Discourse Analysis in Media and Communications Research (working title)

Chapter prepared for

The Craft of Criticism: Critical Media Studies in Practice

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Introduction

Discourse analysis is the name given to a variety of approaches that take language or social constructions as their object of study. Strictly speaking, there is no single 'discourse analysis', but many different styles of analysis which all lay claim to the name. What these perspectives share is a rejection of the realist notion that language is simply a neutral means of reflecting or describing the world, and a belief in the central importance of language and representations in constructing social life. Discourse analysis became a popular approach in Media and Communications Studies from the 1990s onwards, reflecting a wider 'turn to language' across the humanities and social sciences, along with the influence of poststructuralist ideas. Types of discourse analysis used in studying media include Foucaultian discursive analysis, critical discourse analysis (CDA) and conversation analysis. Discourse analysis has close intellectual connections to ideological and narrative analysis, as well as to broad thematic analysis and qualitative approaches more generally.

This chapter is structured as follows. First, it will provide a brief intellectual history of discourse analysis, situating it in relation to other traditions. It will examine a range of different approaches to analyzing discourse and introduce their key terms and concepts. Next it will discuss one particular approach to discourse analysis that I have used in a variety of types of research, including studies of media organizations, analyses of media texts, and interview-based audience research. To illustrate the nature of the approach and the kinds of

findings/knowledge it generates, I will focus on one case study, analyzing sex and relationships advice in women's magazines. I will conclude by reflecting on the challenges and dilemmas of using this approach in media and communications research.

History and intellectual context

The extraordinarily rapid growth of interest in discourse analysis in recent years is both a consequence and a manifestation of the 'turn to language' which has occurred across the arts, humanities and social sciences in the wake of the influence of structuralism, poststructuralism and postmodernist ideas. Discourse analysis belongs to a group of approaches that are sometimes called social constructionist. Key features of these perspectives include:

1. A critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge, and a skepticism towards the view that our observations of the world unproblematically yield its true nature to us (a perspective known as positivism).
2. A recognition that the ways in which we commonly understand the world are historically and culturally specific and relative.
3. A conviction that knowledge is socially constructed-- that is, our current ways of understanding the world are not determined by the nature of the world itself but by social processes.
4. A commitment to exploring the ways that knowledges – the social construction of people, phenomena or problems - are linked to actions.[1]

The terms ‘discourse’ and ‘discourse analysis’ are contested. To claim that one’s approach is a discourse analytical one, therefore, does not necessarily tell anybody much. Instead it may be helpful to identify some different approaches to discourse analysis and to connect them with distinct intellectual traditions. Here I discuss three contrasting traditions of discourse analysis that have been used in media research.

First, there is the variety of positions known as critical linguistics, social semiotics or critical discourse analysis.[2] Compared with many types of discourse analysis this tradition has a close association with the discipline of linguistics, but its clearest debt is to semiotics and structuralist analysis. The central semiotic idea that a term’s sense derives not from any inherent feature of the relationship between signifier and signified, but from the system of oppositions in which it is embedded, posed a fundamental challenge to ‘word-object’ accounts which viewed language as a process of naming. This insight has been developed in recent critical linguistic work which has an explicit concern with the relationship between language and power. The tradition is well-represented in media studies, particularly in research on news, and has highlighted—amongst other things—the ways in which particular linguistic forms can have dramatic effects upon how an event or phenomenon is understood – not simply the choice of individual terms (such as ‘terrorist’ versus ‘freedom fighter’) but also distinctions between active and passive voice, or agent deletion- e.g. the difference between ‘Police shoot dead demonstrators’ versus ‘Demonstrators shot dead’. The approach has a strong interest in ideology – understood as

the ways in which power and meaning intersect[3] – and has been popular amongst feminist researchers[4]. Most recently it has been developed into a broader approach known as multimodal analysis that allows the researcher to look not just at language but at sound and image too, attempting to offer a systematic approach to analyzing meaning in media texts such as television programmes or Facebook pages.[5]

A second broad tradition of discourse analysis is that influenced by speech act theory, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis.[6] These perspectives stress the functional or action orientation of discourse and are interested in looking in detail at the organization of social interaction. The approach emerged out of micro-sociology, and has made a significant contribution to understanding how sense and meaning are produced out of the everyday messiness of talk – punctuated as it is by hesitations, false starts, deviations, 'ums' and 'ers', etc. Conversation analysis offers insights into how we 'do' things with words – make excuses, apologize, offer an invitation, practice sarcasm, etc. It has been taken up in media and communications studies to research mediated interactions such as radio phone-ins or talk shows.[7]

The third body of work which sometimes identifies itself as discourse analysis is that associated with poststructuralism. Poststructuralists have broken with realist views of language and rejected the notion of the unified coherent subject which has long been at the heart of Western philosophy. Among poststructuralists, Michel Foucault is notable for characterizing his genealogies of discipline and sexuality as discourse

analyses. In contrast to most discourse analysis, this work is not interested in the details of spoken or written texts, but in looking historically at discourses. Foucault's methodology has had a significant influence on some media analysts. His work rejected mono-causal explanations and he attempted to write 'histories of the present' that disrupt the obviousness of the way things are. As he put it, 'the genealogist tries to rediscover the multiplicity of factors and processes which constitute an event in order to disrupt the self-evident quality ascribed to events through the deployment of historical concepts and the description of anthropological traits'.[8] A good example of this approach in media studies is Sean Nixon's genealogy of the development of new sexualized ways of representing the male body, which showed how emergent representational practices for signifying masculinity had multiple points of origin – e.g. in fashion, advertising, magazines – and were not the outcome of one single change.[9] To do a discursive analysis in this Foucaultian sense, then, is to be interested in reading how new masculinities materialized across multiple mediated sites.

Foucault was critical of the notion of 'ideology', understood as 'falsehood', versus science or truth (see Becker this volume for a discussion of this). Unlike Marxists he did not think it was possible to divide up representations between the true and the false but was more interested in what he called 'truth effects' and their relationship to power. Moreover, rather than seeing science as 'truthful' and 'innocent' he was precisely interested in the ways in which the sciences – and particularly the emerging human and social sciences – were themselves enmeshed in power relations through the production of new subjects and categories of experience - the hysteric, the schizophrenic, the

homosexual, etc. He called this idea the 'power-knowledge' nexus, and it has been central to much media and communications research because of the way it directs our attention to what representations and stories do rather than comparing them with an assumed 'reality'. We come back to this point in the case study.

Having looked briefly at a number of different discourse analytic traditions, in the next section I will turn to elaborating the approach I have used in my own media research.

Elaborating discourse analysis

The approach to be elaborated here draws on ideas from each of the three traditions outlined above, as well as from the growing field of rhetorical analysis.[10] Developed initially in work in the sociology of scientific knowledge and social psychology, it has now produced analyses in fields as diverse as gender studies, social policy, technology studies, and is a valuable addition to approaches in Media and Communications studies.[11] It constitutes a theoretically coherent approach to the analysis of talk and texts.

It is useful to think of discourse analysis as having five main themes. First, it takes discourse itself as its topic. The term discourse is used to refer to all forms of talk and texts, including naturally-occurring conversations, interview material, and written or spoken texts of any kind – from blogs to TV programmes to SMS messages. Discourse analysts are interested in texts in their own right, rather than seeing them as a means of 'getting at' some reality which is deemed to lie behind the discourse -

whether social or psychological or material. Instead of seeing discourse as a pathway to some other reality, discourse analysts are interested in the content and organization of texts. Thus if a discourse analyst were looking at a news broadcast, she would not be interested in comparing the news representation with 'reality' (indeed she would not believe that there exists some ultimate, unmediated, non-discursive reality), but might rather be concerned with exploring how the broadcast was organized to produce a sense of truth and coherence, to make its version of events persuasive, to generate a sense of 'liveness' and authenticity, to accord authority to the host, and so on.

The second theme of discourse analysis is that language is constructive. Potter and Wetherell argue that the metaphor of construction highlights three facets of the approach: it draws attention to the fact that discourse is built or manufactured out of pre-existing linguistic resources; it illuminates the fact that the 'assembly' of an account involves choice or selection from a number of different possibilities; and it emphasizes the fact that we deal with the world in terms of constructions, not in a somehow 'direct' or unmediated way; in a very real sense texts of various kinds construct our world.[12] The constructive use of language is a taken-for-granted aspect of social life. The notion of construction, then, clearly marks a break with traditional 'realist' models of language, in which it is taken to be a transparent medium, a relatively straightforward path to 'real' beliefs or events, or a reflection of the way things really are.

The third feature of discourse analysis which I want to stress here is its concern with the 'action orientation' or 'function orientation' of discourse. That is, discourse analysts see all discourse as social practice. People use discourse to do things - to offer blame, to pay compliments, to present themselves in a positive light, etc. To highlight this is to underline the fact that discourse does not occur in a social vacuum. As social actors we are continuously orienting to the interpretative context in which we find ourselves, and constructing our discourse to fit that context. This is very obvious in relatively formal contexts such as hospitals or courtrooms, but it is equally true of all other contexts too. To take a crude example, you might give a different account of what you did last night depending upon whether the person inquiring was your mother, your boss or your best friend. It is not that you would deliberately be being duplicitous in any one of these cases (or at least not necessarily) but simply that you would be saying what seems 'right' or what 'comes naturally' for that particular interpretative context. Discourse analysts argue that all discourse is, in this sense, 'occasioned' or produced for a particular audience or context.

Even the most apparently straightforward, neutral sounding description can be involved in a whole range of different activities, depending upon the interpretative context. Take the following sentence: 'my cell phone is not working'. This sounds like a straightforwardly descriptive sentence about an object. However, its meaning can change dramatically in different interpretative contexts:

* When said to a friend who has been waiting for you in a restaurant for

an hour it may be the beginning of an excuse or mitigation.
*****When said to the person or store who sold you the phone only a few days earlier, it may be part of an accusation, a blaming.
*When said to a stranger, approached in the street it may be an implicit request to borrow his or her phone in order to make a call.

And so on. One way of checking your analysis of the discourse is to look at how the participants involved responded, as this can offer valuable analytical clues. For example, if the phone sales person responded by saying 'well it was working fine when I sold it to you' this indicates that the sentence was heard as an accusation—even though no explicit accusation was made. It is important to note that the person to whom one is speaking does not have to change in order to alter the interpretative context. Think about how a question like 'are you going out tonight?' can have multiple meanings when said by someone to their partner, depending on mood, history, and so on. The key point here is that there is nothing 'mere' or insubstantial about language: talk and texts are social practices, and even the most seemingly trivial statements are involved in various kinds of activities. One of the aims of discourse analysis is to identify the functions or activities of talk and texts, and to explore how they are performed.

This brings me to the fourth point: discourse analysis treats talk and texts as organized rhetorically.[13] Unlike conversation analysis, discourse analysis sees social life as being characterized by conflicts of various kinds. As such, much discourse is involved in establishing one version of

the world in the face of competing versions. This is obvious in some cases - politicians, for example, are clearly attempting to win people around to their view of the world, and advertisers are attempting to sell us lifestyles, dreams and products - but it is also true of other discourse. The emphasis on the rhetorical nature of texts directs our attention to the ways in which discourse is organized to make itself persuasive. Discourse analysis teaches us to approach all discourse critically – from the Big Brother contestant to the talk show confession, the tweet to the DJ's patter – to see it as attempting to construct particular versions of the world and engaging in social practices.

As well as examining the way that language is used discourse analysts must also be sensitive to what is not said, to silences. This in turn requires a significant awareness of the social, political and cultural trend and contexts to which our texts refer. As I have argued elsewhere, without this broader contextual understanding:

'we would be unable to see the alternative version of events or phenomena that the discourse we were analyzing had been designed to counter; we would fail notice the (sometimes systematic) absence particular kinds of account in the texts that we were studying; and we would not be able to recognize the significance of silences.'[14]

Finally, discourse analysis involves identifying patterns in discourse, being able to highlight recurrent themes or ideas or tropes – particularly when looking across a corpus of data - whether this is newspapers or interviews. Discourse analysts call these patterned features of discourse

interpretative repertoires. Their common features may be content or they may be marked by particular metaphors or figures of speech. Sometimes they encode particular ideological positions, for example terms such as 'community' or 'responsible citizens' or 'hardworking families' seem to come ready-evaluated in contemporary discourse, always already presented as a Good Thing. Recently British political discourse has been marked by a shift from the phrase 'this country' to 'our country'- with potent ideological effects.

To offer an example: in my research on women and radio, I was interested in the reasons radio station managers and programme controllers put forward for the very small number of female broadcasters compared to males, particularly in music programming. Using a discourse analytic approach to analyze my interviews I identified six interpretative repertoires put forward in interviews to account for the lack of women in presenting roles. These were

- women just do not apply (for the role of presenter)
- the audience prefer male presenters
- women don't have the right skills for radio presentation
- women who want to become broadcasters all go into journalism
- women's voices are wrong
- daytime radio is targeted at housewives so it is better to have a male presenter

The broadcasters all drew on and combined these different repertoires, moving between accounts when it felt right to do so. Thus one moment

they might assert that the reason for the lack of women at the station was that no women applied; the next they would regretfully explain that actually the issue was audience objections, or the fact that women's voices did not sound appealing on radio. Rather than taking any of the accounts at face value, the analysis looked at the patterning, organization and action orientation of the discourse. That is, the force of the analysis as a critique of sexist ideology or practice lay not in comparing the accounts with a taken for granted reality (e.g. the assertion that women do apply), but in looking at how the accounts worked together to justify the lack of women at the radio stations in question.

One of the things that attention to the fine detail of discourse was able to show was how carefully these accounts were constructed, despite being part of the fast cut and thrust of an interview conversation. They were, for example, full of disclaimers about sexism (such as 'I'm not being sexist but...'), and other rhetorical devices designed to head off potential criticisms of their own sexual politics or the equal opportunities practices of the radio station. The interviews were also characterized by multiple strategies to make the radio bosses' accounts persuasive -- for example, the use of scientific terms to lend credibility and objectivity, the deployment of 'extreme case formulations' and so on.

What the analysis showed, in sum, was the subtlety and the detail of the way that discrimination was practiced: at no point did any one of the interviewees say that they did not think women should be employed as

radio presenters -- on the contrary they were keen to stress their positive attitude to female presenters and to suggest that they were (to quote one) 'looking hard' to appoint women. However, what they produced were patterned accounts which justified the exclusion of women, while simultaneously protecting themselves against potential accusations of sexism.

Mediated intimacy: using discourse analysis in magazine research

In order to more fully flesh out the principles of discourse analysis discussed above, and its use as an approach within Media and Communications research, I am going to discuss my development of this approach to examine sex and relationship advice in a top-selling women's magazine.[15] Glamour is the UK's best-selling monthly magazine, targeted at upwardly mobile women in their 20s and 30s and gaining (at the time of the analysis) 8 million hits on its website each month. Articles about sex and relationships are a key part of its success, along with fashion, beauty and celebrity news. Each month sees this fare prominently displayed on the cover with headlines such as 'How good are you in bed? Men tell you what your partner won't'; and 'We're coming to your sexual rescue: never be bored in bed again'. The aim of the analysis was to understand the kinds of messages about sex and relationships that were presented in the magazines, asking questions about sex, gender and sexuality. Other research looking at similar magazines (e.g. Cosmopolitan) had highlighted themes of 'naughtiness' and transgression, alongside the notion that the 'fun, fearless female' must ultimately be focused on pleasing men, rather than herself.[16]

Pantea Farvid and Virginia Braun argued that such sex advice draws on the 'male sex drive' discourse which depicts men as 'needing' lots of great sex and women as having to develop sexual skills in order to satisfy him and prevent him from straying.[17] In their research, carried out in New Zealand, men were presented as easily aroused and satisfied, whilst women's orgasms were depicted as difficult to achieve, building into a his'n' hers, Mars and Venus notion of gender complementarity and heteronormativity.[18] My research set out to extend these studies, looking in detail at sex and relationship advice in Glamour magazine.

The study could be seen as a type of ideological analysis or critique in that it examines a cultural artifact – sex and relationship advice in a magazine – as a means of understanding and illuminating the ideological notions that run through it (see Becker, this volume). In this sense, as Becker puts it, it connects 'close textual analysis' with 'wider systems of domination'.

The analysis also bears resemblances with some Weberian style approaches which are interested in the rationalization of modern life – or what George Ritzer has called its 'McDonaldization'.[19] Eva Illouz's work on 'emotional capitalism' is pertinent – particularly her incisive critique of internet dating sites.[20] She documents how these push people towards very particular ways of relating in which oneself and all potential partners must be advertised and apprehended as competing products in a marketplace of intimacy.

The case study is also informed by a Foucaultian interest in 'technologies of the self', and an attentiveness to the way the magazines incite us to become entrepreneurs, even in this most intimate of domains.

In reality, then, it is striking to note the varied and hybrid intellectual influences on this project – it is not a 'pure' discourse analysis (whatever such a thing might be) but benefits from a range of scholarly traditions.

Sampling

The first challenge for most researchers is in building a sample of material that will offer reliable – and in some cases generalizable – findings whilst working with a volume of data that is manageable. I started my research with a corpus of three years worth of editions of Glamour – that is 36 issues, each one averaging around 380 pages- around 150,000 pages in total. This is a huge volume of data for a single researcher to work with - though might be suitable for a small team or 2-3 people working together. In order to cut into it I selected 2 issues at random from each year – but had to be careful that they were spread across the year, as Christmas issues, Summer issues and (in the Northern hemisphere) the famous September issue which launches new fashion collections, all have a distinct flavor and tone.

Having selected a more manageable number of magazines to examine in detail, the next dilemma was to think about how to develop rigor in my sampling within the magazines. Given the focus of Glamour upon beauty, looking good, celebrity, etc. it was quite difficult to draw the boundaries in a principled way around those articles which could be considered sex and relationship advice articles, and the mass of the rest of the magazine. Inevitably, articles about hairstyles, skin care regimes, or new make up techniques often touched upon sex or sexiness, whilst those

about celebrities frequently discussed relationships. How was I to narrow down my sample?

In order to do this I read and re-read the magazines in detail and identified a recurring set of article types or genres that took as their main focus intimate relationships or sex. These included the survey report articles which described the results of new research (often commissioned by the magazine) e.g. Glamour's sex survey and a survey about sexual fantasies; the 'men's voice' article which discusses what men do/want/think/ fantasize about when 'you' (the assumed heterosexual female reader) are not there; the 'how to' article which explicitly sets out to educate you on how to be a better lover or how to get a man to commit, etc.; the quiz in which you can find out what sort of lover you are, how shy or forward you are in bed, etc.; and the feature article which focuses on a group with a particular relationship to sex or intimacy e.g. women who learned sex tips from porn stars, women who are determined to marry within six months of a first date, men who are sex addicts, etc. Focusing in on these types of article, all of which explicitly take intimate relationships as their primary focus, yielded more than 20 full length articles to examine and this became my data corpus.

Identifying patterns and themes in the data

As discussed above, one of the aims of discourse analysis is to identify patterns in a corpus of data in order to be able to say something meaningful about it. The key concept here is the interpretative repertoire which is a unit of analysis that allows researchers to go

beyond individual or discrete expressions to begin to identify themes, consistencies and patterns across and between texts and to connect these to wider contexts and social formations. In some discursive traditions these are known as 'discourses' and researchers may speak of 'consumer discourse' or 'environmental discourse' or 'legal discourse' and so on. However rather than assuming that each domain – law, medicine, environment – has its own associated discourse that can be readily identifiable and which maps directly onto it, the notion of interpretative repertoire allows for more flexibility and dynamism, recognizing that any one phenomenon or text may be constituted by multiple intersecting discourses, some of which may be contradictory. Magazines are the example par excellence, and have always been discussed as sites of intense contradiction yet somehow able to hold together competing discourses in a pleasurable whole – e.g. injunctions to love your body alongside articles about dieting; stories about cheating husbands alongside articles about wedding planning, etc.[21]

In beginning to identify interpretative repertoires different researchers take different approaches. Margaret Wetherell and Jonathan Potter in their important work on the dynamics of new forms of racism, discuss the need to look out for common or recurrent themes or figures of speech and to be attentive to the repeated use of particular metaphors, similes or tropes.[22] In my own analysis, the focus is more on particular ideas or arguments. Whichever approach is taken, central to all discourse analytic approaches is what Jonathan Potter has called 'the spirit of skeptical reading'.[23] This involves the suspension of belief in the taken for granted. It is analogous to the injunction by anthropologists to 'render the familiar strange'. It involves changing the way that language

is seen in order to focus upon the construction, organization and functions of discourse rather than looking for something behind or underlying it. As Potter and Wetherell have pointed out, academic training teaches people to read texts for gist, but this is precisely the wrong spirit in which to approach analysis:

'If you read an article or book the usual goal is to produce a simple, unitary summary, and to ignore the nuance, contradictions and areas of vagueness. However, the discourse analyst is concerned with the detail of passages of discourse, however fragmented and contradictory, and with what is actually said or written, not some general idea that seems to be intended.'[24]

By contrast to our normal practices of reading, doing discourse analysis involves interrogating your own assumptions and the ways in which you habitually make sense of things. It involves a spirit of skepticism, and the development of an 'analytic mentality' which does not readily fall away when you are not sitting in front of a transcript.[25] You need to ask of any given piece: 'why am I reading this in this way?', 'what features of the text produce this reading?', 'how is it organized to make itself persuasive?', etc. In my opinion, discourse analysis should carry a health warning, because doing it fundamentally changes the ways you experience language and social relations – much as studying media and communications more broadly can radically shift our perspective and experience of everyday experiences and media.

In this phase of the analysis I might 'try out' multiple ways of coding or cutting into the data, trying to 'make sense' of it. A key point – that I will return to later – is to be able to account for the variability in the data. It is no good coming up with a way of understanding magazine sex advice that leaves out several types of argument or theme because they don't fit the schema. The analysis must be able to lend coherence and understanding to the whole data set, not just the 'juiciest' quotes or the parts we find most interesting. For me this stage involves multiple notes and different ways of trying to code the data. When doing the magazine research it involved a very untidy work environment that was a hive of activity: magazines spread out everywhere, marked with sticky notes; piles of paper; detailed notes made on the computer. It is, as Beverley Skeggs has noted, inevitably a 'messy' process that often gets cleaned up, smoothed over and sanitized in the process of writing up in a way that obfuscates the difficulties and the hard work, the frustration and dead-ends, the false starts and abandonments of notions.[26] As Skeggs puts it:

'If we have done research we all know that it is a difficult, messy, fraught, emotional, tiring and yet rewarding process; we know about all the elements involved, but how does anyone else get to know? All they usually see is the clean, crisp, neatly presented finished product.'[27]

<u>The analysis</u>

This complicated, difficult, at times frustrating process is difficult to write up honestly and authentically. It is much easier to explain the key themes of discourse analysis than it is to explain how actually to go

about analyzing texts. Pleasing as it would be to be able to offer a cookbook style recipe for readers to follow methodically, this is just not possible. Somewhere between 'selecting the data' and 'writing up', the essence of doing discourse analysis seems to slip away; ever elusive, it is never quite captured by descriptions of coding schemes and analytical schemas. However, just because the skills of discourse analysis do not lend themselves to procedural description, there is no need for them to be deliberately mystified and placed beyond the reach of all but the cognoscenti. Discourse analysis is similar to many other tasks: journalists, for example, are not given formal training in identifying what makes an event news, and yet after a short time in the profession their sense of 'news values' is hard to shake. There really is no substitute for learning by doing. This is how I learned to analyze discourse.

In the magazine study after going through the process described above I finally identified three interpretative repertoires that helped to make sense of the sex and relationship advice being offered, whilst also offering a new – and hopefully productive – way of thinking about how articles about intimate life were connected to a broader postfeminist sensibility operating across popular culture. The repertoires I identified were what I called the 'intimate entrepreneurship' repertoire, which was based on a language of goals, plans and strategies, a 'professionalization' of intimate life; 'men-ology' organized around the idea that women need to study and learn about men's needs and desires; and 'transforming the self' which exhorted women to 'makeover' not simply their bodies and sexual practices, but their emotional lives too – in order to become confident and adventurous sexual subjects. I will say a little about each repertoire in order to highlight their key themes.

Intimate entrepreneurship

In this repertoire, relationships are cast as work, using analogies and metaphors from the worlds of finance, management, science and military campaigns. Finding a satisfying intimate relationship is portrayed as having little to do with 'fate' and more to do with careful planning and strategy. Women are advised to build a detailed checklist of what they want in a partner and to 'go out and find him' and market themselves to suitable partners. Even sex is treated as an entrepreneurial activity, best approached in a rational, quasi-scientific manner. As one article put it: 'Forget spontaneity – if it's passion you're after, you need to plan for it. Here we tell you what to eat, the exercises to boost your libido, and the tricks that will guarantee sex worth waiting for'.

Men-ology

The name I gave this repertoire is designed to draw attention to two things: the emphasis it laces upon learning and studying, and it's focus on men as the subjects of this intense pedagogic activity. Whereas women were depicted as smart and go-getting in the intimate entrepreneurship repertoire, in this repertoire they appear naïve and unworldly, requiring guidance about every aspect of intimate relationships and particularly how to please men. Women are exhorted to study men closely, to learn about how they like to be seen and to offer compliments that fit with this perceived self-image, to familiarize themselves with men's interests, to mirror their speech patterns, and to

ensure that they reassure and affirm what is presented as an extremely fragile male ego at all times – but especially during difficult sexual encounters. The asymmetry of the emotional labor required in relationships is striking – though obfuscated through a discourse of 'good communication' (which turns out to mean women's communication).

Transforming the self

This third repertoire also focuses on the work women are required to do in relationships, but differs from the two others in that it involves a profound 'work on the self'. This repertoire helped to make sense of articles that were neither about planning and goal setting to get a man or a good sex life, nor about learning to please men, but – perhaps more fundamentally – necessitated a transformation of subjectivity. In this women were advised to 'love your body', 'banish neediness', work on their attitudes so that they are confident and adventurous, having rid themselves of any body 'hang-ups' or sexual repression. This is because (as one article put it) 'Most men agree that a confident, secure, optimistic and happy woman is easier to fall in love with than a needy neurotic one'.

What this brief summary has shown, I hope, is that sex and relationships were constructed in three very different and quite contrasting ways across the body of data. Considering them now, these interpretative repertoires may have taken on the status of a certain kind of obviousness. This is partly because they capture and express well the main thematics of contemporary sex and relationship advice targeted at

young, middle class women. In practice however these repertoires did not come ‘ready identified’ but were entangled within the magazine articles – sometimes all three repertoires might be mixed up together in the space of two or three sentences. The quotation below demonstrates this vividly:

'You just have to give sex the same priority you do to everything else in your life which you cherish. Educate yourself, try out new things, and, above all, have the right attitude. Try anything (within reason) once, put some effort into planning, but also don't worry if nothing goes to plan. Great sex stems from sexual confidence and if you feel sexy and believe in yourself, your body and your own ability, you really will be better at everything in bed' (‘Six ways to be better at everything in bed’).

Here, then, we see a ‘mash up’ of all three repertoires: the focus on planning and prioritizing sex, the emphasis upon education, and the injunctions to ‘have the right attitude’ and ‘believe in yourself’. The repertoires give us a way to understand and unpick the different discourses at work in extracts like this and in the magazines in general. This constitutes the main work of analysis, offering a fresh yet rigorous take. However, for me, what is interesting is not to stop at the identification of the different repertoires but to explore how these patterned ways of talking about intimate relationships connect back to broader themes, and cultural shifts and sensibilities. In the analysis foregrounded here, I did this by situating them within the neoliberalization and postfeminization of culture.[28]

A critical evaluation of discourse analysis

One of the questions asked of research findings generally is: are they representative? Can they, in other words, tell us something beyond the specifics of the particular analysis? This is a good question and an important one for scholars, pushing us to be careful about the status of the claims we want to make. In the case of discourse analysis, much of the time researchers are less interested in representativeness – let alone in the generalizability of their findings – than in the richness of their research, the ways it may offer insights into the structure and organization of everything from a TV talk show to a problem page. Looking back on my own research on Glamour magazine, however, I would make a bolder claim: by careful sampling I attempted to generate a representative set of articles to analyze. I think it is fair to claim that my analysis is representative of the kinds of discourses about sex and relationships circulating in a particular kind of magazine, in a particular historical and geographical context. Clearly my analysis is not true of all magazines at all times – indeed it is striking how different sex and relationship advice is in otherwise similar men's magazines such as GQ or Men's Health, but it does, I think, offer something that goes beyond an analysis of the particular editions of Glamour that came under my forensic gaze.

Another important set of questions concern the reliability and validity of research. How can we judge this? How do we know – in other words – which research to take seriously and to trust? Discourse analysts have been extremely critical of many existing methods for ensuring reliability

and validity. In psychology, for example, much experimental and qualitative research depends upon the suppression of variability, or the marginalization of instances that do not fit the story being told by the researcher.[29] Jonathan Potter argues that discourse analysts can make use of four considerations to assess the reliability and validity of analyses:[30]

1. Deviant case analysis—that is, detailed examination of cases which seem to go again the pattern identified. This may serve to disconfirm the pattern but it may help to add greater sophistication to the analysis.[31] This step was part of the process of coding in my research – trying out new ways of organizing the material until it could make sense of all the data, not just some of it.

2. Participants understanding. As I noted earlier in the chapter one way of checking whether a piece of discourse analysis holds water is to examine how participants responded. This is most relevant, of course, in records of interaction, but in media research like mine, magazine letters pages and online comments can provide useful ways of checking how (other) readers responded.

3. Coherence. Discourse analytic research is building increasingly upon the insights of earlier work. For example, knowledge about the effectiveness of three part lists, contrast structures, extreme case formulations, and disclaimers, etc. is developed from insights from earlier studies. As Potter argues, there is a sense in which each new study provides a check upon the adequacy of earlier studies.[32]

4. Readers evaluations. Perhaps the most important way for the validity of the analysis to be checked is by presentation of the materials being analyzed, in order to allow readers of the research to make their own

evaluation and, if they choose, to put forward alternative interpretations. Where academic publishers permit it, discourse analysts present full transcripts of their materials to readers. When this is not possible, extended passages will always be presented. In this way discourse analysis is more open than almost all other research practices, which invariably present data 'pre-theorized' or, as in ethnographic research, ask us to take observation and interpretations on trust.

Limitations and drawbacks

In all these ways, discourse analysis offers a principled, rigorous approach to researching media and communications. Three limitations or drawbacks are perhaps worth mentioning. First, discourse analysis is not an ideal approach for analyzing large data sets. It is much better at telling us 'a lot about a little' than produce broad and sweeping findings. Secondly, the labor-intensiveness of the approach is another key point to note. Compared with a simple thematic analysis, a proper discourse analysis will require significantly greater investment of time, concerned as it is with the organization, action orientation and rhetorical functions of texts as well as their thematic content. Finally, a third limitation of discourse analysis – including the one presented here – is its inattention to the visual dimensions of the text. In this sense it requires further elaboration for use in moving image research - as some scholars are now attempting with 'multimodal (discourse) analysis'.[33]

Conclusion

Ultimately, discourse analysis, like much other media and communications research, involves an individual or research team making a reading or interpretation. Discourse analysts put forward their take on a particular phenomenon, 'showing their working' and presenting as much information as possible to allow others to make alternative interpretations. In the case of media texts such as Glamour magazine, their ubiquitous nature makes it easy for others to contest or challenge the findings. At the end of the day, analyses stand or fall by the extent to which they illuminate a contemporary phenomenon, such as the changing nature of sex and relationships advice, and become part of an ongoing conversation about how to understand a world that is increasingly mediated. In this chapter I hope to have shown how I have used the approach to aid in our understanding of the changing ways in which intimate life is mediated in a popular cultural text.

Notes

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Further Reading

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