

1   It is worth noting that Potter has moved somewhat from his earlier position and is now unlikely to use interpretative repertories in his own work, while continuing to be cited for developing the literature on them.

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