Research Paper Psychology

Discourse Analysis as A Method

Vatsala Saxena | Department of Psychology, University of Delhi

ABSTRACT

This is a theoretical paper which presents discourse analysis as an alternate method of studying psychological constructs. The paper highlights its importance, and how it diverges from the conventional methods employed in researches. In addition to elucidating the main theoretical principles of discourse analysis, it provides an exemplary discourse and its analysis for enhancing the understanding of the method.

KEYWORDS | Discourse analysis, discourse , parent-child interaction

Introduction

In psychology constructs have been studied by employing traditional methods like interview and survey method. However, these methods decontextualize the construct under study and investigate it in a seeming cultural vacuum. Consequently, striping the concept of its ecological validity. As contested by Sinha(2002) the construct should be conceptualized as drawing its meaning from the culture. This idea can be put to practise by studying the construct as embedded in everyday interaction. Hence the most appropriate way to study any construct will be through everyday conversations around it and subjecting them to discourse analysis.

Going by the distinction given by Chomsky discourse analysis focuses on 'performance' rather than 'competence'; or in other words it unveils the concept as in action and is not just satisfied by its theoretical conceptualization (Potter ,2003). This method thus informs us not what people 'know' about the construct, but how people 'act' on it. Discourse analysis provides us a means to scratch the superficial verbal exchange between individuals, and identify the 'implied' 'unintended' meanings. This technique helps us to uncover the gaps between preaching and practising; or to say between belief and actual teaching.

Potter and Wetherell (1987) critique mainstream psychology of cognition on the following three points: (1) considering an individual's verbal expression to reflect his thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, or simply what is 'going on in his mind', (2) taking cognitive structures to be mental representations of 'real' objects and events as they exist, and (3) considering the conceptualization of the social object to be consensual. On the other hand , discourse analysts counter the above three points on the following premises: (1) according to them an individual's discourse does not transparently mirrors his mental processes , rather serves the purpose of doing 'social action' to meet some objectives, (2) discourse analyst believe that the world can be read in different ways, i.e. there is no 'one' reality , lastly (3) according to discourse analysts social objects are constructed through language, thus it has its subjectivity.

Various studies have been carried out in the naturalistic context of everyday interaction focusing on parents and children. Sadlik, and Kim, (2007) studied parent-children interaction during various active and passive sports activities. The study showed that parents use sports as an arena to foster in their children various qualities like team spirit, discipline, self-confidence,and responsibility. Similarly in another study Ochs and Shohet, (2006) studied parent-children interaction during mealtime. The interaction during this time socialized children into moral values such as saying one's prayers before eating, food-sharing, not to waste food, or not to show strong preference for any one food and many such values according to cultural sensibilities. In yet another study Sterponi(in press) investigated parent-children interaction surrounding transgressions , the focus was on how parents signal child's inappropriate actions (priming move) , and how the remedial action are contingent on such priming moves.

However, these studies do not do discourse analysis per se to uncover the implicit meanings, rather they simply cite the instances as evidence of their subject of study. In other words there is no analysis of the data, but simple reporting of incidences. In this paper an attempt has been made to understand the process of doing discourse analysis subscribing to the theoretical background of discursive psychology. Discursive psychology applies these ideas of discourse analysis to study psychological issues. It provides an opportunity to understand psychological process by directly studying the tangible, observable interactions as unfolding in real time, rather than digging into a researcher mediated interview, or some abstract inner cognitive process.

In the next section main theoretical principles of doing discourse analysis subscribing to the perspective of discursive psychology is presented. These principles are further elucidated with the help of an exemplary discourse.

Theoretical principles and examples

The main theoretical principles of discursive psychology are as following:

A) Action orientation: Discourse is considered to act as a medium for carrying out action. Whenever people enter in a verbal exchange they have a purpose. They express their intention, motivation, fear, desire, emotions through their verbal exchange. Thus, discourse is an arena where the acting out actually happens. The psychological mechanisms become tangible and observable.

B) Discourse is situated:The actions as they unfold in the discourse do so logically. They are situated *sequentially*, i.e. a particular action gives way to the next plausible action, or in other words a particular action is contingent on a preceding action. For example, if an invitation is made, the possible courses of action are either acceptance or refusal. Also, a discourse occurs in a particular setting or within a particular institution (e.g. school, family, therapy session, news interview etc.). Therefore an action executed through the discourse will be understood in relation to such institutional identities. For example, the same statement made by a child and the mother will carry different implications. If a child says 'don't repeat it', it is more likely to be taken as a request, however if the mother says the same thing it can be a warning, or a directive. Therefore, a discourse is situated *institutionally* as well as *sequentially*.

C) Construction: Discourse is both constructive and constructed. It is constructed by means of words, categories, grammatical structures, cultural ideas etc. For example, addressing elders by name is taken as an instance of disrespect in Indian context, but not in western milieu. Similarly, the use of words like 'aap' and 'tum' are markers of respect in Hindi. At the same time discourse is constructive, as it seems to create versions of reality. For example, if respect for elders is always solicited from children citing how elders extend favours to them or by threatening to withdraw privileges; it seems to convey the message that elders are respected because they are benefactors. 'Respect for elders' is reduced from being a moral virtue to a give and take business.

D) *Focus on deviant cases*:At times there are cases in the corpus of data that are deviant or do not fall in line with the pattern identified in the rest of the episodes. Such cases are analytically very rich and provide us an opportunity to investigate the robustness of the analysis.

Exemplary Discourse

Example: Here the grandmother (G) complaints that she shall not take the child out anymore, the child (C) too initially express his displeasure with the grandmother, only to later direct it towards someone else.

G: main nahi le ke jaungi aaj ke baad isko!

G: I won't take him from now on!

M: kya gandi bat kari aaj apney? (addressing to the child)

M: what bad thing did you do today?

C: aur main aaj ke baad- main daddi ke saath jaunga hi nahi!

C: and I from now on – I will myself not go with grandmother!

M: nahi jayega ? kyon?

M: (You) will not go? Why?

F: yeh aapsey pahele se hi gussa hai! (addresses grandmother)

F: he is already upset with you!

M: kyon naraaz ho aap dadi se?

M: why are you angry with granny

F: dadi ne toh apko itney gift dilaye!

F: granny has gifted you so many things!

C: dadi se nahi..yashi se

C: not with granny..with yashi

Here the child seems to direct his displeasure from his initial target (grandmother) to someone else, because he was reminded that the grandmother brings gifts for him. This is because if the child was actually displeased with someone else he could have clarified it after the father exclaims that the child is angry with the grandmother (line 5). The child could have even clarified it after the mother asks why the child was angry with the grandmother (line 6). In fact, here he kept quiet, and only responded when the father mentions how the grandmother has given him so many gifts (line 7). The child's failure to respond at appropriate positions and his clarification after the mention of gifts is indicative of the fact that the child's response is motivated by his love for gifts, than his feelings for the grandmother.

Conclusion:

Discourse analysis helps to study the concept as embedded in the socio-cultural context, thus lending it ecological validity. In contrast to the conventional methods (example interview& survey) wherein the researcher depends on the participants' report, discourse analysis enables one to have a first-hand understanding of the meaning making process, or the unfolding of the event.

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