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**DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND CONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACHES:  
THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

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This chapter is structured in terms of questions and answers. There are several reasons for adopting this format. First, people often consult a handbook to find the answers to questions so the format may simplify this task. Second, most constructionist approaches place a considerable emphasis on dialogue and question-answer sequences are dialogue in one of its most prototypical forms. Third, constructionist researchers have been at the forefront of moves to rethink the literary forms in which social science is presented.

I shall start with some general questions about constructionism and its place in psychology, and then I shall move on to focus on issues of method and analysis. I shall concentrate upon general principles and arguments, however, this is not intended to be a how-to-do-it chapter. Chapter 11, by Rosalind Gill, provides a more fleshed out example of a particular style of constructionist research.

### ***What is constructionism?***

On the face of it this seems like a sensible question with which to start. What could be wrong with give a broad characterisation, offering a compact definition, and then going on to describe constructionism in detail? The problem is that this would be a profoundly anti-constructionist approach to this question. It would imply that there is a simple thing — constructionism that can be neutrally and objectively described and defined. This would be a realist account of constructionism. That is, it would do precisely the thing that constructionism rejects. Instead of seeing constructionism as a simple describable thing, another approach would be to consider the way constructionism is itself constructed: how it is described differently, perhaps, in methods handbooks or theoretical overviews, by psychologists and sociologists; how different perspectives are treated as constructionist, and what is taken to hang on this ascription. However, I do not intent to attempt this ambitious enterprise here.

Having cautioned against treating definitions realistically, they can nevertheless be a useful ladder to better understanding. Here is a definition of social constructionism from John Shotter and Ken Gergen's important series of books with a constructionist theme:

[Social constructionism] has given voice to range of new topics, such as the social construction of personal identities; the role of power in the social making of meanings; rhetoric and narrative in establishing sciences; the centrality of everyday activities; remembering and forgetting as socially constituted activities; reflexivity in method and theorizing. The common thread underlying all these topics is a concern with the processes by which human abilities, experiences, commonsense and scientific knowledge are both produced in, and reproduce, human communities (Shotter and Gergen, 1994: p. i).

The quote implies a unity, but listing also shows mix and match of different theoretical perspectives.

Elsewhere Ken Gergen (1994) identifies five basic assumptions for a social constructionist science:

1. *The terms by which we account for the world and ourselves are not dictated by the stipulated objects of such accounts.* (1994: 49)
2. *The terms and forms by which we achieve understanding of the world and ourselves are social artifacts, products of historically and culturally situated interchanges among people.* (1994: 49)
3. *The degree to which a given account of the world or self is sustained across time is not dependent on the objective validity of the account but on the vicissitudes of social process.* (1994:51)
4. *Language derives its significance in human affairs from the way in which it functions within patterns of relationship.* (1994: 52)
5. *To appraise existing forms of discourse is to evaluate patterns of cultural life; such evaluations give voice to other cultural enclaves.* (1994: 53)

Another way to come at the question is not to attempt a definition, but to consider the different approaches that have been commonly called constructionist (with the warning that ‘commonly called’ hides a range of complications).

***What approaches have been called constructionist?***

One of the features of the approaches that have been called constructionist is that they often have often developed at the margins of disciplines, in the spaces where psychology blurs into sociology, where literary studies borders on political science, where feminism and rhetoric intersect. A rather cursory survey of constructionist approaches can easily gather together a dozen perspectives (see Table One). Note, however, that there are all sorts of potentially contentious features of this list and its absences. Reviewing literature is itself a constructive and sometimes highly contentious business (Ashmore, et. al., 1995); what should count as an approach? and what is its defining reference?

Table One: Varied Constructionist Approaches

<b>Approach</b>	<b>Example</b>
<b>Conversation analysis</b>	Atkinson and Heritage (1984a)
<b>Discourse analysis</b>	Potter and Wetherell (1987)
<b>Ethnomethodology</b>	Button (1991)
<b>Ethogenics</b>	Harré (1992)
<b>Feminist studies</b>	Radke and Stam (1994)
<b>Post-structuralism</b>	Culler (1983), Hollway (1989)
<b>Postmodern political science</b>	Der Derian and Shapiro (1989)
<b>Rhetoric</b>	Billig (1987)
<b>Reflexive ethnography</b>	Clifford and Marcus (1986)
<b>Sociology of scientific knowledge</b>	Latour and Woolgar (1986)
<b>Socio-cultural Psychology</b>	Wertsch (1991)

Some of these approaches — such as ethogenics — are developments specifically from within or directed at psychology. Others — such as postmodern political science — have been carried on in almost complete isolation from the problematics of psychology. Several of these perspectives have some psychological adherents, but have their main site of development outside the disciplinary boundaries of psychology.

***Is there an underlying unity to these approaches?***

Having identified these approaches as constructionist it might seem straightforward to identify features that they share in common. Yet it is hard to find a single characteristic central to them all. The idea of a family resemblance gives something of a sense of the pattern. First, they all tend to be oppositional movements of one kind or another to traditional social science positions, and in particular their realist assumptions. Second, they all tend to stress the way mind and action are contingent on specific cultural forms. They see minds as not having fixed essences but being built from the symbolic resources of a culture; indeed, in some constructionisms mind is not a mental entity at all, but a discursive move: a set of stories that people tell, or different discursive practices for dealing with one another as moral and accountable (cf. Harré, 1983; Coulter, 1989). Third, they all tend to treat discourse — variously theorized — as the central organizing principle of construction.

***What does this mean for traditional institutional boundaries?***

Clearly constructionism cuts across traditional disciplinary boundaries. In many cases current boundaries are a product of particular views of the social and human sciences that were established during university expansion after the Second World War, particularly in the US and UK. Lack of expansion in the late 70s and 80s during the proliferation of constructionist approaches has meant that there is often a disparity between the intellectual and bureaucratic

structure of departments. Constructionist researchers in psychology often have more in common with colleagues in areas of linguistics or sociology of science than they do with their colleagues who study ganglion sprouting or the ergonomics of car dashboards.

One of the challenges for constructionists is to be able to thrive in the traditional structures while operating in a genuinely interdisciplinary manner. This can cut both ways — at times it can be a struggle to establish the legitimacy of this kind of research with more mainstream psychological colleagues; yet at other times it can be a context that allows superficial theorizing and loose analysis.

***Is constructionism the same as social constructionism and constructivism?***

In psychology work has normally proceeded under the title *social constructionism* with concern being expressed that social *constructivism* could be confused with the artistic movement known as *constructivism* (Gergen, 1985). In contrast, in sociology of scientific knowledge *constructivism* is a well established perspective (with no concern about the artistic movement), but *constructivism* (without the social) is increasingly favoured over *social constructionism* (cf. Latour and Woolgar, 1979, 1986). One reason for this is that social construction is associated here with rather limited perspectives which relate knowledge to scientists' social background and group allegiances. However, sociological constructionists often see such accounts as reductive (Mulkay, 1979; Woolgar, 1988). Moreover, they may want to make recourse to processes in texts and rhetoric which are not social in this more traditional way (Knorr-Cetina, 1995). More radically, they have started to question the coherence of the very distinction between the social and non-social (Latour, 1987).

***Is there something that could be called a constructionist method?***

The short answer to this is no. If anything there is even more variation of method than of theory. For many of these approaches it is not clear that there is anything which would

correspond to what psychologists traditionally think of as a method. Perhaps the most appropriate consideration in many cases would be what Billig (1988a) calls scholarship. That is, lack of method in the sense of a formally specified set of procedures and calculations, does not mean a lack of argument or rigour; nor does it mean that the theoretical system is not guiding analysis in various ways.

\* \* \*

For the rest of this chapter, I want to concentrate on discourse analysis which is an approach where it makes more sense to talk about research method. Although even here method is understood very differently than is normal in psychology. For example, one point of contrast is in the justification of 'results'. In much traditional psychological work, justification is provided by carrying out the procedure of analysis correctly and fully. A sample is collected, some 'variables' operationalized, conventional statistical tests are carried out, and so on. In contrast, in discourse analysis, the analytic procedure is largely separate from how claims are justified.

### ***What is discourse analysis?***

Discourse analysis focuses on talk and texts as social practices, and on the resources that are drawn on to enable those practices. For example, discourse analytic studies of racism have been concerned with the way descriptions are marshalled in particular contexts to legitimate the blaming of a minority group (Potter and Wetherell, 1988), and with the resources ('interpretative repertoires') that are available in a particular cultural setting for legitimating racist practices (Nairn and McCreanor, 1991; Wetherell and Potter, 1992).

Discourse analysts have focused on issues of stake and accountability, looking at the way people manage pervasive issues of blame and responsibility (Antaki, 1994; Edwards and Potter, 1993; Gill, 1993) and have studied the way descriptions are put together to perform



actions and manage accountability (Potter, forthcoming). For example, Edwards (1994) studied 'script formulations' in a set of telephone conversations, showing the way events could be described to present them as regular and routine, to treat them as a characteristic consequence of personal dispositions or, to make them out as an unusual result of outside pressures. Such descriptions manage questions of fault and provide legitimation for courses of action.

Discourse analysts have rejected the traditional cognitive explanations of psychology. Rather than try and explain actions as a consequence of mental processes or entities, their interest has been in how mentalist notions are constructed and used in interaction. For example, instead of attempting to explain sexism, say, in terms of the attitudes of individuals, the concern is with how evaluations are managed in particular interactions, and either linked up with, or separated from, individuals (Gill, 1993; Wetherell, et al., 1987).

These are some of the characteristic strands of discourse work, but they do not define it. New studies are being done, pushing back the limits of discourse work and the problematics of discourse analysis are providing a new take on a range of psychological issues.

***Does that mean there is a discourse analytic answer to any psychological question?***

No. One of the mistakes that people sometimes make when they are starting discourse work is to treat discourse analysis as a method that can simply be plugged in to a predefined question: 'I am interested in the factors that cause people to smoke, should I use an observational study, an experimental simulation, or discourse analysis?' What this misses is that, first, discourse analysis is not just a method but is a whole perspective on social life and its research, and, second, that all methods involve a range of theoretical assumptions.

Traditional psychology has often been concerned with factors and outcomes, and these ideas are thoroughly enmeshed in thinking about experimentation and questionnaire design. The

logic of discourse analysis is a rhetorical and normative one. Any rhetorical move can have a rhetorical counter move — categorization, say, can be countered by particularization (Billig, 1985). Effectiveness is not guaranteed as it should be with a causal process; for a norm is not a mechanical template. Norms are oriented to, but they are also regularly deviated from, although such deviations may themselves be marked by a range of accounts or sanctions. One of the skills involved in discourse analytic work is in formulating questions that are theoretically coherent and analytically manageable. Simply importing a question cold from a traditional psychological framework is asking for trouble.

Another important difference in the formulation of questions is that traditional psychologists have become devoted to hypothetico deductivism, where quality research is seen to hang on a well formed question or precisely specified hypothesis. Without endorsing a naive, assumption free inductivism, discourse researchers have often found it productive to collect and explore a set of materials — interview transcripts or natural records of some kind — without being hampered by the need to start from a specific hypothesis. Indeed, the devotion to a fully formulated prior hypothesis has probably been one of the reasons why psychologists have been so reluctant to study records of natural interaction such as everyday conversations between familiars or interactions in the workplace.

### ***What are interpretative repertoires?***

I noted above that discourse analysis is concerned both with the organization of texts and talk in practices, and with the discursive resources that those practices draw on. The notion of interpretative repertoires is intended primarily to help in specifying and analysing interpretative resources. Interpretative repertoires are systematically related sets of terms, often used with stylistic and grammatical coherence, and often organized around one or more central metaphors. They are historically developed and make up an important part of the common sense of a culture; although some may be specific to certain institutional domains.

The idea of an interpretative repertoire is intended to accommodate to the twin considerations that there are resources available with an off-the-shelf character that can be used in a range of different settings to do particular tasks, and that these resources have a more bespoke flexibility which allows them to be selectively drawn on and reworked according to the setting. It is the attempt to accommodate to this flexible, local use that distinguishes interpretative repertoires from the more Foucaultian notion of discourses (Parker, 1992; Potter, et al., 1990). Participants will often draw on a number of different repertoires, flitting between them as they construct the sense of a particular phenomenon, or as they perform different actions. Billig (1992) refers to this as the kaleidoscope of common sense.

The classic research using this notion is Gilbert and Mulkey's (1984) study of scientists discourse, which records the way scientists use one interpretative repertoire in their formal writing for justifying facts, and another in their informal talk when accounting for why competing scientists were in error. More recently, the notion has been developed in a number of studies with a more social psychological focus (e.g. Marshall and Raabe, 1993; Potter and Reicher, 1987; Wetherell et al, 1987; Wetherell and Potter, 1992). The overall analytic goal in these studies is the identification of repertoires and the explication of the practices they are part of. For methodological discussions relating to repertoire analysis see in particular Coyle (1995), Potter and Wetherell (1987, ch. 7, forthcoming) and Wetherell and Potter (1992, ch. 4) and Wooffitt (1992a).

Although the notion of interpretative repertoires has proved analytically fruitful, it has some limitations. For example, it is much more difficult to make clear and consistent judgements about the boundaries of particular repertoires outside of constrained institutional settings such as science discourse. Another problem is that the generality of the repertoire notion may obscure local interactional business done by particular discourse forms (see Potter, forthcoming; Wooffitt, 1992b).

***Is repertoire analysis the main task of discourse analysis?***

No. Although it has been one important development, it is increasingly supplemented or replaced by studies of the way specific actions are accomplished, or of the devices and procedures through which factual versions are constructed. These are studies asking the following sorts of questions. How is a blaming achieved? How is a particular version of the world made to seem solid and unproblematic? How are social categories constructed and managed in practice? Such questions require an understanding of what Billig (1987) calls the witcraft of rhetoric: the detailed, contextually sensitive manner in which versions are constructed and arguments deployed as well as an appreciation of the conversational organizations in which such procedures are embedded. Indeed, it is here that the study of discourse shades both into the study of rhetoric and work on conversation analysis.

There is less written on methodological aspects of this style of discourse work. However, Potter and Wetherell (1994) describe the methodological decisions and analytic practices in one study of this kind, trying to show how specific conclusions were arrived at. Wooffitt (1992a,b) also provides a clear and helpful introduction to such analysis.

***How are discourse and conversation analysis similar and different?***

Conversation analysis has developed from pioneering work of Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson to provide an elaborate and systematic account of talk-in-interaction. It is sometimes crudely stereotyped by psychologists as the study of the rules of turn taking in trivial conversations. However, the point of conversation analysis is to explicate the fundamental sense that interaction has for its participants. It is a fast growing and notably cumulative field which has highlighted major deficiencies in the speech act approaches that psychologists often look to for an account of language practices (Levinson, 1983; Schegloff, 1988) as well as providing striking analyses of topics as diverse as intersubjectivity (Schegloff, 1992), public speaking (Atkinson, 1984) and courtroom interaction (Drew, 1992).

Conversation analysis is relevant to discourse analysis in two ways. First, it provides a powerful and general understanding of interaction that has the potential to illuminate a wide range of research questions. After all, much human interaction is performed through conversation and to understand many of the more psychological and social phenomena that discourse analysts are interested in it is necessary to understand how they emerge out of the general pragmatics of conversation. This involves being mindful of basic features such as turn organization, pairing of actions, normative ranking of alternative turns, as well as considering the findings of many studies showing the delicate way in which actions are embedded in sequences of discourse. A basic practical understanding of CA is a prerequisite for producing high class DA work. The best and most accessible current introduction is undoubtedly Nofsinger (1991), although Heritage (1984) has an excellent chapter situating CA in its ethnomethodological context (see also Heritage, 1988).

There are specific areas where discourse and conversation analysis come together. Like discourse analysts, conversation analysts have paid a lot of attention to the way versions are constructed and actions performed. One of the points argued by Sacks (1992) is that interaction is not merely organized in its general forms, but is also organized in its particulars. Any level of detail in talk — hesitations, repairs, pauses — can be crucial for a piece of interaction; indeed, much of the business of interaction may be happening in the details. Workers in this tradition have also developed a sophisticated critique of cognitivist approaches to interaction, and at the same time attempted to identify grounds for making inferences about cognitive entities (Coulter, 1989; Pomerantz, 1990/91). CA and DA are starting to develop complementary alternatives to cognitivist theory.

Making conversational interaction a topic of study is also important for methodological reasons. CA highlights a symmetry between the position of the participant and analyst in a conversation. In conversations speaker provide their own ongoing interpretation of what is going on. In most cases, a turn of talk is based upon and displays some sort of analysis of the

sense of the previous turn of talk. A turn may be *responded to* as a question, a criticism, an invitation and so on — and in responding to it in this way the speaker displays their understanding. And if the displayed understanding is faulty various repair mechanisms can come into play in the next turn to sort things out. What this provides, then, is a way for the analyst to use the participants' own, situated, analyses to help check the adequacy of their own analysts' claims. The point is not that the analyst is forced to take such displayed understanding at face value, nor that interaction is always well oiled and explicit; nevertheless, it is one important resource for understanding interaction.

This ability to use participants' understandings to build up the analysts' account distinguishes this work from other types of constructionist research which have focused on texts or documents, or considered talk abstracted from its conversational context. While discourse analysts have often worked with interview material, conversation analysts have worked almost exclusively with natural occurring records of interaction collected with tape recorders or video and transcribed to a high degree of detail.

There are a number of discussions focused on CA methods. Atkinson and Heritage (1984b), Heritage (forthcoming), Wooffitt (1990) and Wootton (1989) cover a range of practical issues, Psathas (1990, 1995) attempts to characterise the analytic mentality that is involved in this work, and Drew (in press) introduces CA in a way that is designed specifically for psychologists.

### ***How are discourse and rhetorical analysis similar and different?***

The study of rhetoric was revived in the 1970s and 80s with a particular concern with the argumentative organization of texts and the different rhetorical forms used to make them persuasive (Perelman and Olbrecht-Tyteca, 1971). Billig (1987) has highlighted the way rhetorical ideas can be used to reformulate thinking in psychology. For example, that the metaphor of an argument can be used to make sense of thought processes; instead of viewing

thought as the operation of some calculating mechanism on internally consistent systems of belief, thought can be seen as riven with argumentative dilemmas whose structure comes from the available interpretative repertoires of a culture (Billig, et al., 1988). So while a more orthodox social psychologist might be concerned with an evaluative expression as an index of a person's individual attitude, a rhetorical analyst might be concerned to reveal the way that evaluation is put together to counter an established alternative (Billig, 1988b).

Conversation and rhetorical analysis emphasise two different orders of relationship. CA emphasises sequential organization across turns; rhetorical analysis emphasises the relationship between opposing argumentative positions. These may themselves be sequentially organized, but are not necessarily so. Sometimes they may be expressed as direct and explicit argumentative claims using the speech act vocabulary of argument ('I don't agree with that'); at other times rhetorical contrasts may be built implicitly, often through competing descriptions of some action or event; for instance at a rape trial:

**Counsel:** And during the evening, didn't Mr. O [*the defendant*] come over to sit with you?

**Witness:** Sat at our table.

(See Drew, 1992; Edwards and Potter, 1992). Discourse analytic studies sometimes collect a range of different analytic materials — newspaper reports, interactional materials, interviews, parliamentary records — to facilitate a rhetorical analysis of some domain. In this way it becomes possible to identify the rhetorical targets and oppositions of particular arguments and descriptions.

### ***What is the role of interviews in discourse analysis?***

Interviews have been used extensively in discourse analytic work; however, they are construed in a novel manner. Traditionally, the goal of an interview was to produce a piece of colourless, neutral interaction. However, in practice interviews are as complex and vivid

as any other type of interaction, and responses to answers which may seem neutral and non-committal in the abstract may have an important impact on the trajectory of the interaction.

In discourse research interviews have been used extensively because they allow a relatively standard range of themes to be addressed with different participants — something hard to achieve when collecting naturalistic materials. They also allow a high degree of control over sampling. Interviews are conceptualized as an arena for identifying and exploring participants interpretative practices rather than an instrument for accessing a veridical account of something that happened elsewhere, or a set of attitudes and beliefs (Mischler, 1986; Potter and Mulkey, 1985). An interview can be a particularly effective way of getting at the range of interpretative repertoires that a participant has available as well as some of the uses to which those repertoires are put. Billig (1992) and Wetherell and Potter (1992) are both extended discourse based studies which work principally from interview material and illustrate some of the analytic possibilities they provide. Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995) draw extensively on CA to show how interviews can be dealt with as an interaction rather than a research instrument, exploring the way that different social categories are worked up, used and avoided in the course of interview talk.

Despite the virtues of this use of interviews, there are problems in relating the practices that happen in interviews to what goes on elsewhere and avoiding the interaction being swamped by the interviewer's own categories and constructions. Even the most open ended of interviews is guided by a schedule which specifies topics and themes as important. Moreover, even when an interview is understood as an interaction in its own right, the dominant question and answer format is not ideal for getting at the sorts of turn-by-turn display of action and understanding that conversation analysts have utilised so effectively. Partly for these reasons, discourse analysts have been increasingly turning to the study of records of natural interaction.



### ***What is the role of records of natural interaction?***

Arguably, one of the most astonishing omissions in 20th century psychology has been the study of what people do; their interactions in the home and workplace. The few attempts in this direction were marred by a simplistic behaviourism which ignored interaction or reduced it to brute movements. Inspired in part by the success of CA in working with records of natural interaction, discourse analysts have started to work with transcripts of conversations, newspaper articles, recordings of counselling sessions and similar materials.

The term 'natural' here should be taken contrastively. These settings are made up of natural interaction in the sense that it is not 'got up' by the researcher. The test is whether the interaction would have taken place, and in the form that it did, if the researcher had not been born. Of course, the use of recording technology itself can have an impact on participants' understandings of a situation and their actions. However, in practice there are a range of techniques for minimizing the intrusive effects of recording, such as using a period of acclimatisation. Practice suggests that such effects are often surprisingly small.

In most cases, such records cannot be used directly — a tape, particularly a video tape, is a very clumsy way to deal with materials. What is required is a transcription that turns the record into a form that can be read through quickly, that allows different sections to be compared, and that can easily be reproduced in research papers. The transcript does not replace the tape — often it is most helpful to work in parallel with both.

### ***What kind of transcript is most useful?***

A transcript is not a neutral, simple rendition of the words on a tape (Ochs, 1979). Different transcription systems emphasise different features of interaction. For example, a researcher with a speech therapy interest will need a system that records phonetics; a sociolinguist concerned with language variety will need some way of showing accent. What system will a

discourse analyst need? One common approach claims that discourse analysis concerned with broad content themes such as interpretative repertoires needs only a relatively basic scheme which represents the words and relatively gross features such as corrections and hesitations, while analysis more concerned with interactional specifics will need to represent pause length, emphasis, various intonational features, overlap and so on. Although there is some sense to this, it obscures some tensions that need careful consideration.

In the first place, it is not easy, nor analytically satisfactory, to make a strong distinction between content and interaction in this way. Indeed, one of the consequences of using a basic transcription scheme is that it will often fail to capture those features which show how the content is occasioned by the interaction that is taking place. For example, with a research interview it may obscure just how much the participants' 'responses' are a product of various activities (some very subtle) on the part of the interviewer. Moreover, one of the virtues of discourse analytic work is that readers should be able to assess the interpretations that are made because at least a selection of the original analytic materials have been reproduced. It might be argued that, even if the analyst is not making use of interactional specifics, a reader should have them available so they can make their own judgements.

Having made this strong argument for a fuller approach to transcription, it is important to stress that doing a good transcript is very demanding and time consuming. It is hard to give a standard figure for how long it takes because much depends on the quality of the recording (fuzzy, quiet tapes can double the time necessary) and the type of interaction (a couple talking down the phone present much less of a challenge than a multi-party conversation with a lot of overlapping talk and extraneous noise); nevertheless, a ratio of one hour of tape to twenty of transcription time is not unreasonable. However, this time should not be thought of as dead time before the analysis proper. Often some of the most revealing analytic insights come during transcription because a profound engagement with the material is needed to produce a good transcript — it is always useful to make analytic notes in parallel to the actual transcription.

The most commonly used system in conversation analysis, and increasingly discourse analysis, was developed by Gail Jefferson. It is a system developed to be easily used with the symbols on a standard keyboard, and records features of interaction that have been found to be important for talk-in-interaction. For fuller accounts of Jefferson's system see Atkinson and Heritage (1984), Button and Lee (1987), Jefferson (1985) and Psathas and Anderson (1990).

*Can you illustrate the value of a good transcript?*

There are numerous CA studies that show how features of interaction that are often missed out in more basic transcripts can be analytically useful and interactionally consequential. Most of the work on 'preference organization', for example, (the differential marking of responses such as acceptances and refusals, agreements and disagreements) is inconceivable without the availability of high quality transcription (see Levinson, 1983).

Here is a fragment of talk from a relationship counselling interview. The Counsellor (C) is asking the woman (W) about the sequence of events leading to the request for counselling.

**Counsellor:** Wha- (.) what happened at that point.

**Woman:** At that poi:nt, (0.6) Jimmy ha- (.)  
my- Jimmy is extremely jealous.  
Ex- extremely jealous per:son.  
Has a:lways ↓been, from the da:y we met.  
Y'know?  
(DE-JF/C2/S1 - p.4)

### **The Transcription Symbols Used in the Extract**

A dash marks a sharp cut off of the prior word.

A colon marks an extension to the preceding sound.

A dot in brackets shows a noticeable pause to short to measure.

Underlining marks emphasised delivery.

A full stop indicates a ‘completing’ intonation, while a comma indicates a continuing intonation.

Two things may be immediately striking about this extract. First, the transcription symbols may make it hard to read easily. Second, there seems to be a lot of ‘mess’ in it: repairs and changes of gear. On the first point, reading transcript is itself something of a skill which develops with familiarity. After a period getting used to materials of this kind it is the transcript *without* the symbols that looks odd — idealized, cleaned and shorn of its specificity — while the fuller transcript becomes evocative of the interaction captured on the tape. It starts to be possible to hear, in a sense, the delivery.

On the second point, what seems on first reading to be mess is quickly understandable as something much more organized. The woman breaks off her direct answer to provide a description of her partner. This description is reformulated and emphasised until it has a precise sense that is suitable for the business in hand (briefly and over-simply: starting to display how the relationship problem is his fault — for more on this, see Edwards, forthcoming; Potter, forthcoming). The careful transcript here allows us to see this final version being actively shaped, and gives us a feel for the versions that are rejected as unsatisfactory.

### ***What about reliability and validity?***

The notions of reliability and validity have increasingly taken on a mix of everyday and technical senses in traditional forms of psychology. Reliability is taken to be established in a quantitative fashion by techniques such as test-retest correlations or inter-rater reliability. Validity is often treated as established by a congruence between different instruments, or perhaps a triangulation from different research methods. Because of the different theoretical assumptions in discourse work, along with its largely non-quantitative nature, these approaches to reliability and validity are largely unworkable here. Nevertheless, these are important considerations which can be, and have been, addressed in this work.

Reliability and validity are not so clearly separated in discourse work. Various considerations are relevant; four important ones being deviant case analysis, participants' understanding, coherence and reader evaluation.

*Deviant case analysis.* A discourse analytic study will often work with a collection of instances of some putative phenomenon with the aim of showing some pattern or regularity. For example, an analyst might claim that news interviewees generally avoid treating interviewers as responsible for views expressed in questions (Heritage and Greatbatch, 1996). One of the most useful analytic phenomena are cases which seem to go against the pattern or are deviant in some way. In this type of work such deviant cases are not necessarily disconfirmations of the pattern (although they could be); instead their special features may help confirm the genuineness of the pattern (Heritage, 1988). For example, when a news interviewee does treat the interviewer as accountable for a view posed in a question it can create serious trouble for the interaction (Potter, forthcoming). The deviant case can show up just the kind of problem that show why the standard pattern should take the form it does.

*Participants Understanding.* As I noted in the discussion of conversation analysis, one of its important elements is its use of participants' own understandings. Thus instead of the analyst

saying that this turn of talk is a compliment, say, the focus is on how the participants' treat it. At its simplest, is it responded to with an acknowledgement, perhaps, or a depreciation: 'Oh that's very sweet of you, its just an old top I picked up cheap?' A common critique of discourse analytic work is that there is no check on its interpretations. However, a close attention to participants' understandings provides one kind of check.

*Coherence.* One of the features of conversation analysis and increasingly of discourse work is its cumulative nature. A set of studies can be combined together, and can build on the insights of earlier work. For example, work on fact construction builds on the insights about accountability from earlier studies, and its success provides a further confirmation of the validity of those studies (Edwards and Potter, 1993). There is a sense, then, that each new study provides a check on the adequacy of previous studies that are drawn on. Those studies which capture something about interaction can be built on, those that do not are likely to become ignored.

*Readers' Evaluation.* Perhaps the most important and distinctive feature in the validation of discourse work is the presentation of rich and extended materials in a way that allows readers of discourse studies to evaluate their adequacy. This has two facets. On the one hand, it allows them to assess the particular interpretation that is made as it is presented in parallel with the original materials. This is not the case in much ethnographic work where the interpretations have to be taken largely on trust and what data that is presented is largely pre-theorized; nor is it the case with much traditional experimental and content analytic work where it is rare for 'raw' data to be included and more than one or two illustrative codings presented. On the other hand, readers are themselves skilled interactants with a wide range of cultural competencies as viewers of news interviews, members of close relationship, recipients of compliment, and so on. Thus the judgements they can make are not merely abstract ones of the relation between materials and interpretations, but of the adequacy of more general claims.

A final comment on validity. These features are not all present in all discourse studies; nor do they singly or in combination guarantee the validity of an analysis. As sociologists of science have repeatedly shown, there are no such guarantees in science.

***Is constructionist research necessarily qualitative?***

Some researchers have treated the issue of quantification as a definitional one; it is part of the meaning of constructionist work in general and DA in particular that it is qualitative.

However, I think this gives too much importance to the quantity/quality divide and risks an uncritical support of qualitative work and criticism of quantitative. I would rather see quantification as quite appropriate in certain situations depending on a range of analytic and theoretical considerations. Nevertheless, arguments for quantification in discourse work can easily miss the point that the research goal is often that of explicating what should count as an instance of something; what is a compliment, or a blaming, or an error account? That is not something decided by counting — is a prerequisite for counting.

The issue of how far quantification is appropriate in conversation and discourse analytic work has received some detailed attention recently. A useful source is a discussion between various conversation, communication and discourse research researchers which explores different perspectives on the role of counting (Wieder, 1993). Schegloff (1993) and Heritage (forthcoming) both provide clear arguments for being cautious when attempting to quantify because of a range of difficulties that arise when transforming discursive materials into numerical form. However, the issue of quantification is undoubtedly going to become more important with the growth of this research area.

In parallel this discussion of the role of quantification in discourse research there is an increasing interest in study quantification practices as a topic. Such work has looked at quantification in both technical and everyday situations. Some of the classic work in this area was done by Sacks (1992) on members' measurement systems. He was particularly

concerned to show that mundane practices of quantification are not a poor imitation of the seemingly more precise and accurate technical practices of statisticians and scientists, but have a subtle and sophisticated logic of their own. For example a request for an appointment at half past four is not merely a less precise way of requesting an appointment at four twenty eight. Rather, different sets of expectations about punctuality, the type of meeting it is, and what delay would count as late are called into play in each case.

Other work in 'ethnostatistics', as Gephart (1988) has dubbed the study of statistics as a cultural practice, has looked at the way health economists have performed cost-benefit analyses (Ashmore et al, 1989) the construction of accounts of the success of charity funded cancer treatment (Potter, et al, 1991) and the textual practices for representing the 'subjects' in social psychology experiments (Billig, 1994). This work eats away at the idea that there is a straightforward choice between doing quantitative and qualitative research, and that entirely different considerations are involved in each.

### *Is that it?*

There are many other considerations about the nature of discourse research and constructionist work more generally that could be addressed here. However, coming to see these abstract considerations is quite different from learning to do analysis which is very much a craft skill like bike riding or chicken sexing. There is no substitute for learning by doing, and such learning is almost always better done collaboratively so that interpretations and ideas can be explored with co-workers. Such learning is time consuming, hard work and often frustrating. However, the goal is to develop an analytic mentality that is sensitive to the action orientation of talk and texts.



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