Researching Communication: The Interpretive Approach between Theory and Practice

Samo Uhan[*]

ABSTRACT

A proper understanding of communication research and the way it has been carried out cannot emerge without some consideration of the theoretical backgrounds of the different methodological approaches to communication analysis. In the last few years the most important progress has been made in the field of so called reflexive methodology. According to Alvesson and Sköldberg, the syntagm reflexive methodology (2000) denotes complex relationships between the knowledge-development processes and variable contexts in which knowledge develops, including all actors.

The aim of the paper in that sense is to present some influences of the poststructuralist theory that are relevant to qualitative methodological strategies in communication studies. The paper begins with presenting the key theses of structuralist and poststructuralist approaches. This is followed by the section devoted to the central figure of Derrida and deconstruction. Then an illustration is given of some of the implications of poststructuralism for empirical research of communication. In that part also some specific proposals are offered on possible ways of coping with the complexity of the research process. The paper closes with a discussion opening some space for more critical evaluation.

---

[*] Samo Uhan, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Sciences, +386041486355, samo.uhan@fdv.uni-lj.si

Introduction

A proper understanding of communication research and the way it has been carried out cannot emerge without some consideration of the theoretical backgrounds of the different methodological approaches to communication analysis. Over the years, communication research has borrowed from and been dominated by social science disciplines such as political science, anthropology, psychology, linguistics, sociology and philosophy, which communication scholars have identified as interdisciplinary characteristics. In the past decade, the methodology of communication research has been experiencing rapid development directly related to the development of social science research. The development of methods in communication studies has thus represented an upgrading of the development in wider social science research (Stempel and Westley 1989). This development is seen both in empirical research with the assertion of findings in cognitive sciences as well as in the epistemology of social sciences and through the development of so-called reflexive methodology. According to Alvesson and Sköldberg, the syntagm reflexive methodology (2000) denotes complex relationships between the knowledge-development processes and variable contexts in which knowledge develops, including all actors. For research in communication studies and more broadly in social science, reflection on these relationships carries important methodological implications. Typically, compared to »traditional« methodology, reflexive methodology fully accepts the fact that language, culture, social structure, norms, ideology, discourses etc. make up a constitutive part of the scientific process. These elements necessarily interfere with the relationship between the empirical reality and attempts to implement segments of this reality in research findings (text), which largely influences the research results or even creates conditions for their validity. While this realisation may be considered a justified criticism of unreflected empiricism,[1] on the other hand a radical critique of empirical research triggers the »resignation« of research and questioning about whether empirical communication studies and also social science are at all theoretically justifiable.[2] The larger part of the traditional methodological literature does not offer satisfactory answers to these questions. Thus, either uninterpreted facts in the form of »pure« data or the approach whereby even an everyday human experience is denoted as a »discursive construct« are offered as two extremes of a range of answers to the question: what is the key element of social science research?

Therefore, researchers' quandaries are related to the fact that contemporary communication studies operate both with open empirical material enabling its interpretive equivalence, and with qualitative contents which »succumb« to rigid catego-

risation. As a result, researchers are growingly renouncing the precise separation of standardised and non-standardised research approaches, and thereby the key measure of differentiation between quantitative and qualitative methods. Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000: 150) point this out when claiming that even with the highest level of methodological differentiation and rigour researchers cannot avoid what is believed to be the essence of research in communication studies and more broadly in social science; namely, that they form part of the society whose social relations they are studying, which in itself co-creates the research results.

Although in this context a justifiable and constant question is whether research results are not only a peculiar construct of researchers, this does not imply that we can legitimately distinguish methodological approaches whose research results are constructs, and those which do not »construct« research results. Research practice shows that we can justifiably only speak of approaches that are not aware of the »construct«, and those which admit the »construct« and try to explain the nature of this fact and its impact on the research results. While being aware of the deficiency of this fairly rough simplification, later in the article I address only one of these approaches which is classified among the so-called epistemological fundaments of research in social sciences, namely the post-structuralist theory. However, in doing this, I have no intention to reduce the significance of other theories which constitute the epistemological arc of social sciences research; on the contrary. Contemporary reflexive methodology quite directly refers to hermeneutics, linguistic philosophy, critical theory and to the recently particularly topical discourse analysis or contemporary discursive theory (comp. Vezovnik 2008). The emphasis laid in this context on post-structuralism is linked to the key element of reflexive methodology, i.e. the interpretation of research results.[3] In the context of empirical research, reflexivity should be understood as the interpretation of interpretation (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000: 6) or as the critical questioning of the researcher's own interpretation of the empirical material. In this view, post-structuralism compared to other theories stands out with its requirement to separate the text from the »outside« reality. For post-structuralists, a text has its own life without any outside reference, with only the influence of other texts being relevant to its understanding and interpretation.[4] This assumption questions the authority of the authors (in our case the researchers) as well as the possibility of the »empirical reconstruction« of reality. In other words, for contemporary methodology both the subject (researcher) and the object (empirical reality) of research are seen as problematic.

Consequently, the parsing (empirical) methodologies do not end with only the metric and interpretive. Just as the interpretive has entered the critical, the critical has likewise entered the empirical (Anderson 2012). During the past decade a corpus

of critical- empirical methodologies has appeared. These are reflexive methodologies that apply cultural/critical interpretive methods to empirical texts. They are influenced by social communication studies now mostly known as the postmodern rejection of the universal narrative (Anderson, 2012: 18). They accept the requirement for some empirical grounding, but are less interested in telling the what or how of text than in understanding the cultural force of a class of texts or in promoting what ought to be the cultural consequences of their engagement (ibid.). The reflexive methodologies go by a number of different names – discourse analysis, cultural studies, interpretative studies etc.

In this paper we turn to the media research methods that can be considered under the category of interpretive analysis. Speaking in broad terms, methods of interpretive analysis seek to read media content of all kinds and draw from it particular socio-cultural meanings that the contents potentially create and circulate. Namely, we can think of media content as a text that offers lessons in how to understand the social, cultural and political worlds within which we live our daily lives.

The paper begins with presenting the key theses of structuralist and poststructuralist approaches. This is followed by the section devoted to the central figure of Derrida and deconstruction. Then an illustration is given of some of the implications of poststructuralism for empirical research of communication. In that part also some specific proposals are offered on possible ways of coping with the complexity of the research process. The paper closes with a discussion opening some space for more critical evaluation.

Theory and Methodological Consequences

The theory examined in the following paragraphs in terms of its impact on contemporary qualitative communication research dates back to the 1960s, to authors such as Levi-Strauss, Lacan, Barthes and others who are more or less justifiably classified first in the structuralist circle, and later with the arrival of Derrida (the concept of deconstruction), Lyotard (the concept of knowledge) and Foucault (the concept of subject and power) in the post-structuralist field. The »structuralist revolution« broke off with the philosophical tradition which had grounded »Western« thought from Descartes to Sartre by introducing structuralist analysis or concepts such as structure, rules, codes, system and others into the interpretation of social phenomena. The starting point for structuralists is a rejection of the concept of subject which had dominated the Western humanist tradition for decades. They see the subject as derived, secondary and marginal, the effect of

language, the unconscious and culture, without any creative potential. By foregrounding the unconscious, the symbolic and communication-social relationships, structuralism positions the »methodological consequences« accordingly: meanings and interpretations are not the result of transparent intentions of autonomous subjects; instead, the subject itself is the result of the linguistic relationship and subjectivity is a social and linguistic construct (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000; Best and Kellner 1991; Vattimo 2004).

While post-structuralists adopted the key elements of the thesis of structural linguistics, they completely rejected the concept of the so-called dominant centre »governing« the structure. Instead, centre stage is occupied by the text which post-structuralists regard as a mere play of signs without reference to an author (the subject) or the outside world. At the same time, this is post-structuralism's most radical methodological innovation. For post-structuralists the text[5] is separated from the outside world and thus unburdened of all references.[6] This challenges both researchers' authority in the research process and their possibility to reproduce outside reality in text.

Post-structuralists' key reference becomes language which is ambivalent, ambiguous, metaphorical and constitutive rather than unambiguous, literal and descriptive. With such an understanding of language (speech) post-structuralists problematise the concept of objectivity, clarity and rationality of the research procedure. For the needs of research this problem can be reformulated into the question posed by Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000: 152), i.e. can the researcher tell anything about »reality« which in terms of credibility and quality would reach beyond the opinions of others about the same reality?

Communication scholars and methodologists who lean on post-structuralist ideas are primarily interested in the concept of the »emergence« of theories, along with discursive strategies and the understanding of authority developed by post-structuralists. In this regard, post-structuralists do not create a theoretical frame of reference to guide researchers towards unambiguous logical results and interpretations. On the contrary, they strive for multiple and variable interpretations of results which should demonstrate the inconsistency and fragmentation of the (media) »text« (reality).

Indeed, the key post-structuralist authors do not even speak of methodology, which is why post-structuralism is believed to be anti-methodological. Yet it can be claimed that post-structuralism comes close to the method by asserting the concept of insightfulness, anti-objectivist interpretation and, of course, deconstruction – which is given more attention later in this paper.

Naturally, the key to understanding the post-structuralist attitude to empirical research does not lie in the idea of »portraying reality« since for post-structuralists there is no such thing as neutral and simply interpretable reality. If in these terms we ask what is the scholar's key task, then for post-structuralists the answer is clear: active work with the language and the text or their local, contextual and arbitrary nature.[7] Obviously, for communication scholars this answer triggers more dilemmas than it solves. While it is impossible to address all of them here, I list three of them that can be considered inherent to contemporary methodological approaches with regard to the »specific« post-structuralist view, namely:

− the attitude to empirical reality: post-structuralism consistently rejects the concept of a definite (irrefutable and absolute) truth, at both theoretical and interpretive levels;

− the attitude to the nature of social facts: post-structuralism primarily directs the attention of researchers to the disclosure of ambivalence, divergence and differentiation of communication and social facts which figure as self-understood constructs; and

− the attitude to the researcher–respondent relationship: post-structuralism problematises the traditional relationship between researchers and respondents by foregrounding the unresolved question of »structural violence« or the fact that no matter how rigorous the methodology it does not eradicate the effects of social structure which are inscribed in the relationship between the researcher and the researched (Bourdieu et al. 2002).

In the rest of this paper I will use these dilemmas as my point of departure for examining the frame of reference of contemporary (reflexive) methodology and the role of post-structuralism which I see as one of the key frame theories. I raise a theoretical research question about the influence of post-structuralist ideas on the formation of contemporary reflexive methodology (are they identifiable and how do they manifest themselves). Further on, I will be interested in whether the pinpointing of the influences can be used as the starting point for making recommendations for research strategies. First, I look for answers to these questions by examining Derrida's concept of deconstruction and the related two methodological dilemmas, namely the position of the humanistic and communication subject in research and the role of the researcher as an author. I link both dilemmas with those points in the post-structuralist theory which in the opinion of different authors hold direct implications for a contemporary reflexive, particularly qualitative methodology of communication.[8] I stress that the work of the interpretation is central and the empirical material, text in various forms, is to subject of attempts to asses meanings

and develop revealing insights (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000: 258). In practice this may mean that at the beginning and end of a study the researcher goes through all the levels, but during the main part of the process he keeps to the empirical and insightful interpretive levels (ibid.)

De(con)struction as the Methodological Means

The starting point of Derrida's deconstruction can be found in the metaphor of every, even the smallest and virtually invisible crack in the façade being a symptom of the flaw of the entire edifice (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000: 154). Hence the crack in the text, to use the same metaphor, lays bare the apparent unity of the text by unveiling the hidden, the repressed and the subjected in the text (relationship).

The first step in deconstruction requires that things be turned upside down, making the oppressed side the dominating one. Rather than implying the mere inversion of the hierarchical relationship between the two opposing sides, this procedure in the second step fully undermines the differences between these opposites. This is also how Derrida explains the word de-con-struction. The first step thus involves the destruction of the original dominating picture where what was hidden before now becomes dominating, and the next step implies the destruction of both opposing poles with their simultaneous »displacement« and the construction of something new and wider in which both sides constitute cases in their own right

Through the assertion of the deconstruction concept, Derrida first criticised the apparent unity of the spoken word and reference. According to Derrida, in semiotics, linguistics and other theories of the meaning of communication the spoken word dominates over the written, which he terms »phonocentrism« (meaning can be more immediately expressed through speech). Phonocentrism leads to the wider and better known notion of logocentrism which represents the tendency dominating the Western system of thought that everything has logical/rational grounds, and therefore such are (or have to be) also the goals and conclusions.

Derrida's criticism of the privileged status of the spoken word leads to the demonstration of the importance of the written word or the inversion of the hierarchical relationship between the spoken and the written word, which some of his critics define as graphocentrism. Considering the requirement of deconstruction that the deconstruction process should not only imply the inversion of positions (in our case of the spoken and written word), according to Derrida a third phase of deconstruction is needed, namely a different way of creating a text with non-referencing signs which should eradicate the hierarchical relationship. According to Derrida, texts should be read so as to dismantle the authoritarian game of which texts are the car-

riers each time they want to tell »the ultimate truth«, when trying to really speak about things as they are. This is about »laying bare« the intertextual play of presence and absence, such as the cause in the consequence, the intentions of an individual's behaviour, the essence of power from its use etc., with which we dismantle a given and self-understood hierarchy. The analytical tool used in this context is the so-called conceptual triangle consisting of the word-meaning-object or the more well-known sign-signifier-signified. Therefore, conceptually, the word specifies a set of properties which together constitute its meaning and real phenomena (referents) that possess these properties[9] (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000; Best and Kellner 1991; Derrida 1988, 1997; Kembel 2005).

Along with some other post-structuralist emphases (mainly Lyotard's critique of »the grand narratives«), Derrida's concept of deconstruction generates two basic methodological dilemmas: (1) the question of the position of the humanistic subject in research; and (2) the question of the researcher as the author of research (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000: 164, 167).

Position of the Humanistic Subject in Research

Post-modern authors and even more those who consider themselves post-structuralists consider the idea of the autonomous individual as an active individuum, the holder of sense and meaning, a missed invention of Western thought. Contrary to the prevailing idea of a coherent and fully integrated individual, post-structuralists wish to decentre the idea of individuum, and thus displace the emphasis from classical constructs, perceptions, emotions and actions towards the so-called discursive context that constitutes the expression of subjectivity as limited in time and space. Subjectivity here is the conscious and the unconscious, emotions and perceptions, the individual's self-insight and attitude to the surrounding world. In this sense, rather than language being the expression of subjectivity, on the contrary it constitutes subjectivity.

It is with language that we make the experience of the world (Vattimo 2004: 91) and this is why subjectivity is unstable, contradictory and more of a process than a structure. It depends on the form of address which form of subjectivity will be constituted. An individual can be interpellated as a man, a journalist, a taxpayer, a drug addict, a Slovenian etc., in which the interpellation of the subject depends on the available discourses or discursive contexts that create different meanings of social roles, identities or relationships. Weedon (in Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000: 165) notes that the individual's experience has no innate essential meaning, but acquires its sense in language from »discursive systems of meaning« which often contain contradictory versions of how social reality should be described. Accordingly, dis-

courses do not emerge freely nor randomly. Certain discourses are dominant, for example the discourses of gender roles, consumerism, normality or political participation, while others can be completely overlooked due to the nature of the social structure and the power relations.

For post-structuralists the disclosure of subtle dimensions of the text is related to dismantling the real nature of authority and power. However, as opposed to critical theory post-structuralists are not interested in the emancipatory potential of knowledge. Margolis (1989) regards Derrida's approach as conservative in his disinterest in reality or the insistence that nothing definite can be said about reality as such and it is even less possible to suggest a concrete social change. While the reproach of being apolitical applies to the entire opus of post-structuralism, this is, however, only partly true. Derrida's approach can also be defined as subversive in it disclosing the prevailing forms of social relations or the violence of the social structure. However, the post-structuralist »obsession« with authority also has concrete methodological consequences. Post-structuralists' fear of being authoritarian (with the scholar's arbitrary intervention in the empirical material) is the same as their fear of the authoritarianism of the system. While for post-structuralists the Word is omnipotent and the key to understanding the world, at the same time they renounce contact with empirical material due to the fear of becoming »tainted« (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000: 240).

With the idea of the decentring of the subject, post-structuralism has in many ways »shaken« the foundations of social sciences. In this light, the post-structuralist requirement of rethinking the traditional sociological categories and primarily the concept of the autonomous rational subject has become legitimate.

The Question of the Researcher as the Author of Research

With the idea that language or speech is the key element of research, the question of authorship also becomes crucial, especially in ethnographic communication studies. The fact that the abundance of empirical material prepared to be analysed requires a researcher's radical intervention (reduction) has revealed a banal realisation that the final text (research result) is not determined by the empirical reality. In this light, post-structuralists see the research process as a »totalising« description of a reality, where the researcher speaks on behalf of the »Other« so that, rather than being reinforced, the voice of others (ignored, repressed, subjected) is de facto made impossible (comp. Ragin 2007).

The key methodological question for post-structuralism therefore becomes the question of representation or the idea with which post-structuralism completely rejects

traditional views according to which the recording of data is only one part of the research process which is determined by theory, data collection, analysis and interpretation. For post-structuralists there is no neutral social reality which can be objectively described and interpreted. Therefore, the researcher's task is anything but an objective description of reality: it is to make visible the text's ambivalent and contextual nature by adopting an active attitude (values, interests) to it. Fictional elements or authors' creative inventions have become an integral part of every interpretation that most post-structuralists see in two ways: on one side as the question of the reproduction/construction of a specific reality (re-presentation) in terms of whether it comprises the totality and how it explains it and, on the other side, as the question of what or whose interests predominate in the research. For researchers this chiefly means the recognition and taking into account of the fact that research is primarily an interpretive activity with the researcher as the key actor: interpretation cannot stand preconceived interpretive schemes, instead crucial elements are the researcher's judgement, intuition and ability to see (more and beyond), in a more or less explicit dialogue with all of the actors in the research (comp. Uhan 1998).

Starting Points for a Different Methodology of Communication

In this context, the examination of the above methodological dilemmas indicates clear starting points for the generation of a contemporary reflexive methodology. In the following paragraphs I first address them as the post-structuralists' call for a different ethnography of communication studies, and then I present the mechanisms for the selection of research participants as the methodological means to prevent the reproduction of the asymmetry of social power of the actors in the research. Methodological implications also include the necessary understanding of the relationship between the researcher as the actor and the empirical material, while also highlighting the need to take account of alternative presentations and perspectives of all actors in research. I conclude the examination of methodological starting points with post-structuralist critical remark regarding interpretations of the contents of interviews as a technique of collecting empirical material.

The Post-structuralist Call for a Different Ethnography

One of the key post-structuralist emphases is their call for a different ethnography. According to post-structuralists, the pronounced disadvantage of traditional ethnography lies in it being fixed to an empirical basis and not being sensitive enough to the ideological background of theories which researchers refer to in their inter-

pretation of data. Post-structuralists believe the combination of both prevents the interpretation of a social cosmogony. An apparent opportunity is found in the ethnographic technique or so-called »giving word«. It is a technique which enables the disclosure of subtle aspects and properties of overlooked groups which should help researchers form better narratives of their experiences (Ragin 2007). The problem of traditional ethnography here is that, in the post-structuralist view, it totally overlooks the »intentional symbolic violence« or impacts of the social structure which become inscribed in the relationship between the researcher and the researched. The post-structuralist methodological innovation proposes researchers' consistent self-limiting when attributing meanings to a researched phenomenon (transcripts are already interpretations!), while simultaneously abandoning the idea (the illusion!) of discourses speaking for themselves (Bourdieu 2002: 620).[10]

In this sense, observation taking place in a natural context also does not bring a perfect solution due to it being under the strong influence of the indefinite nature of language – social interactions are constructed by speech and, in this context, actors' involvement is only conferring meaning or sense to their own existence.

Compared to the traditional approach[11] based on the coding and synthesis of findings (reduction), post-structuralists assert the norm of the »open text«, which in practice means that researchers look for variations in empirical material (observations, interviews) that are included in the interpretation in an equal way. Only in this way is it possible to express the multiplicity of a subject's identities that are not only dominant, but also particular and marginal. Therefore, the researcher must be aware that, by interfering with what has been said, they are creating a narrative and so they should think hard about how they do it. It is important that they recognise both the »unreflected sociological categories« (such as a journalist, a woman, an audience member etc.) as well as discursive constructs which create effects. An example of poor research practice is the usual requirement of the researcher that the respondent describes, for example, their relationship with their superior; such a requirement creates a fixed identity which involves the relationship of dependence or superiority and subordination while at the same time excluding all other equally relevant individuals' positions (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000; Bray in Della Porta and Keating 2008).

The Selection of Research Participants as the Reproduction of Power Asymmetry

It is completely erroneous to assume that for the results in qualitative research to be valid it is important to consider all actors that can be relevantly categorised. What is much more important for the validity of the findings is the process of so-called

»reflected exclusion« or a well-grounded plurality of voices which can balance the perspectives of the actors included in empirical material to the greatest extent. Empirically, there are two dimensions of the exclusion problem: on one hand, it is about the (non)representation of different groups, categories and individuals in the research process or text and, on the other, there is the question of the (non)representation of these subjects within these groups or categories – thus, it is about whose voice is heard or disregarded.[12] It is important to point out that »silencing« is an integral part of categorisation or »locking subjects into identities« (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000: 189).

For both post-structuralists and critical theorists, the question of exclusion is essentially a political question or a question of the nature of the social structure. Post-structuralists believe the research instrument (e.g. a questionnaire) reflects the relationship of social power among individual social groups. Authors within both approaches (critical social theory and post-structuralism) see the institute of the neutral research question as merely concealing the problem of a selective construction of the world. However, in their examination of political discourse post-structuralists move away from the engaged critical theory by mainly directing their interest to the problem of the researcher's interpretation of reality, with the disclosure of asymmetries in power relations among social actors or the description of forms of ideological domination only coming in second place.

Thus, for post-structuralists the question of the exclusion and inclusion of participants in research is not primarily a question of which groups or categories are included in the research or how researchers influence the selection process. For the research to have »weight« it is more important to find out the ways in which what actors say (what has been uttered) has been changed, disregarded or distorted with the interpretation. In describing their reality, subjects use different strategies and can also represent »voices« of others, which is why researchers have to encourage the ambivalence of empirical material rather than limiting it.

Complementarity of the Researcher and Empirical Material

The selection of research participants and the way of the researcher's interpretation of the material are the key elements of a plausible text. Post-structuralists see this fact as placing researchers side by side all other research actors. This is perhaps the most characteristic contribution of post-structuralist theory to understanding the processes in qualitative research. Post-structuralism strives for a well-thought-out process of exclusion or inclusion of subjects in research by representing and reading of empirical material. A frame of reference is needed for this process to enable the researcher to initially bring to the fore and strengthen, at the theoretical level,

those relationships, roles or subject identities that are structurally discriminated; this is, for example, something traditional communication studies cannot do. For instance, if in an examination of media representation of sexual discrimination the discrimination occurs in a context which is not problematised by male or female journalists, this phenomenon cannot be characterised within traditional communication studies. This can only be done within a frame of reference in which theory can be used as the framework for the recognition and detection of unreflected structural violence expressed by the interviewees in the research.

In this sense, the researcher has a justified role to critically judge whose position is undervalued or whose voice in the research is not heard or is excluded as a result of intentional discursive violence.

However, it is necessary to point out that the critical reading which should disclose the ambivalence of the text and avoid attributing dominant meanings to individual phenomena is not the same as so-called emphasised reading. On the contrary, the reservation of researchers to form an unambiguous interpretation by pointing out one dimension (emphasised reading) of the text is not mutually exclusive of making an interpretation in which researchers intentionally strengthen the voice of an individual subject so as to compensate for the »systemic loss« or the subordinated position of that subject in the social structure. In practical terms, this dilemma can be solved if researchers expose their own interpretation to an alternative reading after the research or become informed about different views before conducting the research. In a post-structuralist light the researcher's position is complementary to the empirical material, and not in any way an alternative to the empirical nature of the material.

Taking Alternative Representations and Actors' Perspectives into Account

Typically, the post-structuralist approach is sceptical of the theoretical frames of reference which should define the horizon of meaning. For post-structuralism the relationship between the world and experience, text and reality, structure and action remains undefinable in terms of meaning, making the researcher's reference to a theoretical frame of reference unproductive since a theoretical solution which would impose order onto the universe that is permeated with meanings is simply impossible (Marcous in Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000: 191).

Although researchers are aware of the ambiguity, inconsistency and contradiction of empirical material, they most often miss with their interpretation because they try to harmonise the text by referring to a frame of reference. Post-structuralists see the solution in the confrontation of different interpretations, which initiates a play between a dominating and an alternative interpretation, leading to the open-

ing up of the text. This is also what Derrida's idea of conversion mentioned above refers to, which explains how a certain meaning depends on the repressed opposite or how the meaning of a specific sign is influenced by the absence of all other signs.[13] Accordingly, the parallel interpretation and confrontation of perspectives are important for establishing the meaning as they enable the researcher to creatively combine all elements. With multiple readings a productive »tension« can be achieved, which can then only be released by thinking about which questions these perspectives require. The purpose of the whole procedure is to avoid making a synthesis of findings or form conclusions at too early a stage.

Taking Responsibility for the Text and Its Interpretation

One of the post-structuralist reprimands of empirical researchers is that they tend to hide behind an almost bureaucratic methodological procedure and the dominant conventions of writing scientific texts.

In this context, the post-structuralist theory of the subject as a discursive construction dominated by language and context holds major implications for the understanding of a research interview. For post-structuralists, how an interviewee represents reality in an interview has little to do with the reality itself. In the process of interviewing temporary subjectivities are formed which represent reality in relation to the local discursive context created by the interview (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000: 193).

The emphasis on the meaning of language primarily influences the understanding of interpretation. Post-structuralists substitute the modernist idea that language only reflects a complex reality with the idea of the constitutive (non-referential) nature of language. In this context, speech becomes the medium for understanding what lies beyond empiricism and the theories that lean on it. In their analysis of speech, post-structuralists primarily focus on four dimensions which become the subject of interpretation, namely: (1) what we know and say (known uttered,said); (2) what we know but do not say (unknown uttered); (3) what we say but do not know (uttered unknown); and (4) what we do not say and do not know (unuttered,unsaid unknown) (Francois 2009).

What are crucial for interpretation are the researcher's judgement, intuition and ability to recognise hidden dimensions of the problem which are reflected in what has been said. Therefore, interpretation is not based on self-evident, simple and unambiguous methodological procedures, but on explicit dialogue (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000: 248) between the subject, researcher and reader. The main point of reflexive interpretation is that in this sense it »brings out« the relationships among the participating actors and makes the research process and the power relations as transparent as possi-

ble. The challenge of interpretive analysis is to offer an insightful reading of the text, one that helps us better understand both the text itself and the issues of social, cultural and political significance of which the text speaks (Anderson 2012).

A frequent weakness of qualitative research practice is the fact that researchers consider or put too much weight on just one element in the research – either the empirical material and its interpretation or the sociolinguistic relations among the actors.

Conclusion: How to Formulate Research Strategies?

From a post-structuralist viewpoint the whole set of traditional methodological strategies is problematic. Reality cannot be grasped, described and explained by raising questions and translating answers into theory in the way that applies to empirical methods. While post-structuralist criticism has dissuaded numerous theoreticians from empirical research, many researchers suffer from »research resignation« which is mainly revealed as constant self-questioning about the sense of empirical research. Do post-structuralist »findings« and post-structuralism's anti-methodological nature create a sufficient basis for abandoning the idea of traditional empirical sociological research? Not necessarily. The fact that »data handling« is not central to post-structuralist theoreticians can largely explain post-structuralist reservations regarding traditional methodological themes. On the other hand, post-structuralist critiques of empirical research can strengthen researchers' methodological ambitions by moving methodological attention away from looking for the »empirical truth« in data towards an interpretation of and reflection on data in the global context including the ideological, metatheoretical, linguistic and political dimensions of research. Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000: 248) speak of reflexive interpretation which encourages researchers to look for answers to research questions beyond self-understood schemes at the interface of the positions of the research objects, researchers and »readers«. This means that in practice research occurs at three levels – empirical, interpretative and critical-interpretative. The latter means that reflexive interpretation does not simply examine the random structure of interaction, but interaction as the transaction of actors with the intention to realistically reconstruct the relationships among them. In this respect, reflexive interpretation rejects both pure empiricism or data reductionism as well as theoretical reductionism, which is shown as the domination of either gender, discursive, structural or cultural references of the chosen theory.

Based on this and in relation to the dilemmas and the research question I posed in the first part of this paper, the following recommendations can be offered for a contemporary qualitative methodology in communication studies:

1. with regard to the dilemma or attitude of contemporary methodology regarding the empirical reality we suggest the employment of the practice of the consistent inclusion of alternative presentations of communication in the research procedure, including the critical and reflected use of different theoretical perspectives;

2. with regard to the discussion relates to the use of quantitative/qualitative approaches in media research; in our point of view the distinction between standardization and non-standardization as the dividing line between quantitative and qualitative methods becomes a little blurred. We do not explicitly argue in favour of qualitative methods or against quantitative ones, even thought it will be obvious that we are sceptical about the universal adoption of the later in the media research as well as in the social sciences in general. We share the view that the choice between quantitative and qualitative methods cannot be made in the abstract , but must be related to the particular research problem and research object. In our view it is not methods but ontology and epistemology which are the determinants of good social science (Alvesson and Sköldberg, (2000: 4)

3. in relation to the requirement that contemporary methodology be perceptive to disclosing the ambivalence, divergence and differentiation of the studied social facts, we suggest the pluralism of perspectives of actors in research, which Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000: 194) understand as the use of the potential of different identities (voices), associated with different groups and individuals and their positions or special interests which are the subject of research or a constitutive part of the researched (media) texts; and

4. with respect to understanding the relationship between the researcher and the respondent in contemporary methodology, we suggest the development of research approaches in communication studies that will increase receptiveness of variations in what the research subjects convey along with the possibility to accept the multiple representations an individual respondent can contribute to a topic. This suggestion sensibly relates to Bourdieu's »recommendations« for researchers regarding the choice of respondents and understanding the structure of relations between researchers and respondents. Bourdieu (Bourdieu et al. 2002: 610) draws attention to the importance of social closeness (even affiliation) between researchers and respondents which he claims would enable researchers to conduct research in conditions of so-called non-violent communication. According to Bourdieu, non-violent communication solves the question of structural violence (the effects of the social structure which are inscribed in the relationship between the researcher and the researched) by enabling the exchangeability of social experience and thus reducing the danger

of the researcher making subjective conclusions about »objective factors« (the functioning of the social structure). At the same time, social closeness enables an authentic interpretation by facilitating good knowledge of the communication context (slang, jargon etc.) (Bourdieu et al. 2002).

Nevertheless, the most important methodological commitment of the contemporary reflexive methodology of communication remains the creation of an open text which encourages active interpretation without a researcher's constraining and methodologically rigid intervention. In communication studies the text is a metaphor for communication or a wider social phenomenon. The metaphorical nature of the text enables an insight by creating tension between the research object (society, media, members of the audience) and the discourse which »represents« the research object. In that context, new media forms are just beginning to have an impact on the old forms of research. Nowhere is this impact shown more dramatically than in ethnographic (interpretive) research. The interpretive analyst is always, by definition, also a social critic – a media text provides us with critical windows revealing an endless range of social, cultural and political phenomena that are continuously in flux and often the sites of contestation. Stauart Hall (In Anderson 2012: 326) suggested that media texts are often a location of struggle an argument in words, images, sound and story over meaning and value. If media text are sites of struggle, then they equally are products of, or exercises in, power. To read a mediatext is also to confront the play of power in shaping the meanings and assumptions that delimit the boundaries of communities, cultures and societies.

However, such an examination should be taken with a »grain of salt«. Researchers should not direct their attention to minor contradictions and incongruities in the text, but eradicate a strict line between two ontological positions – the extreme linguistic one which requires the deconstruction of text, and the objectivistic one which closes the interpretive space.

REFERENCES

Alvesson, M., and Sköldberg, K. (2000) Reflexive Methodology. New Vistas for Qualitative Research. London, New Delhi: SAGE Publications.

Anderson, A. J. (2012) Media Research Methods. Understanding Metric and Interpretive Approaches. SAGE Publications.

Bourdieu, P., et al. (2002) The Weight of the World – Social Suffering in Contemporary Society. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Best, S., and K., Douglas (1991) Postmodern Theory. Critical Interrogations. New York: Guilford Press.

Della Porta, D., and Keating, M. (eds) (2008) Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences. A Pluralist Perspective. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Derrida, J. (1988) Glas in fenomen. [The Voice and the Phenomenon] Ljubljana: Studia Humanitatis.

Derrida, J. (1997) Izbrani spisi. [Selected Essays] Ljubljana: Krt 91.

Kembel, D. (2005) Lažljivčeva priča. Istorija neistine. [Campbell, Jeremy. The Liar's Tale: A History of Falsehood] Beograd: Biblioteka XX vek.

Margolis, J. (1989) Postscript on Modernism and Postmodernism, Both. Theory, Culture & Society. 6 (1): 5−30. London: SAGE.

Ragin, C. (2007) Družboslovno raziskovanje: Enotnost in raznolikost metode. [Constructing social research: the unity and diversity of method] Ljubljana: Faculty of Social Sciences.

Stempel, G. and Westley B. (1989) Research methods in mass communication. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.

Uhan, S. (1998) Prava in neprava mnenja. [Correct and Incorrect Opinions] Ljubljana: Znanstvena knjižnica (Scientific Library) Faculty of Social Sciences.

Vattimo, G. (2004) Filozofska karta 20. stoletja: Tehnika in eksistenca. [Philosophical Map of the 20th Century: Technique and Existence] Ljubljana: Založba Sophia publishing house.

Vezovnik, A. (2008) Kritična diskurzivna analiza v kontekstu sodobnih diskurzivnih teorij. [Critical Discursive Analysis in the Context of Contemporary Discursive Theories] Družboslovne razprave Journal, XXV (60): 27−45.

Sources

Francois, Philiphe (2009) Beda ideologije. [The Misery of Ideology] Le Monde diplomatique. November, 051.

ENDNOTES

[1]   In this context I link the term »empiricism« with those practices in research that use empirical research as the key criterion to reflect reality. In this view, research is primarily considered as the collection, processing and analysis of data, both qualitative and quantitative. Theory and data feature separately with the value of theory being tested against data (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000: 10).

[2]   In the background of this questioning lies the idea of research whose key and distinguishing characteristic is a continuous interpretation of and reflection on all research elements. A common mistake of researchers is that interpretation is understood as a »technical« element of research which follows the collection and processing of empirical material. In this case, the epistemological dimension of research is completely overlooked.

3   This paper addresses »reflexivity« as a specificity (specific characteristic) of research which integrates the »reflexivity« of different research approaches, which are mainly asserted by ethnomethodological ethnography, critical phenomenology, post-modern sociology, and authors such as Gouldner and Giddens (double hermeneutics). The concepts of reflexivity and reflection mostly appear in relation to the processes of »developing« knowledge and different contexts in which knowledge develops, including the actors (researchers). This paper leans on the concept created by Alvesson and Sköldberg who understand reflexivity as the intertwining of linguistic, social, political and theoretical elements in the process of »developing« (constructing) and interpreting empirical material.

4   While a text is unquestionably an »echo« of another text, this does not mean that researchers can renounce its relationship with the »outside« reality. Thus, a text should more adequately be understood as a metaphor of a social phenomenon »containing« the tension between the research object and its representative (discourse, text), in which it is important for researchers to recognise this tension and »release« it at the level of interpretation.

5   »There's nothing outside the text« states Derrida's first commandment. On the other hand, the entire culture is a text in which everything we consider to be real has its own structure. As individuals we are permanently caught up in a network of political, linguistic, historical and other structures; which is why deconstruction aims at breaking through borders, opening up, expanding and increasing the complexity, creating space for what is only emerging_ (Campbell 2005).

6   Derrida's key criticism refers to the so-called »metaphysics of presence«. The metaphysics of presence is a concept according to which there is always another, more important, more authentic, primal, either temporary or conceptual entity lying in the background of the observed phenomenon. Therefore, Derrida criticises the idea that there is always something behind what we observe that is hidden but crucial to the understanding of the phenomenon. For Derrida and post-structuralists in general the phenomenon does not have any »background« and so everything that is relevant for the researcher lies on the surface (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000).

7   Scholars who rely on post-structuralist theory consider as the most important the metaphorical nature of language or the idea that in social sciences the text is the metaphor for a social phenomenon. The metaphor allows the scholar to gain an insight into the phenomenon by creating »tension« between the object of study (society, organisation, the subject) on one side and the "modifier" (text, discourse) of these objects on the other. Therefore, it is important for researchers to recognise this tension, yet without allowing the metaphor to define the meaning (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000: 179).

8   In contemporary social science research a rigid distinction between qualitative and quantitative methods has become increasingly rare. Methodological discussions highlight the ontological and epistemological foundations of research, assuming that deciding on one method or another depends on the nature of the research question rather than belonging to a »school« or a theory.

9   Derrida believes words are the »doubling of absence« and, moreover, are built into a linguistic community that is historically and culturally determined, which causes an even further deviation from directness. That is why for Derrida the right model of language is writing (text) rather than the spoken word (Vattimo 2004: 92).

10   Post-structuralists see the solution in taking into account (disclosing) the hidden dimensions of their own interpretation. This can be done by »confronting« different interpretations which »disclose« the position of the dominant interpretation and the alternative one. In this way the text can remain »open«.

11   In this paper, I use the concept »traditional« to denote those approaches based on making a consistent distinction between quantitative and qualitative methods or standardised and non-standardised techniques of data collection. In this sense, contemporary (non-traditional) approaches are those which »redirect« the researcher's attention away from the »traditional« examination of empirical data to taking the cognitive, theoretical, intertextual and linguistic contexts of the emergence (collecting) of data into account.

12   For Bourdieu, the individual's history is never anything else than a »concrete speciality in the collective history of his stratum or class« (Bourdieu in Della Porta and Keating 2008: 304).

13   Similarly, Campbell says: »For Derrida every word is encircled by a fictitious »absence« of other words from which it differs. In a given system of signs, the meaning of an individual sign is what it is for the very absence of all other signs« (Kembel 2004: 375).

Istraživanje komunikacije: Interpretativni pristup između teorije i prakse

Samo Uhan

SAŽETAK

Ne može doći do pravilnog razumijevanja istraživanja komunikacije i načina na koji je ono provedeno bez razmatranja teorijske pozadine različitih metodoloških pristupa analizi komunikacije. Posljednjih nekoliko godina najvažniji je napredak postignut na području takozvane refleksivne metodologije. Prema Alvessonu i Sköldbergu, sintagma refleksivne metodologije (2000) označuje složen odnos između procesa razvijanja znanja i varijabilnih konteksta u kojima se znanje razvija, uključujući sve njihove sudionike. Cilj ovog rada u tom smislu jest predstaviti neke utjecaje poststrukturalne teorije koji su relevantni kvalitativno metodološkim strategijama u istraživanjima komunikacije. Rad počinje predstavljanjem ključnih teza strukturalističkih i poststrukturalističkih pristupa. Tome slijedi dio posvećen središnjoj figure Derridea i dekonstrukciji. Potom je dana ilustracija nekih implikacija poststrukturalizma za empirijsko istraživanje komunikacije. U tom su dijelu također ponuđeni neki mogući načini nošenja sa složenošću istraživačkog postupka. Rad završava raspravom koja otvara prostor za daljnju kritičku evaluaciju.

Ključne riječi: poststrukturalizam, refleksivna metodologija, dekonstrukcija, empirijsko istraživanje, komunikacija