

## Discourse: noun, verb or social practice?

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**ABSTRACT** *This paper comments on some of the different senses of the notion of discourse in the various relevant literatures and then overviews the basic features of a coherent discourse analytic programme in Psychology. Parker's approach is criticised for (a) its tendency to reify discourses as objects; (b) its undeveloped notion of analytic practice; (c) its vulnerability to common sense assumptions. It ends by exploring the virtues of 'interpretative repertoires' over 'discourses' as an analytic/theoretical notion.*

### Introduction

In the last few years the analysis of discourse and rhetoric has become increasingly established as a major alternative perspective on issues of psychological concern. For example, it has offered critical reassessments of such basic psychological notions as attitudes (Billig, 1987, 1988a, 1989a; Condor, 1987; Potter & Wetherell, 1987, 1988a; Smith, 1987), gender (Billig *et al.*, 1988; Frazer, 1988; Hollway, 1989; Marshall & Wetherell, 1989; Potter *et al.*, 1984; Wetherell, 1986; Wetherell *et al.*, 1987; Walkerdine, 1988) and memory (Billig, 1990; Bogen & Lynch, 1989; Coulter, 1985; Drew, 1989; Edwards & Middleton, 1986, 1988; Edwards & Potter, 1990; Wooffitt, 1989) as well as a reworking of major social psychological notions: categories (Billig, 1985, 1987; Condor, 1988; Potter, 1988a; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Widdicomb & Wooffitt, forthcoming), social representations (Billig, 1988b, forthcoming; Litton & Potter, 1985; McKinlay *et al.*, forthcoming; Potter & Litton, 1985; Potter & Wetherell, 1987), and racism (Billig, 1988; Condor, 1988; van Dijk, 1984, 1987; Essed, 1988; Potter & Wetherell, 1988b; Reeves, 1983; Sykes, 1985; Wetherell & Potter, 1986, forthcoming).

It is worth commenting on the term discourse analysis and its history as it provides a context for our later discussion of the very interesting paper by Parker (1990) and, at the same time, illustrates some of the basic issues that are at stake. In the early 1980s at last four distinct strands of work laid claim to the title discourse analysis. The most psychologically orientated of these had close links with cognitive science and often characterised its concern as with discourse processes; for example,

the way the pattern of discourse effects the recall and understanding of events (e.g. van Dijk & Kintch, 1983). A second strand was strongly influenced by speech act theory and aimed at providing a systematic account of the organisation of verbal interaction, for example in classrooms (Coulthard & Montgomery, 1981; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). The third strand was centred in the entirely different tradition of continental social philosophy and cultural analysis. While most proponents worked with the titles of semiology or post-structuralism, Foucault (1971, 1972) is notable for characterizing his 'archeology' of madness and medicine as discourse analysis. This strand of work is closest to that outlined by Parker. Finally, within the sociology of science a distinct position was developed through focusing on scientific discourse which raised important problems for both traditional and radical theories of scientific action (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984; Mulkay *et al.*, 1983).

If this complication were not enough, discourse analysis is also used in a more encompassing fashion to refer to large bodies of diverse work. For example, it has been used as a summary term for research in speech act, sociolinguistic and social psychological approaches to language areas (e.g. Brown & Yule, 1983; van Dijk, 1985) and in reviews of almost entirely independent developments in structuralism and semiotics (MacDonnell, 1986). This creates its own special complexities. For example, conversation analysis can be one sub-variety of discourse analysis (e.g. in van Dijk, 1985) or conversation analysis can be a competing theoretical position to discourse analysis (e.g. Sharrock & Anderson, 1987). Alternatively, the distinction between discourse analysis and text analysis has been used to mark off the study of actual speech and writing from presumed underlying structures of coherence (Halliday, 1978). Thus quite separate strands of work are called discourse analysis and the term is used with radically varying degrees of specificity and subtle theoretical inflection.

This digression into the variety of discourse analyses illustrates how the terms 'discourse' and 'discourse analysis' can be part of contrasting theoretical and disciplinary debates and can come to mean very different things. Indeed, part of the struggle is exactly over what these terms mean or what they ought to mean. The seemingly innocent definitional question addressed by Parker 'what is discourse?' is thus a particularly charged one, hiding many subtle ramifications behind its apparent simplicity. In this comment, we will address three points. First, we will briefly indicate the rationale for the definition of discourse analysis developed by Potter & Wetherell (1987). Second, we will suggest some difficulties with the way Parker has formulated the problem of identifying discourses. Third, we will document some of the virtues of the alternative theoretical notion of interpretative repertoires.

### **Discourse analysis: descriptive and constructive**

When *Discourse and Social Psychology* was written in 1986 there was very little of what social psychologists now call discourse analysis being published, and so there were choices to make of both a descriptive and constructive nature. For example, should we weigh into the minefield of definitions of discourse and use the

established but conflictual term 'discourse' or should we propose an alternative of our own, say 'social text analysis' (as in Potter *et al.*, 1984). Such a choice would, of course, have implications for whether we wished to present ourselves as doing the 'merely descriptive' work of a textbook or as making an original contribution, a 'new' analytic perspective. We opted for the term 'discourse analysis', not wanting to miss out on the cross-fertilization the use of this term brought to bear, but also tried to suggest three major themes which would distinguish a new social psychological orientation to such research: (1) it would have a concern with functional orientation of language; (2) it would address the constructive processes that are part and parcel of the functional orientation; and (3) it would have an awareness of the variability thrown up by this orientation.

### (1) *Function*

A number of disparate traditions of language research have stressed that it is a medium orientated to action. The most obvious of these are linguistic philosophy and, in particular, speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Ryle, 1949; Searle, 1968; Searle *et al.*, 1979; Wittgenstein, 1953, 1980) as well as ethnomethodology and the conversation analytic perspective which grew out of it (Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1978, 1984, 1988; Atkinson & Heritage, 1984; Sacks *et al.*, 1974; Wieder, 1974). Workers in these traditions stress that discourse is orientated to action; utterances ask questions, make accusations, justify oversights, and so on.

The term function, then, emphasizes the action and outcome orientated nature of descriptive discourse against views of language as an abstract, essentially referential system which have been prevalent in psychological theory and practice (see Potter & Wetherell, 1987). This must not be understood in a mechanical sense. Just because an account is organized to offer the particular action of blame this does not mean that the blame will be accepted by the recipient or even by the wider community. Indeed, as Billig (1987, 1989b) has emphasized, discourse is organized rhetorically; effective techniques of blaming can be countered by equally effective techniques of mitigation. In part, a study of discourse is an analysis of this rhetorical struggle.

### (2) *Construction*

The metaphor of construction illuminates three facets of this discourse analytic approach. First, discourse is manufactured out of pre-existing linguistic resources. That is, language and linguistic practices offer a sediment of systems of terms, narrative forms, metaphors and commonplaces from which a particular account can be assembled. Secondly such an assembly will involve choice or selection from possibilities. On the most basic level, philosophers of science such as Kuhn and Popper have stressed that with even the most simple of phenomena it is possible to provide many different kinds of description (see Lynch & Woolgar, 1988). What is picked out in talk depends on the orientation and interests of the speaker. Thirdly, and more generally, the constructivist metaphor reminds us that much of the time

we deal with the world in terms of discursive constructions or versions. Our access to world events, the findings of science, or how a particular film should be evaluated are via constructions in texts and talk. In this sense, these texts and talk construct our world, and there are clear parallels here with the constructive emphases of post-structuralism which Parker describes.

### (3) *Variation*

The third central concept, variation, follows from the first two. Given that discourse is constructed and orientated to action, we will expect that with different sorts of activities different sorts of discourse will be produced. If you take an event, say, or a social group or a feature of a person; it will be described in different ways as the functional orientation changes from blaming, for example, to excusing. Stated like this it becomes almost a truism. However, the sorts of variation between descriptive accounts of the same phenomenon can be striking in analytic practice (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Again there are fruitful parallels here with the notion of contradiction which dominates ideological analyses and which Parker, rightly, highlights as a central facet of research.

Variability is central for analysis because of its close connection to functional orientation. As this orientation leads to variation, so the presence of variation can be used as an analytic clue to work back to functional orientation. That is, we can predict that certain sorts of functional orientations will lead to certain sorts of systematic variations and look for the presence of those variations (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984; Potter & Mulkay, 1985; Wetherell & Potter, 1988).

For us, then, the presence in some form or other of these three theoretical strands provides a rough but principled way of grouping together a body of work as discourse analysis; although within this soft perimeter there are many important theoretical tensions and much that we would take issue with in terms of theoretical claims or simply poorly realised and unscholarly analysis (Billig, 1988c). They are not meant to provide an exclusive definition but rather to mark out an area which would have significant implications for work in social psychology. What we expressly did not do, however, was make an equation of 'discourse analysis' with the 'analysis of *discourses*' as Parker does above. We will elaborate on the reasons for this in the next section.

## **Reification and intuition**

Our dissatisfaction with Parker's argument for an analysis of discourses focuses on three main points: (1) its tendency to reification; (2) its ingenuous version of analytic practice; (3) its permeability to unexplicated common sense.

### (1) *Reification*

The notion of reification is intended to capture the confusion where ideas are thought of or treated as objects. In this case, the problem is not *ideas* being

objectified so much as *discourses* in their guise as 'sets of statements'. Parker is endorsing something akin to the geology of plate tectonics—great plates (discourses) on the earth's crust circulate and clash together; some plates grind violently together; others slip quietly over top of one another; volcanoes burst through while massive forces work unseen below. The limitation with this approach is that the discourses in this view become formed as coherent and carefully systematized (Parker, 1989, p. 5) wholes which take on the status of causal agents for analytic purposes. That is, the processes of interest are seen as those of (abstract) discourse working on another (abstract) discourse. This approach can provide considerable heuristic potency as Foucault's work demonstrates, and the historical twist to analysis associated with this should be welcomed. Nevertheless, it is greatly weakened in Parker's formulation for social psychology by the isolation of the propositional functions of discourse (the statements) from all the rest of the pragmatic work that is done in text and talk.

What is excluded?—the actual working of discourse as a constitutive part of social practices situated in *specific* contexts. Discourses or interpretative repertoires are always versions organised in particular contexts, their study should be based around the performance of procedures or actions; that is, the 'witcraft' analysed in the rhetorical tradition (Billig, 1987) and the interpretative procedures and devices studied in the conversation analytic tradition (Heritage, 1984). A recent study investigating the practices done through meritocratic discourse in the context of race and educational inequality in New Zealand (Potter & Wetherell, 1989) exemplifies this concern. The analysis consists not just of tracing out the socially constitutive role of discourse, in this case through the criticism of programmes attacking inequality, but also (as in other analyses of this type) involved examining in a detailed manner how talk was made effective, and, indeed, self-evident on each specific occasion.

## (2) *Analytic practice*

Parker's more reified version of discourse analysis as analysis of discourses has ramifications for his view of analytic practice. Rejecting Potter & Wetherell's suggestions for ways of approaching discursive materials as bewildering (p. 19) he opts instead for a set of criteria for identifying *a* discourse. Yet his bewilderment stems, we suggest, from his failure to address the exclusion documented above; the role of discourse in social/interpretative practices and the detailed constructive work needed to mobilise a discourse on any occasion. For Parker, analysis apprehends discourse *directly*; but he can only understand analysis in this way because of his reified view of discourses as independently existing entities. For us, in contrast, interpretative repertoires (as we prefer to call discourses for the reasons outlined below) are *abstractions* from practices in context.

For this reason, then, analysis must be very attentive to what might be called the local geography of contexts and practices and also to the devices through which the discourses are effectively realised. Parker is perplexed by the lengths we go to in this task. However, we are mystified as to how discourse analysis can be done

without this; how, as it were, can this Platonic/tectonic realm of discourses be breached without theorising its entry into the worlds of practical affairs and everyday conversation and sense-making?

For example, it is not clear to us how 'statements' are derived from discourse in the first place; nor how the 'construction of objects' is concretely studied. Is the idea that the words should be compared to the world in some fashion? From our perspective, objects are constructed in talk and text in such a way as to perform actions, and actions can be studied precisely in terms of their context—fittedness and variability, including their uptake—the ways in which phenomena such as next turns, responses and reactions implicate them as actions. The status of 'texts' created by analysts as part of a 'preliminary step' in analysis (p. 194) is equally problematic. There is a danger that a great deal of the interpretative work will be done at this preliminary stage, producing the kind of idealized data that is a feature of much traditional social psychology.

Parker provides several pointers as to how analysts should identify various separate discourses. Partly it is 'purely conceptual'. However, while it is crucial to recognise the role of the analysts' categorisations and intuitions, this is not a good start for a set of criteria that are claimed to be 'necessary and sufficient for marking out particular discourses'. Another part of the identification of discourses relies on the notion of reflexivity. For Parker, a characteristic of 'discourses' is that they refer to themselves and thus this moment of self-naming is proposed as an analytic tool for identification and commentary. However, we would want to ask how these reflexive moments are *themselves* constructed to perform actions. Thus, rather than taking a text's overt claim to belong to a scientific legalistic or medical domain to indicate the character and institutional location of this discourse it can be studied as part of the text's rhetorical organisation. Ultimately, it is not clear to us what role is left for analysis in Parker's framework. There is a real danger that analytic work is simply being replaced by the analyst's common sense.

### (3) *Common sense*

For Parker, discourse analysis starts by 'turning our objects into texts, and locating those texts in discourses' (p. 194). He seems to be using a sort of correlational view here—the 'objects' of our common sense experience each have their associated discourse. Indeed, for the analyst to group a set of statements together as a discourse is taken to involve the deployment of 'culturally available understandings as to what constitutes a topic' (p. 192). This is graphically illustrated when, in the course of his argument, Parker deploys notions of *family* discourse, *scientific* discourse, *racist* discourse, *medical* discourse and *Christian* discourse. That is, the central ideas and institutions of our common sense versions of everyday life each turn out to have their own associated discourse.

But some of the most interesting work, for example, emerges when analysis is more inductive and the role of common sense in producing the social categories for analysis is less inflated. Take, for example, the work of Gilroy (1987) and others on

the contemporary meaning of 'race' and the suggestion that traditional racism based on the usual construction of race as a biological object is being superseded by the construction of the English nation and patriotic culture as the new discursive reference point in black/white relations (see also Miles, 1989). As we are sure Parker would agree, sometimes it is crucial to question in detail 'one's culturally available understanding about what constitutes a topic', or to hold them in suspension.

Scientific discourse provides another example. Parker claims a 'scientific discourse is one in which rights and powers to speak are clearly signalled by the amount of knowledge held, and the desire to be a scientist may be provoked when we hear or use that discourse' (p. 198). Parker works from our common sense understanding of science and formulates it as having its own distinct discourse. However, numerous analyses have been done which refrain from making this correlational assumption (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984; McKinlay & Potter, 1987; Mulkay, 1985; Myers, 1990; Potter, 1984, 1988a). Put glibly, they suggest that scientific activity (the *institution* of science, if you like) is constituted out of not one single 'discourse of science' but two distinct 'discourses': an empiricist repertoire embodying many of the ideals of story-book science along with nineteenth century justificationist philosophy, and also a contingent repertoire, which is a fragmentary archipelago of notions about psychology, sociology, social interests and institutional functioning. The crucial point is that it is the *two together*, distributed across scientific arenas, that sustain modern science. A scientific view is warranted by the use of the empiricist repertoire, while the competitors are discounted by the use of the contingent repertoire; this pattern of discourse is endlessly repeated in the face of interpretative problems raised by the generation of 'false knowledge'.

Parker's notion of discourse suffers from the same kind of problem as beset Halliday's (1978) similar notion of register. As registers were simply defined through common-sensically existing social contexts, they became an analytic reification of that common sense (Coulthard, 1977). In this way a critical edge was lost from the analysis which came to merely reproduce its predefined ontology in linguistic form. This circularity is reasonably transparent with Parker's definition of discourse which steers the analyst away from a searching critique of our common-sensical notions. Without going into detail here (see Ashmore, 1989; Mulkay, 1985; Potter, 1988b) this kind of unexplicated building in of assumptions is one of the targets of more recent reflexive developments in discourse analysis (in this role it is certainly not intended to 'dissolve discourse'—Parker, p. 201) The point is not that common sense can somehow be fully purged; it is that Parker's version of analytic practice builds that common sense in at an early stage with little chance of critical explication.

### **Interpretative repertoires**

Having suggested some limitations with Parker's approach to defining discourse it is important to be clear about what we are suggesting instead. In this final section we

will suggest some of the advantages of incorporating the concepts of interpretative repertoires as part of a more broadly defined analysis of discourse, and comment on Parker's criticisms of this notion (ignoring his bizarrely empiricist suggestion that discourse is a more 'accurate' word—p. 192). It is important to emphasise at this point that it is not the term 'discourse' that is at stake—indeed, at times we have been happy to use it as a variant of interpretative repertoires and to signal links to the semiological/post-structural tradition; it is the *assumptions* that Parker brings to his use of the term.

Using Foucault as backup, Parker defines discourses as regulated systems or sets of statements which construct objects (see also Parker, 1989). We have already noted the potential for reification in this definition where the 'set of statements' is taken to do the 'object construction' in the abstract rather than as part of situated practices. In trying to avoid this, we have deployed the notion of an 'interpretative repertoire' (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). By interpretative repertoire we mean broadly discernible clusters of terms, descriptions, common-places (Billig, 1988d) and figures of speech often clustered around metaphors or vivid images and often using distinct grammatical constructions and styles.

For example, we have studied the 'community repertoire' in accounts of uprising/riots (Potter & Reicher, 1987; Potter & Halliday, forthcoming) and of 'community care' of handicapped people (Potter & Collie, 1989). The 'community repertoire' is partly a set of words describing a certain style of cohesive social relationships; 'closeness', 'integration' and 'friendliness'. It is also made up of certain sorts of metaphors involving space ('close-knit'), organism ('growth', 'evolution') and agency (a community 'acts' or 'feels'). Overwhelmingly, 'community' is used as a positive term, as a good thing. Rather than seeing this repertoire as mechanically constructing an object, we have studied the way this repertoire can be deployed in different practices to construct contrasting objects; for example, it can be used to construct versions of uprisings which valorise participants as community members struggling against the police; or it can be used to construct very different versions in which the police are part of the community, the problem is community relations, and the solution is community policing (Potter & Reicher, 1987). The important point here is that the way the object is constructed is dependent on the discursive practice within which the repertoire is invoked.

The idea of a repertoire, analogous to the repertoire of moves of a ballet dancer, say, encompasses the way that different moves (terms, tropes, metaphors) from the repertoire may be invoked according to their suitability to an immediate context. That is, the idea of a repertoire spotlights flexibility of use in practice in way that Parker's organised sets of statements fail to do. However, it is important not to move too far away from Parker's conception here and think of repertoires as infinitely flexible resources that are artfully and knowingly invoked by people. For a particular form of discourse may have consequences which have not been formulated or even understood by the speaker or writer and on any specific occasion there may be powerful constraints on the discourse used. There is a clear tension between seeing people as active users, on the one hand, and seeing discourse as generating,



enabling and constraining, on the other. Put simply, discourse analysis studies how people use discourse and how discourse uses people. Parker's point that 'a discourse contains subjects', connected with Althusser's (1971) notion of subject positions, is an important insight here.

Parker expresses specific disquiet over three aspects of our definition of interpretive repertoires: its interest in grammar; its assertion about limits; and its resonance with behaviourism. With respect to the point about grammar it is important to make a clear distinction between topic and resource. We are not suggesting that discourse analysts take over any of the theoretical baggage of grammar as a resource for analysis; rather, we are stressing that in the practice of analysis attention to grammatical forms as a topic may be revealing. A simple example of this appears in the work on science discourse, where it was found that one of the distinctive features separating the empiricist and contingent repertoires was the recurrent use of impersonal grammatical constructions such as 'it was found that...'

Parker suggests that our talk of a limited range of terms in interpretive repertoires implies an unrealistically closed system. Again, our use of this talk of limits arises out of our analytic practice; one of the striking things about studying the talk of fifty or so interviewees on a particular topic is the restricted and indeed stereotypic set of terms and tropes which occur again and again. Our use of the idea of a limited range is not meant to place *a priori* boundaries but to highlight this conspicuous lack of variation. Finally, on the point about the resonance of 'repertoire' with the language of behaviourism, we suspect that the prefix 'interpretive' heads off most of this line of connotation at the pass and what little is left is outweighed by the term's usefulness.

It is very important to reiterate that for us the identification and analysis of interpretive repertoires is just one part of a larger analysis of discourse that includes, but is not bound by, analysis of discourses. Moving in one direction, this has involved addressing issues of ideology and the legitimation of exploitation which may involve a study of a whole tract of interpretive repertoires and their interrelations and patterned consequences (Gill, 1990; Wetherell *et al.*, 1987; White & Wetherell, 1988). Moving in the other direction, we are concerned with the 'witchcraft' that brings them alive as 'authentically meant' parts of arguments and the more general warranting devices that make them plausible or that fix them as unproblematically factual. Indeed some discourse studies may be less concerned with organised repertoires than with procedures for warranting, say, or different techniques of accomplishing a variety of actions (cf. Edwards & Potter, forthcoming; Potter & Edwards, forthcoming). There is nothing secondary about this work—each is complementary to the other.

It is here that Parker's polarisation between the good/radical post-structuralists and the bad/reactionary ethnomethodologists/conversation analysts is particularly unhelpful (see also Parker, 1989). While the former position is a useful backdrop to the analysis of repertoires, providing inspiring analyses such as those of Barthes cited by Parker; the latter is particularly useful for making sense of the implementation of repertoires in practices and the array of interpretive procedures that are on

hand to accomplish this. To set them up as alternatives would result in a dangerously stunted enterprise.

To conclude, there is much of value in Parker's argument and much with which we agree. What we have tried to do is sharpen up (at times taking the honing perhaps too far) some of the differences between our position and his. In particular we have suggested some difficulties which arise when operating with discourse as a noun, when discourse analysis is equated with the analysis of discourses, and when post-structuralist definitions are generalized to the concerns of discourse analysis as a whole.

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