

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS: A TOOL FOR POLITICAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Discourse analysis is one of the tools in political science inquiry within the broader framework of qualitative methodology. It is both a theory and a method of conducting research. As a theory, discourse analysis assumes that language shape the thoughts of human beings which help them construct their political and social realities. As a method, it relies mostly on small groups whose actions are discerned through a critical study via series of technical activities which includes transcription, coding and analysis of data. Therefore, discourse analysis assumes among others, that reality and identity are socially constructed through a system of meaning that is generated from discourses. As a technique, discourse analysis is useful in conducting qualitative research whose purpose is to study in real life situation, behavior of actors in the political arena and how these behaviors affect the political process. It is also useful in the study of recorded events as well as naturally occurring behavior of political actors. Despite its usefulness, discourse analysis has been called to question on the grounds of its limited scientific credentials. It expose researchers to bias; it does not seem to have a clear pattern of conducting research; and it leaves open the challenge of discerning the boundaries between political activities and other social activities. Despite these lapses, discourse analysis remains an important tool of political science research offering a wide range of utility in collection of data, generating theory and analysis of data.

Introduction

Political Science like many other disciplines in the field of Social Sciences is equipped with a variety of tools and theoretical constructs through which political phenomena are viewed and examined. These tools can be categorized as theories, methods, approaches, models and paradigms. Some of the theories that abound and are utilized by scholars and students in analyzing political

phenomena include: systems theory, structural functionalism, institutional theory, behaviouralism among many others (Mahajan, 2008). However, there are also a variety of methodological constructs that are available to Political Scientist in conducting research. The broad categorization of research into either of quantitative and qualitative variants or both is

very common to the discipline. Within these general typologies of research, there are a variety of instruments that guides the collection and analysis of data depending on the type of research involved. On the other hand, political science as a discipline has been divided into three major paradigms namely: institutionalist, rational choice theory and bahavioralist paradigms respectively. Although there are in recent times, criticisms against these three paradigms, they have continued to influence and play important roles in guiding the focus and direction of Political Science.

Another unique attribute of some of these approaches and theories is that they serve multiple functions. Thus, it is common place to find an approach serving or playing the role of a theory and methodology of research at the same time, depending on how it is utilized by a researcher. Indeed, most theories in Political Science provide their unique method of conducting an investigation into a political phenomenon. That is why for example, the institutionalists while focusing on state institutions and other formal institutions that exist within the state in explaining a particular political event, they also advocate for a researcher to focus on these institutions in conducting his research by relying on historical and legal evidences as basis for collection of data. It is because of the foregoing that the utility of these theories in conducting investigation into power relations, public policy, issues on war and diplomacy, and other basic political science concerns cannot be over emphasized (Mahajan, 2008, p. 19).

In addition to the above, data collected in political science is usually subjected to some form of analysis. This analysis is usually sanctioned by popularly accepted strategies of doing same. For example, a quantitative research may utilize statistical, mathematical, graphical and other quantitative techniques in its analysis. However, for a researcher conducting a qualitative study, the use of statistical methods of data analysis may not necessarily apply but rather other

unique techniques of analyzing data may be employed to make political sense out of whatever is being examined. In this regard, the use of content analysis and/or discourse analysis may come in handy for the analysis of data in a qualitative research activity. Although Discourse analysis may not be a frequently used tool in political science research, it is useful in qualitative research because it offers an opportunity for the researcher to utilize and exploit the use of language to explain political phenomena in their social context. Another great import of discourse analysis is that beyond just a technique of data analysis, it provides a reach strategy through which data could be collected (Pierce, 2008). As such, it is one of the important aspects of political science research especially as it relates to theory and methodology.

On account of the poor attention accorded it by political science researchers, this paper attempts to give an insight into the understanding of discourse analysis. This is done by segmenting the paper into a number of sections. After the introduction, the meaning of discourse analysis was discussed. This is followed by the historical background of discourse analysis. The subsequent section looks into discourse analysis as a theory. Another section focused on discourse analysis as a method of conducting research before delving into its major assumptions, strengths and weaknesses. The last section concluded the paper

Discourse Analysis: A Clarification

To begin with, it is important note that discourse analysis defies a generally accepted definition. There is no mainstream definition of discourse within the social sciences. Neither is there any consensus as to which method(s) its practitioners should use. Consequently, it is difficult to give a precise description of what characterizes discourse analysis (Pedersen, 2009). In the same vein, Hewitt (2009) remarked thus: "There are many schools of discourse analysis which encompass diverse methodological approaches". In any case, the point to note is that, a number of

explanations and definitions abound that seeks to provide an understanding of discourse analysis. Linguistic traditions define discourse solely as the units of written and spoken communication under study and focus on the content of texts and conversations. Other social science traditions define discourse as being derived from and dependent on social practices – the complex mix of cultural norms, disciplines and rituals– which govern discursive formations. A definition of discourse which encompasses social practices draw attention to how discourses are formed and shaped, and to the possibility of contrasting sets of influences producing divergent discourses (Hajer, 1995). Discourse Analysis has also been defined as the contextualization of communication. It is the deconstructive method that seeks to reveal the motivations behind text or choice of words (Holsti, 1969).

In explaining discourse analysis, Georgaca and Avdi, noted that:

In a broad sense, discourses are defined as systems of meaning that are related to the interactional and wider sociocultural context and operate regardless of the speaker's intentions. Discourse analysis examines the language in use rather than the psychological phenomena, such as attitudes, memory or emotions, which are traditionally presumed to underlie talk and be revealed through it (2007:158).

Discourse is thus, viewed as text in context, seen as “data that is liable for empirical analysis” (Dijk T. V., 1996), with focus being put on discourse as action and process. Buttressing this position further, the following quote may suffice: “I shall use the term discourse to refer to the whole process of social interaction of which a text is just a part” (Fairclough, 1989, p. 24). The analysis of discourse is, necessarily, the analysis of language in use. As such, it cannot be restricted to the description of linguistic forms independent of the purposes or functions which these forms are

designed to serve in human affairs (Brown & Yule, 1983: 1, cited in Alba-Juez, 2009).

Discourse Analysis typically focuses more on the qualitative interpretation of the meaning of language in texts, paying special attention to how context and conventions are represented through language. While text typically refers to written documents, it applies quite generally to recorded verbal behavior of almost any kind. Commonly analyzed examples include political speeches, media broadcasts, newspaper editorials, court decisions, business reports, psychological diaries, draft legislation, correspondence with companies, and the transcripts of customer service phone calls. It therefore, follows that, discourse analysis deals with the examination of language with a view to discern and explain human or political behavior within its social context. Because social sciences generally and political science in particular, study human action that are essentially political (for political science), the focus on language which is the main tool of political communication remains sacrosanct. As such, discourse analysis which emphasizes the social interpretation of political actions through the analysis of words that are written or spoken in various languages occupies a central position in political science investigations.

History of Discourse Analysis

Analysis of discourse have been carried out within a variety of social science disciplines, including linguistics, anthropology, sociology, international relations, communication studies and political science. Although the concept of political discourse has been used for centuries to describe political debate or deliberation in political theory and philosophy, it is only within the last 40 years that there has been a theoretical and methodological interest on how to study the relationship between language and political action (Alba-Juez, 2009). This started in the 1960s in Europe as part of a philosophical renewal of the humanities (including the social sciences), later to be known as structuralism and post-structuralism, or in more general terms as the

Linguistic Turn. In the 1970s it spread to the USA with studies of how political concepts and political news play a role in the construction of social problems. Today there are several approaches on how to understand the role of language in politics. Among these are conceptual historiography (*Begriffsgeschichte*), the history of political ideas, and the theory of narration. They all differ from discourse analysis by the fact that their object of study is concepts, narration and ideas and not discourses (Karlberg, 2012). The most important difference among discourse analytical approaches is between those which seek to understand discourse as a contingent form of knowledge and use discourse analysis to see how knowledge and the production of knowledge have changed over time; and those which take for granted that “the world” is a product of how we categorize it through our statements, and therefore looks upon discourse as a universal type of social action, and use discourse analysis to establish a general theory of discourse. Although discourse analytic approaches emphasize the connection between discourse and power; they differ in how they attach the concept of discourse to other concepts such as knowledge, ideology, ideas and truth (Pedersen, 2009).

This understanding of discourse and discourse analysis is closely connected to Michel Foucault and his publications from 1963 to 1971. In this period Foucault studied the history of language and how words (or language) were placed in relation to things (or what is observable) at various periods in history. Foucault was concerned with the fact that from the mid-1800s, the human sciences began to analyze language and to argue that all human actions and social formations are somehow related to language, or can even be understood as constructed in (or by the use of) language. For Foucault, then, discourse analysis is not some independent theory or method, but a way in which the human sciences perceive the world (Dijk T. V., 1996). He shows how language was turned into an empirical object for scientific

studies, and views discourse analysis as a historically specific manner in which the human sciences relate to reality. Hence, for him, the scientific interest in language is a historical event, the end of the modernity period, where man stood at the centre of scientific interest, and the start of a new period, where language became the central object of study. It is in this context that Foucault introduced the concepts of *archives* and *archaeology* in an attempt to portray discourses as historically determined forms of knowledge which, together with other discourses, enters into a form of institutionalized rationality (an archive) (Holsti, 1969). The archive, in consequence is a historically determined knowledge horizon, a framework for how ideas are produced and sustained and for how knowledge is accepted (as being trustworthy) or not. Ideas are created in discursive events, which subsequently – by historical analysis – can be understood to have added new positions to the archive or to have transformed already existing positions in the archive. At the same time, the archaeology is the knowledge we possess about the history of the various forms of knowledge, and of the limitations and possibilities which exist for creating knowledge and generating ideas. These limitations and possibilities are not exclusively linguistic. They are also extra-discursive and institutional. Discourses are supported by institutions and together with various technologies (for example, disciplining or sanctioning) they constitute a historically determined rationality (Pedersen, 2009).

Discourse Analysis as Theory

The term discourse theory encompasses a diverse set of insights, assumptions, and concepts that have emerged across a range of disciplines in recent decades. Discourse theory generally derives from the “linguistic turn” in the humanities and social sciences that traces back to the work of influential figures such as Ferdinand de Saussure, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Michel Foucault (Parker, 1992). Most approaches to discourse theory rest on the underlying premise

that language, and language use, do not merely reflect or represent our social and mental realities, but they actually help construct or constitute these realities. The idea that language, or discourse, can shape or structure human thought and action, and that language use therefore warrants study as a structuring agent, was initially a departure from mainstream western science and philosophy which, until then, had tended to view language merely as a neutral or transparent medium of thought and communication. However, the view that discourse is a structuring agent is now accepted within diverse schools of thought that span the humanities and social sciences. Although debates carry on regarding the relative influence of discourse, the nature of that influence, and how best to study discourse, discourse theory has established itself as a highly influential framework for inquiry, analysis, and even activism (Karlberg, 2005 cited in Karlberg, 2012).

Variations on the theme of discourse theory can be found in the disciplines of anthropology, communication, linguistics, literary studies, political science, social psychology and sociology, as well as in interdisciplinary fields such as cultural studies. In general, discourse theory tends to be associated with qualitative and interpretive methodologies that focus on the social construction and exchange of meaning through *texts*, defined broadly to include not only written texts but also records of spoken words, gestures, symbols, images, film, and other expressive cultural artifacts (Mair, 2001). However, as Phillips and Hardy (2002) explains:

Discourse analysis does not simply comprise a set of techniques for conducting structured, qualitative investigations of texts; it also involves a set of assumptions concerning the constructive effects of language (p. 5).

Foremost among these is the assumption that discourses are characterized by structural and functional properties. In this regard, “researchers

do not view discourse merely as a medium through which the researcher can discover something about research participants’ inner mental worlds. Instead, discourse is viewed as a phenomenon which has its own properties. Properties which have an impact on people and their social interactions” (McKinlay & McVittie, 2008, p.8 cited in Karlberg, 2012). These properties include systems of categorization, metaphors, narratives, frames, and other interpretative schema that can influence cognition, perception, and action within communities of shared discourses (Karlberg, 2012).

In contrast to Foucault, discourse theory aim at developing a universal theory of discourses as against his restrictive stance on discourse theory. To this end, discourse theory sees all social phenomena as discursive constructions, and assumes that all social phenomena can be studied by discourse analysis. It is in this sense that discourse theory turns social phenomena into language, and language into an object for discourse analysis. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe are the best examples. They have advanced discourse theory by deconstructing other theories. First, with inspiration from structuralist linguistics, they emphasize that the smallest unit in a discourse (*langue*) is the sign, and that discourses includes a system of signs characterized by every sign being different from other signs. Second, with inspiration from post-structuralism, they emphasize that signs are infused meaning through articulation (*signifié*) while the content of signs (*signifiant*) is always contingent and never fixed.

Finally, with inspiration from Neo- Marxism, they stress that the articulation is embedded in a political process. In their definition, discourse is a system of signs which are allocated meaning through articulation (Fairclough, 1989). The articulation on one hand is understood as a conflict between persons whose object is to achieve political status by imposing a particular taken-for-granted understanding of the world. On

the other hand discourse analysis is used to map or trace this process as a political one. The task of discourse analysis is to find the nodal points which give other signs their meaning, and to observe the process through which the allocation of meaning is taking place. In political theory, for example, “democracy” is a nodal point around which conflicts are constantly taking place. In contrast to Foucault’s discourse analysis, the concept of ideology (or objectivity) plays an important role in discourse theory. All discourses are ideological because they appear as objective, the taken-for-granted, and thus, conceal alternative realities. Also, in contrast to Foucault, the concept of knowledge does not enter into the vocabulary of discourse theory. Where Foucault can study how knowledge has become an archive with his archaeological (diachronic) approach, the discourse theoretical (synchronic) approach is analyzing how meaning is created by politics. And finally where Foucault sees institutions as supporting knowledge and therefore capable of having an independent (non discursive) status, in discourse theory institutions are understood as discursive constructions without any extra-discursive status (Pedersen, 2009).

Discourse Analysis as Method of Data Collection and Analysis

The steps to conducting a discourse analytical study broadly include devising a research question, gaining access and consent, collecting data, transcribing, reading, coding, analysis, validation, writing and application (Georgaca & Avdi , 2007). In conducting a research using discourse analysis method, the researcher must rely on a relatively small sample and/or text. This may be as a result of the fact that analysis is usually labor-intensive, and large amount of data may be problematic to handle. However, the appropriate amount of data depends on the specific research question and the depth of analysis to be carried out. In relation to analysis, O’Connell and Kowal, (1995), indicated that analysis begin with a form of interpretation

known as transcription. After transcription has been concluded, several close readings and initial coding begins which heralds the selection of extracts considered relevant to the research question. In the process the researcher becomes immersed in the data and begins to develop and make sense out of the text.

Methodologically, discourse Analysis is characterized by a number of assumptions. They are:

1. Discourse analysis is a social constructionist approach which believes that reality and identity are systematically constructed and maintained through system of meaning and through social practices.
2. It is also assumed that there exist no objective ground on which the truth of claims can be proven and propose that the value of knowledge should be evaluated according to other criteria such as its applicability, usefulness and clarity (Potter, 1996).
3. Discourse analysis deals mainly with text and discourses within a defined social context.
4. Discourse analysis believes that reality is usually constructed using the instrument of language.
5. Language is a form of social action. This means people use language to achieve certain interpersonal goals (Georgaca & Avdi , 2007).
6. All political phenomena are discursive constructions and can be studied using discourse analysis.

Utility of Discourse Analysis

Discourse Analysis has since its inception proven to be very useful in the study of political phenomena. It has served as a theory and a method of data collection and analysis especially in conducting qualitatively-inclined researches where emphasis is placed on interpretation and explanation of text and discourses within defined

social context with a view to providing an understanding into political events. "Discourse analysis has become increasingly important within political science. Its growing conceptual and methodological importance for political research is quite enormous" (Mair, 2001). It is in this regard that the following merits are outlined: In the first place, discourse Analysis involves looking at the effects of discourses on for example, how we experience ourselves and relate to each other. These discourses may reproduce or challenge culturally dominant ways of understanding the world, and, in turn, produce or challenge institutions and those particular kinds of social order (Parker, 1992). Therefore, discourse analysis seeks to provide a new order away from cultural and institutional methods of analyzing political events.

Discourse analysis can be used to study, analyze or examine both naturally occurring events and research generated texts. It is therefore common for a discourse analyst to analyze contents of interviews, official reports from government and private sector organizations, newspaper bulletins, speeches etc.

Another area where the relevance of discourse analysis is valuable is in the area of context. This gives the theory or method its interpretivist strength in examining issues that may be related to politics. Perhaps this feature distinguishes discourse from content analysis where emphasis is on themes and categories upon which codes are developed. In Discourse analysis texts are analyzed by discerning the social context that may influence certain behavior as contained in the discourse (Georgaca & Avdi, 2007).

In addition, Discourse Analysis enables the researcher to consider all possible aspects from which a particular discourse or text could be analyzed. In doing this, nothing is left to chance. All the variables related to a particular event are taken to be important. This has the advantage of enabling the discourse analyst to provide a comprehensive picture on the subject matter of investigation.

Shortcomings of Discourse Analysis

Despite the contributions of discourse analysis in the field of political science, it has its share of problems and limitations. Some of these limitations may be related to it as a theory while others centers on the methodology it adopts in investigating social and political phenomena.

Methodologically, discourse analysis have not provided a clear pattern in investigating a social or political event, this is captured thus:

The absence of extensive discussion of methodological issues raises questions about how researchers can engage with the Foucauldian tradition of discourse analysis and the extent to which it is useful to researchers carrying out time-limited academic research. The position of the researcher, who defines the research problem in relation to the field of research, is another key question. Discourse analysis necessitates the researcher gaining a view of the problem from the "outside" in order to recognize the hidden assumptions and practices that form the rules of discourse formation, as Hidding, Needham and Wisserhof (2000) have described it" (Hewitt, 2009, p. 3)

Van Dijk, (1980) noted that Political Discourse Analysis is also faced with the challenge of scope since most activities taking place in the society may be directly or indirectly associated with politics. It in this regard discourse analysis being a product of cross-cutting disciplines within the social science group is faced with the challenge of delineating itself to events and behavior of individuals that are purely political in nature and deserves the attention of political scientists. Discourse Analysis may give room for the preference and bias of the researcher to influence result of the research. Since it is the duty of the discourse analyst to use the text from verbal or written documents to explain political realities, the tendency for each researcher involved in the same activity to arrive at his or

her own personal reality is very high (Hajer, 1995). This negates the scientific premise of politics as canvassed by the behaviouralists. Discourse Analysis is also limited by its interpretivist stance. In this case, its application or use in quantitative research where statistical tools are deployed to analyze data may not be suitable.

Conclusion

Discourse Analysis appears to be relatively recent in the field of political science gaining relevance beginning from the 18th century. In recent times however, it has enjoyed the attention of students and scholars in this field (Political Science). Scholars and teachers that are inclined to qualitative research have come to appreciate discourse analysis as a useful tool especially given that it provides dual advantage of being used as theory and method respectively. The reality that the bulk of political actions and behavior are displayed and transmitted using the instrument of language underscores the relevance of discourse analysis in political science research. While the study of language in itself may not provide the necessary tool required of political science research, its examination in social context using discourse analysis provides yet another approach to political analysis. Emphasizing the central assumption of discourse analysis which views all political behavior as socially constructed provides opportunity for political scientist to

qualitatively dig into the subtle and less obvious nuances to which actions and behavior that has political relevance could be explained. Indeed, the methodological orientation of discourse analysis which inclines to inductive reasoning promotes the tendency of researchers to develop theories that could explain specific and general political actions in the society.

In essence, it is on account of its theoretical and methodological relevance that political scientist should utilize more of discourse analysis in their researches. Obviously, given some of the lapses replete in the use of discourse analysis, there is the need for political scientist to be more systematic in deploying it as a tool of research. There must be adequate resort to overcoming the challenge of bias that may feature in the use of discourse analysis. This can be done by ensuring that the researcher's idiosyncratic posture remains insignificant as to not influence the outcome of the research. In addition, political scientist must logically delineate discourses that borders on power relations as being of interest to political scientist. This is with a view to addressing the problem of boundaries with other social sciences. Lastly, the interpretivist base of discourse analysis may be useful in augmenting the inadequacies of quantitative researches. Thus, using mixed approach would give room for the use of discourse analysis to interpret, explain and even make germane predictions.

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