

ANMELDELSE

What is this thing called reality anyway?

Potter, J. & Wetherell, M. (1987). *Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behaviour*. London: SAGE.

Anmeldt af: Juha Suoranta, Senior Assistant, Faculty of Education, University of Lapland, Finland.

Discourse analysis has become topical concurrently in a number of different disciplines. There are many different ways to understand and to define the term. Developments are occurring in psychology, sociology, linguistics, anthropology, literary studies, philosophy, media and communication studies.

Potter and Wetherell state that their discourse analysis represents a radical new perspective in social psychology. Yet, from a more general point of view, the basic assumptions of their approach, as well that of all others, can be traced to the linguistic turn in philosophy (which is, as we all know, the name of the book edited by Richard Rorty in the late sixties) and even to later Wittgenstein.

Not only is discourse analysis a complicated term with many faces but the term discourse itself is a tricky one. The authors' solution is to use discourse in its most open sense to cover all forms of spoken interaction and all kinds of written texts. This decision makes certain ideas of their discourse analysis applicable in related disciplines, for example in educational research.

Since its publication Potter and Wetherell's book has attracted much attention in different branches of the human (and natural) sciences. One of the reasons for this attention is the basic idea of the book, i.e. the importance of all kinds of language or discourse in constructing social reality. To some realists this assumption seems to lead to an epistemological relativism that denies the world out there. Furthermore, an emphasis on language in human sciences is said to be futile because it is a self-refuting philosophical position.

In any event, the authors make a distinction between a realistic descriptive model of language and a constructivistic model of language use. In the former position, it is assumed that discourses and texts are direct pathways to actions, beliefs and attitudes; it is further supposed that language is a kind of a mirror of nature. The latter position, which authors prefer, can be summarized as follows:

- * language use has variety of functions and consequences;
- * language is constructive and constructed at the same time;
- * the same event can be described in many different ways;
- * there is, thus, considerable variation in accounts;
- * there is not any reliable way to distinguish literal accounts from mere rhetoric and illusion;
- * and therefore language use itself in all its variation should become the central topic of social psychological study.

The book is divided into an introduction and nine chapters. Its structure is traditional but as such didactically clear. In the introduction, the

authors present three examples designed to give a general idea of what discourse analysis is. In the following chapter they describe the theoretical foundations of their approach: linguistic philosophy, ethnomethodology and semiotics.

After describing the theoretical roots of their discourse analysis, the authors move to the traditional areas and substance of social psychology. It can be said that in the six following chapters they more or less deconstruct the conventional topics of social psychology though they emphasize that they do not expect all researchers in social psychology to change their tune from experimentation to discourse analysis. In chapters two through seven, they attack the study of attitudes, identification of rules, images of the self, social categories as well as social representations.

When tackling the traditional study of attitudes, Potter & Wetherell make some important methodological observations concerning the use of qualitative methods, particularly qualitative data analysis. What they maintain is that when qualitative methods are used, there is a danger of ignoring variability in informants' discourse. Selective reading appears in two versions: reification or ironization. The former means that words referring to some phenomenon actually are treated as evidence of the existence of this phenomenon or mirrors which reflect the phenomenon. The latter is the reverse, referring to the process whereby peoples' descriptions are treated simply as deceptions or as having another perhaps some hidden purpose beyond their overt meaning.

In addition to selective reading there are two more misreadings that can occur when playing social psychology. One is restriction, the other gross coding. In both of them, the variability of participants' discourse is wasted. Either subjects are prevented from using their language (experiments) or their speech is coded using such broad categories that all that is left is consistency, not the natural contextual variability of discourse.

Overall, Discourse and Social Psychology is an exciting mix of both the substantial questions of social psychology and a more general methodology for human sciences.

From a practical point of view the book can be helpful in giving advice on how to conduct a discourse analysis of one kind. In chapter eight, the authors give a ten-step guide to the secrets of discourse analysis:

- * research question
- * sample selection
- * collection of records and documents
- * interviews
- * transcription
- * coding
- * analysis
- * validation
- * the report
- * application

Although the authors describe the process of discourse analysis in ten stages, they emphasize that discourse analysis is not a method in the

same sense as the survey or content analysis. They hope, however, that the didactic advantage will outweigh any possible confusion.

Validation, stage eight, differs from the traditional definitions of the concept quite radically. It consists of four different criteria: coherence, participants' orientation, new problems and fruitfulness. Coherence resembles the technique of analytic induction in which a coherent interpretation of data is reached through the analysis of exceptional cases. Participants' orientation refers to the principal whereby not only analysts but also informants can see consistency and differences in statements. It is also important that discourse analysis creates new problems in the course of research. New problems provide evidence that research has yielded interesting findings, which bring us to the last criterion of validity. Fruitfulness means that if discourse analysis has reached its goal, then it has made sense of new kinds of discourses and generated novel explanations.

Finally, I would like to take up a dilemma that is treated in the book and what especially interests me. It is the methodological and philosophical discussion concerning the relationship between discourse and the world. It is often claimed that when you study discourses or try to do discourse analysis of one kind or the other, you are not dealing with the world out there. Especially in these days, when people are killing each other in the former Yugoslavia, that assertion really is an important one.

Potter and Wetherell try to open up this dichotomy between the material world and language by asking how the issue is formulated in the first place. They remind us that this dichotomy between real events and linguistic representations has a long history in Western philosophy. It is a social construction in the same manner as any other linguistic practice. It has taken huge constructive activities to build up such a construction that has had so much influence in the history of Western civilization. From that point of view it is understandable that it is sometimes difficult to see the discursive practices that formulate and constitute our daily life. On this question I am inclined to think like Rorty's (1991, p. 99) antiessentialist philosopher who "looks forward to the day when all the pseudo-problems created by the essentialist tradition □ problems about the relations of appearance to reality, of mind to body, of language to fact □ will be dissolved. She thinks that all these traditional dualisms collapse, like so many dominoes, once the distinction between essence and accident is collapsed."

"But if all that is happening is only discourse, and all that is solid fades away, like so called postmodernists nowadays put it, how then are there those killings and murders in the world?," asks the realist. To articulate this assertion in another words, it is claimed that in discourse analysis the world out there is excluded from reality. According to this, reality is reduced into the linguistic sphere. Although it is against our common sense to think that reality or the world does not exist, discourse analysis is quite helpless in the face of this argument against ontological relativism without Popper's (Popper & Eccles 1977, pp. 36-50) theoretical construction of three different worlds.

Roughly expressed, Popper's World 1 is composed of material things such as tables and chairs, stones and oranges as well as mountains and stars, atoms and forces. By contrast, World 2 includes such entities as consciousness and states of mind, dreams and hopes, images and wishes. With Popper's conceptualization there is a possibility to save discourse analysts from the disaster of fading into thin air and to maintain a realistic order in a scientific court. It is World 3 that suits the purposes of discourse analysis. By World 3 Popper means

"the world of the products of the human mind, such as stories, explanatory myths, tools, scientific theories (whether true or false), scientific problems, social institutions, and works of art" (p. 38).

For a discourse analysis, it is essential to recognize that World 3 is manufactured or constructed by human beings. The entities of that world are products of the human mind, and they have their own history like all other artifacts have. It is also worth noticing that Worlds 1, 2 and 3 are in emergent relation to each other; that is, there would be no World 3 without World 2 and no World 2 without World 1. Thus, as I see it, the discourse analyst does not necessarily have to be an ontological relativist who denies the world out there (World 1) but an ontological realist in the sense of Popper's emergent construction. Furthermore, it is mainly World 3 that constitutes material for discourse analysis.

After all, it is not necessary for a discourse analyst to sell her mother (that is, material reality in the sense of World 1) in the flea market of relativism; there is still peace in the realm of realistic social psychology □ or is there? What is this thing called reality anyway? In our unpredictable times, Virginia Woolf drops us a hint of an answer:

"What is meant by 'reality'? It would seem to be something very erratic, very undependable □ now to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the street, now in a daffodil in the sun. It lights up a group in a room and stamps some casual saying. It overwhelms one walking home beneath the stars and makes the silent world more real than the world of speech □ and then there it is again in an omnibus in the uproar of Piccadilly."

References

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