

Discourse, cognition and social practices: the rich surface of language and social interaction



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ABSTRACT Discursive psychology (DP) approaches discourse not as the product or expression of thoughts or mental states lying behind or beneath it, but as a domain of public accountability in which psychological states are made relevant. DP draws heavily on conversation analysis in examining in close empirical detail how ostensibly psychological themes are handled and managed as part of talk's everyday interactional business. A brief worked example is offered, in which the intentionality of a person's actions is handled in the course of police interrogation, in ways that perform police work. Degrees of intentionality are partialled out with regard to specific actions or components of actions, and with regard to how actions are described in ways that map onto how crime categories are defined in law. Cognitive states are generally relevant in discourse in the same manner, as participants' concerns with regard to action categories and accountability on and for the occasions they are invoked.

KEY WORDS: *cognition, conversation analysis, discourse, discursive psychology, intentionality*

The rich surface

Discursive psychology (DP) approaches the topics of cognition, mental states and psychological characteristics as matters under active management in talk and text. The start point is everyday discourse considered as a domain of social practice. Mostly it is talk-in-interaction (Schegloff, 1987), but written text is analysed too. The key to DP is that it is primarily a way of analysing talk and text. It does not start with psychological questions, and does not offer a rival theory of mind. Nor does it deny the reality and importance of subjective experience. Rather, DP rejects the assumption that discourse is the *product* or *expression* of thoughts or intentional states lying behind or beneath it. Instead, mental states, knowledge, thoughts, feelings, and the nature of the external world, figure as talk's topics, assumptions and concerns.

Having developed a critical stance on mainstream psychology's uses of language, re-working a range of psychological concepts such as event memory, attitudes, causal attribution and script knowledge as discourse practices (e.g. Edwards, 1994; Edwards and Middleton, 1986; Edwards and Potter, 1993; Potter and Wetherell, 1987), DP has focused on examining in close empirical detail how common sense topics such as what people think, intend, feel or want, are handled and managed in everyday talk as part of everyday interactional business. These matters can be studied in their own right, irrespective of how mainstream academic and professional psychology has transformed and theorized them.

DP's essential difference from cognitive psychology (CP) is in the status of discourse. In CP discourse is: 1) the input to, or output from, or categories and schemas used in, mental models and processes; and/or 2) a methodological resource for research into mental states and representations. The latter 'methodological' use of discourse permeates psychology and other human sciences in standard uses of interview data, studies of autobiographical memory, causal attribution, narrative psychology, the conduct and reporting of general experimental psychology, clinical practice, and so on. In DP psychological interests are relevant analytically only in so far as they are made relevant, topicalized, managed, etc. (but not necessarily labelled) as an integral part of the interaction-oriented work done by talk and text.

Clearly language, or discourse, is not all that there is in the world, not all that psychology and society are made of, and not the same thing as experience, or reality, or feelings, or knowledge. It is just language, discourse, or talk-in-interaction: not those other things. But *it is the primary work of language to make all those 'other' phenomena accountable*. That includes not only what participants say, but what theorists and analysts write about what participants say, including what people (purportedly) think or feel but do not say. A frequent objection to DP, that it leaves those other things (knowledge, experience, feelings, etc.) out of account, misunderstands the practical, categorial and indexical nature of language. In effect, either language covers everything or it covers nothing. It is not a fuzzy thing in between. *Indexicality* guarantees that no terms of reference, not even simple words like 'chair' or 'table', provide for the objective, nor subjective, nor experiential, nor ontological specifics of any actual thing they are used to refer to. *Categoriality* (words are categories, not labels for specific things) guarantees that there is a word for everything, and a word for nothing. Each and every language is a complete cultural system of description and accountability (cf. Sapir, 1924). There is no realm of subjectivity, unconscious feelings, or objective reality, that language does not reach – indeed, the writings of those who are primarily concerned with such ostensibly language-independent and almost ineffable matters, is reflexive testimony to the adequacy of language for dealing with them. Beyond that adequacy, as Wittgenstein famously concluded, 'Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must be silent' (1922: §T7).

In focusing on discourse, or talk-in-interaction, the objection is that we are

seduced by the surface of things, ignoring what goes on 'beneath' or 'over and above' or 'outside' of discourse. DP, like conversation analysis (CA) with which it closely allies itself, recommends examining that rich surface, which is what social interaction consists of. Its richness is unimagined by those whose first move is not to record and examine it, but to invent tidy examples of it to illustrate conceptual points, discover causal connections with other things, or to immediately look through it to what lies beneath and beyond.

Of course, these notions of *surface* and *depth*, *above* and *beneath* and *beyond*, are locative metaphors. Such metaphors are themselves part of the practices of everyday accountability and professional conduct – part of the rich surface (if I may use the metaphor while discussing it) of talk and text. They do not reach, really, beyond the surface of anything at all. Rather, as elements of language use, they are part of the rich surface where experiences and ideas are made accountable, publicly and for social consumption (cf. Billig, this issue, on Freudian repression as a discourse practice). To the extent that something remains unexpressed, that also is something to be handled and managed, just as in the practices of cross-examination, interrogation, confession, dissimulation, psychoanalysis, telling the honest truth, being evasive, and so on. The basic recommendation with problematics of this kind ('What underlies talk?' 'What do people really think?' 'Why do people say the things they do?') is to offload them onto the 'members', onto their talk, text, and social interaction, and let them deal with it, when and if they do. Paraphrasing Harvey Sacks¹, rather than asking is there a way of seeing below the surface to motives, ideas, thoughts and experiences, we can ask: are there procedures that participants have, for dealing with those notions? And of course, there are; those procedures are the topic of CA, DP and ethnomethodology, and they are the resources and practices of psychoanalysts, police interrogators, psychological researchers, and everyone else engaged in mundane life.

A worked example: intentionality

The notion that some actions may be done intentionally, deliberately, in a premeditated manner, or with a view to their consequences, and some not, is a pervasive concern not only for philosophers and psychologists, but also for everyday accountability. Again, following Sacks, the question is not how should analysts classify actions into intentional and unintentional ones (e.g. the classic conceptual distinction between a wink and a blink), but how, when, and doing what, does intentionality arise as a participants' actively managed concern (cf. Heritage, 2005). In addition to its importance in everyday conversation, there are specialized arenas where intentionality takes on a formal, institutional relevance: for example in psychotherapy, counselling, confession, mediation, and in police and courtroom interrogation. Intentionality is not merely an added ingredient to actions, but an integral part of the descriptive formulation of actions and events themselves; even winks and blinks are different kinds of

actions, not just the same action plus or minus agency. This integral relationship between action descriptions and intentionality is particularly visible in legal contexts where intent figures in how actions are described with regard to the criminal law; murder versus manslaughter is an obvious example.

Language provides all manner of options for description and accountability, always applied indexically to particulars. A major feature across a collection of police interrogations is the defeasibility² of intentionality as a component of actions; that is to say, an action's intentionality is generally open to formulation, denial, opposition, alternative description, or the partialling-out of intent with regard to specific, formulated components of actions. Here is an example, where the accused 'A' has admitted punching and smashing a window on a car in the street outside his house. 'P' is the interrogating police officer. The interview was recorded as a routine part of police procedure, rather than for the purposes of research.

(1) NPT:6:132

- 1 P: So a- as y'punched the window, (.) have y'wanted t'put
 2 the window throu:gh?
 3 (0.9)
 4 A: I dunno:. I didn' think o' tha:t. I [jus' punched it
 5 P: [No.
 6 (0.3)
 7 P: A'right okay.= S'y'jus' punched it. So (0.4) if it
 8 went through it went through. If it [didn't [it didn't=
 9 A: [Yeh [it didn't=
 10 P: =it's (.) just a couple of punches.
 11 (0.4)
 12 P: Okay.

Deliberate damage, in the criminal law just as in mundane morality (Stokoe and Edwards, in press), is more culpable than accidental damage. Negligence or 'recklessness' (as the police generally call it in these interrogations) provides a level of culpability somewhere in between. This common-sense range of intentionality provides for a range of crime-relevant subtleties in the attribution of intent for narrated actions. In example (1) A and P (lines 1–3) collaborate in separating the action of punching from its effect of breaking the car window. P's term 'wanted to' (line 1) suggests goal-directed intentional damage, whereas A resists that account by separating the punch (using the limiting expression *just*) from its effects (line 4). A's first words attend directly to the theme of intent and cognitive states: 'I dunno:. I didn' think o' tha:t.' (line 4) with contrastive rise–fall pitch movement on 'tha:t'.³ Note that there is no dispute that the punch was done, nor that the window was broken. P then formulates A's version of events as 'S'y'jus' punched it' (line 7).

Interestingly, P then re-formulates or extends A's version, as 'so if it went through, it went through. If it didn't it didn't' (lines 7–8). The notion that this is P's formulation of what A was *thinking* is signalled by P starting again with 'so'

(as he did for 'so you just punched it'), and by adding it immediately after formulating and accepting A's version, the additional comment being also corroborated by A himself in line 9. There is something especially potent about P's additional remarks here. In logical-semantic terms they are tautologies, one upon another, logically saying nothing, adding nothing, doing nothing. Facts are facts, elephants are elephants, A is A, if it went through it went through (cf. Sacks, 1992, Vol. 1 on interactional uses of tautological statements such as 'boys will be boys' and other ways of 'stating the obvious'). But P is not saying nothing. Rather, he manages to retain an implication that breaking the window may indeed have been imagined, anticipated, or taken account of by A, as part of his action at the time, even if not fully intended. Note the detail of P's initial formulation in line 7, of what A has just said: 'S'y'jus' punched it.' P specifically omits A's intentional state account 'I dunnø: I didn' think o' tha:t.', leaving just the punch. This provides for P to insert his own formulation of, or as, what A may have been thinking: 'if it went through it went through.' The potent legal relevance is that actions that can be defined as 'reckless' as to their likely consequences are covered by the same law that includes deliberate damage to another person's property. It is not clear that A appreciates that technical fact, but P certainly does (based on a strong orientation to it here and throughout the session), and articulates it explicitly later in the interview.

What we have in example (1) is a collection of mutually implicative descriptions of actions and their intentionality, where what is intended, foreseeable, known, accidental or incidental, is defeasibly assembled *in and for the performance of police work*, and with regard to the action categories of relevant law. Through the course of the interview reported actions are fitted, via the avowal and ascription of psychological states, to a framework of common sense and legal accountability. We might be tempted at this point to join with the participants and ask the 'psychological' question of whether A *really did* intend to break the window. But crucially, that is precisely the product of, rather than the input to, the kind of interactional work we see in the extract, just as it is in other realms of everyday talk, text, and social life. What people really think, know, intend, etc., are the actively managed interactional concerns of talk, text, and other expressive domains of social life, typically backdated, of course, to having occurred prior to the act. That is what 'really did' amounts to, in practice.

Further, the mere use of terms such as *know*, *intend*, *want* and *think* should not be taken to be implying cognitive psychological models, nor a realm of cognitive causality governing talk. All such terms need to be examined for their situated uses and public intelligibility, as analytic philosophers and sociologists have argued for some time (e.g. Coulter, 1990; Mills, 1940; Ryle, 1949; Wittgenstein, 1958), rather than taking them to be referring to a private world of mental experience. The status of an account *as* a report of mental experience, just like the status of an account as a description of events in the 'external' world, is always, in the first instance, in the analysis of discourse, a participants' construct and concern (Edwards and Potter, 2005).

DP is not attempting to discover, let alone model, a mental world of motives, ideas, goals and intentions that happen to be indirectly expressed in talk. Rather, we are examining the public practices of accountability in which intentionality and intentional states (knowledge, belief, attitude, etc.) are articulated. Looking 'under the skull' (where 'nothing of interest is to be found . . . but brains': Garfinkel, 1963: 190) can itself only ever be a public practice of some kind, including whatever practices are used as 'operational definitions' in a scientific laboratory. This has to be so, for science to retain its own essentially public character (see Shapin and Schaffer, 1985, on Hobbes, the courtroom, and the history of science). Whatever devices of method and theory psychology may come up with, to discover the 'real' nature of intentions and motives, must inevitably be further extensions and modifications of this essential principle: that is to say, further ways of constituting motives and intentions through some public practice of accountability, even when accounting for them *as* 'mental states' independent and prior to the act (cf. Latour and Woolgar, 1986, on 'splitting and inversion' in science). DP aims not to do away with everyday psychological concepts, but to examine what they mean, how they work, what they are for, and how their conceptual or 'dictionary' meanings, or technical psychological or psychiatric meanings, are understandable as theoretical abstractions from unexamined, but intuitively known, practices of accountability.

Conclusion

Rather than starting with the assumption that what people say is an outward *expression of* what they internally know, intend and think, DP examines the ways in which intentionality, states of mind, motives and thoughts (etc.) are matters *at stake in* discourse and social interaction. The very notion that talk expresses how a person sees the world is itself part of a range of practices in which that notion may be produced, asserted, countered and warranted. DP's concern with cognitive states as topics for, or concerns of, rather than causes of discourse practices, requires close examination of the detailed workings of actual samples of text and talk. In the work I do, as for several other contributors to this special issue of *Discourse Studies*, the major resource and inspiration is CA, for its unparalleled capacity to find intricate but also powerfully generalizable methodical practices in the sequential organization and content of everyday recorded talk. Other important influences on DP are ethnomethodology, linguistic philosophy, social studies of science, and constructionist alternatives in psychology, including the various tensions between them (Edwards, 1997; Potter, 1996).

The key to analysis is to locate psychological and other issues in participants' own practices of accountability. Whatever people say is always action-oriented, specific to its occasion, performative on and for its occasion, selected from a indefinite range of options, and always indexically tied to particulars (as we

noted for tautologies). There is therefore no point, for example, in picking quotations out of context and presenting them as what somebody thinks. Analysis of discourse has to respect the indexical, interaction-oriented, action-performing nature of its phenomena. Examining discourse as a socially disembedded realm of mental representation will inevitably, and circularly, reproduce discourse as the expression of cognitive states and schemas. In DP it is essential that discourse is examined for its particulars (words, intonation, manner of delivery, sequential location), as performative social action.

Although there is not space here to fully justify, exemplify and defend DP, one possibility to consider is that the tables can easily be turned. It might be argued that whatever DP, CA (etc.) may discover about how discourse or talk-in-interaction works, there has to be some underlying cognitive competence to make it all possible. DP's counter to that argument is its circularity (cf. Potter, this issue). Competence need not be based on mental representations, especially where the evidence of those mental representations is the very domain of practices that they are supposed to explain. Similarly, if words derive their meanings from their use in historically sedimented social practices, one might argue that it is because those sedimented practices have become cognitive schemata for using and interpreting language. Again, this is circularly dependent on an analysis of how words are actually used, rather than on an independently known realm of cognitive representation. Even when people are doing the kinds of things that cognitive theory extends to everything (forming goals, models, aims and action plans), those activities are analysable as particular kinds of practices, where working to a plan, intention, or goal, features as a defeasible account for, and orientation to, what people are doing (Suchman, 1987). In any event, the central analytic focus has to be on the empirically tractable study of discourse practices. For DP, the relevance of psychological considerations in discourse practices is an empirically tractable topic that can be grounded in the close study of how psychological concerns are managed as an integral part of those practices, in mundane and institutional settings. In settings such as police and courtroom interrogation (cf. Antaki, this issue on the practices of making mental assessments), resolving 'psychological' business such as motive, memory, premeditation and intent may be essential features of the work of those settings.


NOTES

1. '... instead of saying "Let's find a way of seeing whether people understand what somebody else says," we've asked "Is there some *procedure people use* which has as its product a *showing* that they heard and understood?"' (Sacks, 1992, Vol. 2: 30–1, italics added).
2. This is a collection of 120 police interrogations obtained as part of ESRC-funded project RES-148–25–0010 awarded to Elizabeth Stokoe and Derek Edwards, 2005–08.

3. The transcription of 'thə:t.' follows Jefferson's conventions for CA, with the underlining prior to the colon signalling rise-fall, and the full stop (period) showing falling, terminal contour.

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