Best practice guidelines

WASP (Write a Scientific Paper): Discourse analysis

ABSTRACT

Discourse analysis enables the identification of what social actors say and do but also of what they represent in terms of values and motivation Such an analysis can also unearth ideological representations which legitimize the reproduction of social structures, irrespective of whether such representations reflect some objective reality or not. In their turn, such structures are contingent and incomplete, and are subject to changes. Discourse analysis examines their political and historical construction and functioning. What this approach does is help us understand how certain facts and non-facts make it to the political agenda whilst others do not, and how they are interpreted within the public sphere.

1. Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis enables the identification of what social actors say and do but also of what they represent in terms of values and motivation ([1]: 22–23). It investigates the storylines of different actors, which in turn might have commonalities and differences. Such an analysis can also unearth ideological representations which legitimize the reproduction of social structures ([2]: 243), irrespective of whether such representations reflect some objective reality or not. In their turn, such structures are contingent and incomplete, and are subject to changes. Discourse analysis examines their political and historical construction and functioning [3].

The application of discourse analysis is subject to different designs. It has been described as a 'messy method' ([4]: 250) which is difficult to formalise into a standard approach. Instead of focusing on quantity of data, as is the case with other methods such as content analysis, discourse analysis attempts to uncover data that is rich in textual detail, providing fruitful insights into an issue under research (ibid: 246). Tonkiss remarks that in this regard, even 'a single speech or newspaper report or conversation can generate very fruitful themes for analysis' (ibid: 252–253).

Indeed, discourse analysis is not institutionalised and standardised as is the case with other methods with a longer sociological tradition. Given that the use of discourse analysis is not as mainstreamed as other more conventional methods, evaluation of studies using this research method may be difficult and maybe sometimes not be appreciated enough. On the other hand, one should appreciate its labour-intensive and time-consuming qualities ([5]: 11), whilst acknowledging that it is one method amongst a plurality of other valuable methods (ibid: 16). As Phillips and Hardy [5] put it

'discourses are not neatly packaged in a particular text or even in a particular cluster of texts. Researchers can only trace clues to them regardless of how much data they collect'

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This article focuses on a form of discourse analysis: That which revolves around the 'Essex school of discourse analysis' ([6]: 317) within the 'Essex discourse-theoretic approach' ([7]: xi). In no way is

this article assuming that this form of discourse analysis is superior to others, such as that proposed by Norman Fairclough [8–10]. Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis assumes that language, as an irreducible part of social life, is dialectically interconnected with other social elements, yet social life cannot be reduced to language or discourse. Discourse, therefore, is a 'constitutive part of its local and global, social and cultural, contexts' ([9]: 29). Hence, Fairclough [11] proposes the application of discourse analysis with other analyses, such as ethnography and institutional analysis. His ontology is therefore "realist", giving due importance to contextual factors such the already existent social reality (2–8).

The form of discourse analysis referred to in this article is not after objective casual explanations but seeks to understand and interpret socially produced meanings in relation to research questions. This does not mean that objective casual explanations are not valued, but sometimes they are not useful to analyse people's subjective perceptions. Take climate change as an example: Despite the quasi-consensus amongst scientists about its causes, there are alternative views on this, which despite not being based on solid scientific ground, have a material effect on society. Donald Trump's energy policy is a case in point.

Therefore, this method adopts a constructivist approach, which analyses how reality is defined, and which gives primacy to politics ([12]: 9) by analysing hegemonic struggles. Again, I emphasize that in no way am I adopting an anti-realist position. What I am proposing is to utilise this form of discourse analysis to analyse the politicization of social issues.

In this regard, discourse theorists such as Laclau, Mouffe and Howarth consider 'language, actions, and objects' to be 'intertwined in what we call "discourse"' ([6]: 308). Thus, structures within which social agents attempt to articulate hegemonic projects and discursive formations are analysed, yet such structures are deemed as being incomplete ([3]: 128–9). Hence, 'discourse theorists have to modulate and articulate their concepts to suit the particular problems they are addressing' (ibid: 133). This enables interpretation of problems, cases and issues. Here, it must be emphasized that discourse theorists argue that there are different research styles of conducting discourse analysis which are compatible with its social ontology (ibid: 134; [13]: 514).

Linguistic and non-linguistic data are used by such discourse

analysts to signify discourses and their respective "realities" ([12]: 4; [14]: 68). Howarth [3] highlights various qualitative research methods which can be used in this regard. These include primary data from newspapers, reports, pamphlets, personal biographies, media representations such as films, in-depth interviews, and participation-observation. Cross-reference can also take place, for example by making use of both interviews and textual analysis ([15]: 123; [16]: 339).

Discourse analysis takes account of different voices, but it cannot possibly include all of them. Thus, discourse analysis offers one representation amongst others ([5]: 84). Indeed, theoretical and methodological systems can never be as complex as the environment they are analysing. As Borges [17] recounts, when a king asked a cartographer to create a completely accurate map of his country, the map was as big as the country, thus being useless for practical purposes (319).

Keeping such challenges in mind, as an initial guide for data collection and analysis, one may apply Braun and Clarke's [18], six phases of what they define as "thematic analysis". The phases consist of familiarizing oneself with one's data; transcribing data (if necessary), and formulating initial ideas; generating initial codes by systematically coding data deemed interesting from the entire data set; collating codes to form potential themes, whilst collecting data for each theme; checking whether the themes work with both the coded extracts and the entire data set; giving a name and definition to the themes, whilst refining the specificity of each; and, producing a final report.

In relation to this, Howarth [3] proposes three basic operations for the analysis of empirical data through discourse analysis. First, 'the "translation" of information into textual form' (141). Here, linguistic and non-linguistic data are treated as text which can be analysed through techniques that are in line with the ontological assumptions of discourse theory. Second, 'the application of constructed theoretical frameworks to the problematized object of investigation' (ibid). Here, abstract logics and concepts are applied to a specific case. Third, 'the deployment of the various techniques of discourse analysis to the problem investigated' (ibid). In each case, theoretical flexibility takes place through the application process, as theoretical concepts are articulated during the research process itself ([12]: 5).

In my doctoral thesis [19], I applied Howarth's proposals as follows. As regards the translation of information into textual form, different forms of data were collected [5,20,21]. Qualitative elite interviews activist-experts and case studies of issues were treated as text for analysis. Collection of information from newspapers was carried out with respect to the latter. Whilst being very extensive and comprehensive, its intention was not the discovering of discursive truths through numerical presentation of key text, but rather, the unearthing of 'essences with sufficient context' ([22]: 44). Sometimes a key event which is reported once is more significant than a myriad of press statements which become habitual.

Consequently, data was sorted and coded into keywords and themes ([4]: 253–254); Variation in the text ([4]: 256) was analysed, for example by looking at how social agents discursively relate to specific concepts and issues. I also read for emphasis and detail and attended to silences ([4]: 257–258). In the case of the former, I carefully analysed how discourse was used by different social agents in strategic ways.

Ideologies, keywords and arguments utilised by social agents in their articulatory practices can therefore be identified through their respective discourses. This is like the method proposed by Volkmar Lauber and Elisa Schenner [13].

Through the highlighting of discourses of political actors and institutions, dominant ideas (and actors whom they represent) can be identified within hegemonic formations. These are characterised by the construction and stabilization of systems of meaning, which are articulated through nodal points that organize social orders by means of hegemonic practices. In Howarth's [3] words, 'these privileged condensations of meaning confer partially fixed meaning on a particular set of signifiers' (110). An element of 'ideological totalization' takes place in hegemonic practices, as 'ideology constructs reality as a part of a totalizing horizon of meaning that denies the contingent, precarious, and paradoxical character of social identity' ([23]: 15).

In sum, hegemonic formations are characterised by unstable equilibrium and antagonistic relations, meaning that they are contingent and partial. A successful hegemonic project is one where there is relative stability and a widely shared common sense of universalistic ideological representation ([19]: 32).

Hegemonic formations are therefore characterised by popular identities, which become signifiers of a demand that is more universal than the particular demands that constitute them. Yet, every hegemonic formation must have some form of exclusion, which in turn can result in the creation of counter-hegemonic practices [24]. In this regard, the State is an important site of hegemonic struggles.

Thus, discourse analysis can reveal which discourses are included in debates and which are ones excluded and can also reveal how dominant discourses are challenged ([2]: 247–8).

This interpretative approach can be criticised on the grounds that rather than establishing a truth, it can, at best, used in the interests of certain groups under investigation [25]. Here it must be emphasized that this method does not attempt to provide an absolute, monolithic truth, but rather, a systematic reading through discourse analysis. This can be supplemented by other readings carried out with similar or alternative approaches. It is such pluralism which can help enrich the sociological tradition and the sociological imagination.

Discourse analysis is sociologically useful in that it shows that policy issues are tackled not simply because they are scientifically-proven crises, but more so because of the way they are interpreted and articulated. It is the construction of hegemonic formations which enables determined action on issues. It is also fruitful in showing that there is no such thing as a monolithic discourse or ideology.

In a day and age of 'post-truth', 'alternative facts' and relativization, discourse analysis enables the researcher to understand the politicization of issues. However, in no way should this approach be a replacement of empirically-grounded scientific facts. What this approach does is help us understand how certain facts and non-facts make it to the political agenda whilst others do not, and how they are interpreted within the public sphere. The impacts of vaccinations, the sex and gender debate, the impacts of marijuana, ideal parenting styles and the determinants of health and illness are current examples of health issues worthy of discourse analysis.

Conflict of interest statement

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