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Abstract

In discourse theoretical studies the qualitative interview is scarcely treated as a method, but as empirical data. Some important methodological challenges for discourse theory are thereby being obscured. In this paper the role of the qualitative interview in discourse theory is therefore discussed. The paper outlines the roots of the discourse theoretical project and its approach to language as a reality-producing force. Furthermore, I discuss the role of the discourse theorist in the interview and the status that is assigned to actors and structure in the analysis of qualitative interviews. Discourse theoretical studies do not take advantage of the interview as a way to reveal social forces beyond the influence of language and discourse. It is therefore argued that further efforts should be made in order to reveal the limits to discourse theoretical studies, but then it is necessary to be more explicit on the distinction between method and empirical data.

Keywords: Qualitative interview, discourse analysis, discourse theory, methodology

1. Introduction

Linguistics has gained increased attention in the philosophy debates of the last century. We have also witnessed a cultural and linguistic turn in the human and social sciences in the 1980s and 1990s. Many scholars have subsequently altered their theoretical lens to study society using language as the departure point in what is normally labeled discourse analysis (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 1994: 272; Tannen, Schiffrin, and Hamilton 2001; Winther Jørgensen and Phillips 1999; Åkerstrøm Andersen 2003). The meta-theories of how society go about producing our economic, social and material reality is thoroughly developed in this research tradition, but the question of scientific method is far less well explained (Kvale 1997; Søndergaard 2000; Torfing, Dyrberg and Hansen 2000b; Åkerstrøm Andersen 2003). This is a weakness when the validity of a discourse analysis is considered by other social scientists, who may ask: 'Can we trust the findings and how can we evaluate the relationship between empirical data and the analysis of these data?' In this paper I will therefore turn the attention towards the process of producing knowledge in discourse theory.

Although discourse analysts regularly justify their approach using their own vocabulary, it seems that they are still being met with suspicion from other scholars (Barnett 1998; Cook 2000; Hacking 1999; Sokal and Bricmont, 1998), even though the critics became more zealous around the turn of the millennium. The social sciences, it is claimed, 'have yet to embrace the full deconstructionist force of the cultural turn' (Cloke 2006: 22). At the same time, discourse analysts are critical of many of the presumptions in other research traditions. Thereby, they also reject the most common premises for a discussion between different traditions, such as the question about ontology and epistemology, the relationship between theory and method and also how to relate to empirical data. In this paper I will therefore discuss how discourse analysts relate to empirical data, exemplified with the qualitative research interview.¹

The main aim of this paper is to discuss the role of qualitative interviews in discourse theoretical studies. This discussion will hopefully reveal what a discourse theoretical study can contribute to academia and society, and what kind of knowledge this tradition necessarily fails to grasp.

Before I enter into this analysis, I will present the discourse analytic research tradition, what inspires it and what kind of research project discourse analysts can be said to have in common. I then go on to present some schools within the discourse analytical research tradition, as an introduction to discourse theory. This presentation of other traditions will not do justice to the complexity and variations that can be found within each school of discourse analysis, but will hopefully serve its purpose of making evident some aspects of how discourse theory stand out from other approaches. I then go on to discuss how discourse theoretical analysis deal with (i) the question of being present in the interview; (ii) the status of structure in interview data; and finally (iii) the agency of the interviewee. I will criticize and partly defend discourse theory and the way it deals, or rather not deals, with independent forces that are able to resist discourses. Towards the end I will also question the ability of discourse theory to account for the analytical and methodological interface with other research traditions.

2. What is Discourse Analysis?

Discourse analysis is the analysis of discourses. A discourse analysis consists of a description, interpretation, explanation and – in some variants also critique of discourses, including their development and what consequences they have for the phenomenon under study. It can be defined as a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (Winther Jørgensen and Phillips 1999) or an internally consistent ways of speaking and thinking about a topic (Putnam 1987). It is a structuring scheme that people utilize when they want to understand the world and themselves, when they interpret a situation and talk and act in this situation.

Discourse analysis, especially with its roots in post-structuralism is critical towards the classical bisection that was made in the Age of Enlightenment, between the real on the one hand and the imaginary on the other. In this classical understanding, language works as an instrument in the movement

between the two domains; in other words, language is subordinate and does not hold an independent role in the making of society.

It could be claimed that this ontological basis for a European theory of sciences has produced two different theoretical traditions (Aase and Fossåskaret 2007). The positivist regards our thoughts as more or less good reflections of reality, whereas the other tradition sees reality, or at least the part that we are able to grasp, as a product of our own mental constructions. Reality, in the latter case is in other words constructed by people and society, as is the case in the theory of practice, symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, ethnomethodology and hermeneutics. The field of study in these disciplines is, amongst others, people's actions in social space, their intentions, what people assign meaning to and the processes that produce the phenomenon under study. Even if some of these directions break with the actor/structure dualism in social sciences, whether any of them really transgress the bisection between society as either man-made or as a mirror of an outer objective reality remain an open question (Hagen, 2006), and this is where discourse analysis departs from other traditions.

In addition to the real and the imaginary, discourse analysis introduces a third independent domain. The field of a discourse study is society as it occurs in language. Language is regarded as a driving force behind human knowledge about the world, but even more radical, it brings reality into existence. Language and discourse 'produces something else (an utterance, a concept, an effect), rather than something which exists in and of itself and which can be analyzed in isolation' (Mills 1997: 17). In this we can point to the inspiration from social constructivism (Lysgård 2001), introduced to the social sciences by Berger and Luckmann (1966). Social reality is here defined as phenomena that we humans regard as having existence independently of us and that we cannot wish away. Reality is in other words what we regard as not constructed by people. However, this assumption does not preclude what humans actually create themselves, and reality therefore does not 'really' exist independently of us. The social reality is in other words constructed within society, and here language and symbols play a central role: The intersubjective, the part of reality where we share the comprehension of phenomena, is structured by a system of symbols that is regarded as objective for the person, but which actually originates from common social interaction. Language is the medium for the social construction of reality.

In discourse analysis, language plays an independent, and in the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe (2001), which I will return to, even a basic and primary role in the making of society. Neither the real nor the imaginary is assumed to exist independently of the symbolic. It is only with the aid of language that ideas about reality and reality itself can be brought into existence. A study of the symbolic therefore is not just a study of words in the interstice of the real and the imaginary; it is a study of the making of society. This does not mean that ideas and thoughts about reality or reality itself do not exist. The point is just that none of them becomes meaningful or can be grasped without the aid of discourse. This approach to language and reality of course influences the purpose of performing interviews, and also how data produced in interviews are analyzed.

3. Discourse Analytical Schools

Discourse analysis is not an unambiguous concept. Different directions have developed from Marxism, sociolinguistics, social psychology and ethnomethodology. In conversation analysis (CA), the researcher performs detailed linguistic interpretations of transcripts of interviews or conversations. This direction originates from ethnomethodology, where one believes that the way we constitute the world must be studied, not in abstract researcher-initiated items (Schegloff 1997), but on the level where reality is being performed; in 'lived reality' (Mey 2001).

Jørgensen and Phillips (1999) have not included CA in their presentation of three different discourse analytical schools; critical discourse analysis, discourse psychology and discourse theory. Fairclough (Fairclough 1995) developed his Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) out of the opinion that conversation analysis works with a simplified understanding of the relationship between text and society. CDA provides the researcher with a model for studying the relationships between text, discursive practice and social practice.

Discourse psychology has developed within social psychology, as a critique of cognitivism. The assumption is that psychological phenomena are not hidden in mental units, but arise from social activities (Billig 2001). 'Minds and selves are constructed from cultural, social and communal resources' (Wetherell 2001: 187). The assumption is that our access to reality is through analysis of language in use. Focus is therefore on the text itself, and not the text as a representation of some subjective or objective essence.

Thirdly, the post-structuralist approach from Foucault and Derrida has from the 1980s been developed further in discourse theory through the 'Essex School' (Robinson 2004; Townsend 2003). It is very much the fruits of the labour of Laclau and Mouffe (Critchley and Marchart 2004; Laclau 1990, 2005; Laclau and Mouffe 2001). This school will be elaborated on below, as I go on to relate it to the qualitative interview.

Other distinctions between schools can be made, e.g. Lees (2004) concern with two distinct strands to the discursive turn in urban geography; a Marxist and a post-structuralist. In the first the pre-given identity of actors is a point of departure in studies of who said what to whom, where, when and how, whereas post-structuralists approach the question of agency in a different manner, assuming that linguistic structures of discourse precede and help to construct agents as such. Discourse theory follows this second path.

4. Discourse Theory and the Qualitative Interview

Discourse theoretical analysis can be performed on everything from interviews, letters, diaries and public documents, to observations, movies, newspaper articles and professional literature (Søndergaard 2000; Torfing, Dyrberg and Hansen 2000a). However, it does not necessarily distinguish between different data sources or alternative methods for collecting and creating data. It is otherwise not unusual to divide sources of data into interviews, observations and documents (Repstad 1987). This way of ordering

the empirical data is relevant when focus is on the method or the technique of collecting data. One interviews, observes or collects texts. These data are thereafter treated as the empirical basis for the following analysis. In discourse theory however, all the empirical evidence is classified as one main type; text, and this type of data is therefore the basic unit in the study, not people, social groups or society.

This is a way of relating to empirical data that obscures some important methodological challenges. A qualitative interview is an excellent method if you want to gain insight into the intentions, feelings, purposes and comprehensions of the interviewee. The interview can also represent insights into how individual interviewees interpret themselves and how they interpret the phenomenon under study (Repstad 1987; Ryen 2002). Is this insight in reach if you only study texts? Interviews can also provide non-linguistic data. What status do discourse theory ascribe to these data? Are they irrelevant unless they are articulated? The interview can finally be part of the process of analysis, during which alternative interpretations are developed and tested out. What is lost in discourse theoretical analysis if the researcher does not enter into a direct dialogue with the actors or influence the reality under study? In the following I will address these questions, relating it also to my own work.

4.1 Performing the Interview

Together with a colleague of mine I recently performed a group interview with seven local stakeholders in a small rural community in the southern part of Norway. This was part of a study of place development particularly related to an INTERREG IV-project called “Landsbygdsutveckling i Skandinavien” (Rural development in Scandinavia) that the place was part of. We wanted to apply a discourse-theoretical approach, describing the discourses that framed local perceptions and practice. We found that the place is brought into existence in two fundamentally different ways. The “residence discourse”, as we named it, focused on the place as an arena for living, where the rural idyll is nurtured and where value creation is not connected to local industries but commuting and public employment. In the “autonomy discourse” the inherent value of the place still structure local perceptions. The economic and cultural autonomy is pre-given.

We performed the interview because little empirical material was available where local people articulated their thoughts about the place as such. The interview was taped and transcribed. It is fair to say that our actual participation in the interview was not exploited. We attempted to minimize our influence on what was being said about the place. I think we can say that if two other researchers had performed the interview it would not have altered the way we came to analyze the transcripts. The discourses that we assume structures the articulations about the place are only indirectly accessible to us anyway, and it is therefore the transcripts, and not who said what, in response to what or how it was said that was under study.

The purpose of a discourse theoretical interview would not be to look for the truth about the nature of a phenomenon, causal relations or how things really are (Søndergaard 2000). It is rather denied that there is a true and external reality that science to a greater or lesser degree can correspond to (Aase and

Fossåskaret 2007). Therefore, the most common reasons for performing interviews do not apply. This is the reason why discourse theorists ‘typically analyze documents that have been produced independently of the research process’ (Torfing et al. 2000b: 330), or why ‘in this process, the traditional methods of data collection, which produce the data especially for the research process—as is the case in interviews or focus groups—play a minor role’ (Flick 2007: xv).

I will say a little more about why interviews play a ‘minor role’ in discourse theory. When a research project is about how something is brought into existence, the main interest lies in studying language used in the arenas where this construction takes place—where society is being made. In an interview, on the contrary, issues will come up that do not belong in the arena that you would like to study. An interview is a partly shielded situation where both parties agree to enter into a particular communicative form. This excludes or depresses other communicative norms that may be closer to the discursive universe of the interviewee (Briggs 1986). It is a challenge then to distinguish between statements that result from the setting of the interview, and statements that enter into a public discourse in ‘real life’, since ‘interview data reflect both the events described and the context of the interview itself’ (Briggs 1986: 9). In other words, a problem possibly arises when the researcher enters and plays an active part by asking questions, because this will not be the discourse in its ‘purest form’ as ‘the answers are partly shaped by the discourse that the interviewee normally acts in, and that we eagerly want to know something about, and partly are shaped by the discursive situation, that is created in the meeting with the interviewer’ (Torfing et al. 2000b: 326).

However, this is not a problem of inaccuracy, as the interviewer influences the interviewee in such a way that he or she does not grasp the correct presentation of reality. Even if, for the sake of argument all ‘research effect’ (Repstad 1987) was removed, which of course would be an illusion for any social scientist, what is said is still dependent on the context. Language does not only mirror our inner world, but generates a more or less accidental variant of this world. It is therefore the distance between the interview situation and the more relevant making of society that represents the main problem. Even if discourse theory shares the problem of the constructedness of the interview situation with other research traditions, it departs from the others since the difference is not between reality and its representation, but between two different discursive settings. The researcher therefore needs to reflect upon the influence of these discursive settings (Hansen, Lyager Bech and Plum 2004).

In discourse theory it is not decisive for the researcher to participate in qualitative interviews, participation may even represent a problem, since data are therefore less naturally occurring. It is the analysis of text and the transcribed interview that gains attention, and not how the performance of the interview itself can enrich and affect the analysis.

4.2 A Structure beyond the Interview?

Another way of forcing a discussion about the role of the interview in discourse theory is to ask how structure enters into the analysis of interview data. In our case of place development we studied local discourses, and not the discourse that emerged in the course of the interview. The interview situation in itself was not allowed to bring any additional data to our analysis. The conversation in itself was not our object of study. Here discourse theory departs from conversation analysis. Conversation analysts assume that interview data are 'created in the interaction, but interaction cannot reveal a stable self that is located there more or less complete and stored' (Ryen 2002: 16). This is also how discourse theory understands the course of events in an interview. Data are produced there and then. The difference is that in conversation analysis the interaction that takes place in the interview is regarded as an insight into more common procedures that people utilize in their making of society. Everything is in other words not in the text, because 'underneath the visible, directly accessible text, lays a slightly displaced invisible text that controls the questions and answers posed by the visible text' (Åkerstrøm Andersen 2003: 2), the articulated text is structured from the outside. The transcript of a dialogue between people is primarily interesting to the degree that it reveals something about the general rules or methods that are presumed to work independently of context: 'Our aim is to get into a position to transform, in an almost literal sense, our view of "what happened", from a matter of particular interaction done by particular people, to a matter of interactions as products of a machinery. We are trying to find the machinery' (Sacks in Atkinson and Heritage 1984: 26).

In its conception of structure, among other things (ten Have 2006), conversation analysts depart from discourse theory, which has adopted the post-structural opening up of the structure. Saussure was in part introducing language as a system or a structure that is not determined by the reality that it refers to. The language-system does not mirror reality, it creates meaning (Hall 1997). Structure determines, from its depth, the individuals and the social. Structuralists, like Saussure (1960 [1916]) and Lévi-Strauss (1969), are therefore content with studies of the language structure, or for instance the structures of kinship, because they regard that the coherence and stability of the structure can be found in the centre of the structure itself. In post-structuralism, especially through Derrida (1976 [1967]) and Foucault (1970) the structure became more fluent and sensitive to influence from society and people. Derrida claimed that the order of society does not originate from the centre of the structure. Post-structuralists are therefore giving up presumably autonomous and independent forces such as nature, the subject or the truth. Derrida (in Esmark, Bugge Laustsen and Åkerstrøm Andersen 2005) furthermore claims that in the absence of a center or an origin, everything comes into being in discourse, 'given that we can agree upon this word' (Esmark et al. 2005: 27). What is articulated or signified in discourse is never located outside the system itself. In the absence of a force outside the discourse, all meaning creation takes place in an infinite play in discourse.

For the social sciences, post-structuralism from around 1960 implies that one cannot understand or explain the shaping of meaning in society solely by

studying its language-structure. One has to move upwards from the mechanisms that structure and determine from its depth, up towards the surface, where language is being used (Murdoch 2006). Discourse theorists therefore want to study the process where society is made, and the point is not to produce knowledge that is independent of context about how society should be understood or is made. Any analysis of discourses therefore has to be performed and is only valid in connection to the empirical field to which it is directed (Søndergaard 2000).

Conversation analysts regard interviews as mirrors of an underlying structure, an approach that discourse theorists reject. In discourse theory one presupposes that what is articulated in an interview must be seen as an interview-discourse, on its own producing a version of reality. In discourse psychology however, the ability of the subject to resist and change the discourse is drawn into analysis. I will now elaborate on this last point.

4.3 The Agency of the Interviewee

The last topic I want to shed light on in the relation between interviews and discourse analysis is how much weight is put on the people that produce discourse. During the interview, and in the reading of the transcripts from it, we did not put emphasis on who expressed their notion about the place or why. When a young newcomer to the place stated that she believed that people in the nearby regional city centre regards locals as primitive, we did not attempt to interpret this statement as an expression of this girl's identity or as a product of the situation that she found herself in as a newcomer. The statement instead entered, along with many other statements in the interview and in other written sources, into an overall analysis of ways of articulating the place and its relation to other places.

Discourse psychology here takes a slightly different direction from discourse theory, making the agency of the subject an object of investigation. It seems to me that discourse psychologists (Potter and Wetherell 1987) do not only identify discourses, but they also reveal how discourses enter into a process of identification in situated social practices. Discourse theory does not make the agency of the subject part of analysis, and therefore only study the way the subject appears in the interview.

This is strongly linked to the question about the role and conceptualization of the human subject. In the general discourse analytical approach to the interviewee, humans do not have any unambiguous attitudes that can be expressed in statements. The reason we cannot gain knowledge about such an essence is that language, which is the empirical foundation for our studies, not only mirrors a deeper psychological or social reality, but it just as much creates this reality.

Discourse theorists implicitly reject the idea that the statements of the interviewee during an interview, for instance about his or her intentions and attitudes, can provide fruitful insights into the state of these things outside the context of the interview:

How the subject appears or pictures reality in specific interview situations is less about how they or reality really "is" (i.e. experience it) than about how

they develop a form of subjectivity or represent reality in relation to the local discursive context of the interview. (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 1994: 272, my translation)

The discursive context of the interview in other words guides how the subject perceives or pictures reality.

The subject is something basically social and decentred, i.e. its position does not spring from itself but is rather ascribed from the symbolic and intersubjective reality. The subject does not have any centre, core or essence that can produce intentions or meaning. Human beings do not inhabit any pre-discursive unconscious core in their psyche, an id that is indifferent to reality. This is where Lacan (Lacan [1964] 1985) departs from Freudian psychoanalysis, which maintains a core in our psyche with some degree of agency. Contrary to this, Lacan states:

By submitting to the laws of language the child becomes a subject in language, it inhabits language, and hopes to gain an adequate representation through *the world of words*: the symbolic provides a form into which the subject is inserted at the level of his being. It is on this basis that the subject recognizes himself as being this or that. (Stavarakakis 1999: 20, my emphasis)

People are not born with their id, but everything about the subject is brought to existence in the symbolic, in an eternal process of identification (Stavarakakis 1999).

Individuals are always positioned in relation to particular discourses that are made to work depending on the context in which the person is placed. There is no identity, only identification. With this understanding of the subject, as always constituted in discourse, we will in the interview only get to know how the interviewee presents and understands him- or herself in the context of the interview. As indicated discourse psychology, unlike discourse theory, does not settle with this understanding of the agency of the subject.

4.4 Resistance towards Discourses

There is little doubt that the way we deal with empirical data in discourse theory is problematic. The above conceptualization of the subject leads to the production of empirical interview data that are not able to tease out the resistance of the subject against, and its independent effect on the constitution of the phenomenon:

If you take interviews ... as an example, where the subject is expected to respond to a certain communication, it is an open question whether the discourses that the subject is confronted with will ensure that uniform, unambiguous insights, feelings, purposes, motives, plans, wisdoms, etc. are really being expressed. (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 1994: 249, my translation)

One can claim that the remaining description of the subject, as dependent on context and created in discourse, is more a result of discourse analysis than it is really 'talking back' at the researcher. With a different view of the subject, as with Berger and Luckmann's description of secondary socialization that 'must work with an already constituted self and an already internalized world' (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 164), interviews could have been exploited to

gain knowledge about the existing interactions between the subject and society.

What might be omitted from the analysis is the field of tension between the symbolic and the non-symbolic aspects of humans and society. The result is an oversimplified picture of the many driving forces at work. The interviewees hold embodied life experiences that provide them with dispositions for how to act in different contexts: 'If agents are possessed by their habitus more than they possess it, this is because it acts within them as the organizing principle of their actions' (Bourdieu 1977: 18). This body schema or habitus represents a form of agency that is not solely structured by the symbolic: 'The habitus is precisely this immanent law, *lex insita*, laid down in each agent by his earliest upbringing' (Bourdieu 1977: 81). The body in other words is one of many driving forces behind change that works independently of the representations of reality: 'My body has its world, or understands its world, without having to make use of my "symbolic" or "objectifying function"' (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 140).

People have intentions and they apply meaning to phenomena, they have a frame of reference that they act from and all this is behind the subject when he or she opposes the discourse, breaks with it, contradicts it, enhances it or confirms it (Søndergaard 2000). When this is only registered as it is communicated in discourse, because language plays the active part in the creation of the subject and our surroundings, the lack of concurrence between the linguistic and the non-linguistic slips out of the analysis.

Discourse theorists, to be fair, enter this problematic with open eyes. From the outset, they have criticized the assumption in humanism of human beings as carriers of all meaning around which the social revolves. They therefore turned the focus away from man and society as primary research objects. However, it is still the case that individuals and groups of people possess a consistency and resilience that will survive random linguistic representations. The question then is does the discourse theoretical relation to empirical data equip us to capture this? Discourse theorists could protest against this simplification by saying that the subject does possess resilience beyond what can be expressed in discourse, but discourses can also be consistent and durable to the degree that they survive the subjects, and post-structural approaches is particularly well equipped to capture this.

5. The Interface with Other Research Traditions

To my knowledge there is little discussion among discourse theorists about how one could exploit the results that are generated in interviews, beyond the transcripts of interviews and that can be related to discourse. For this reason, the topic of this paper has been to a large degree uninvestigated. From what I can observe, the discourse theorist does not reflect upon the process of generating data that takes place during an interview. The interest is instead in text analysis: 'Since the text, language and the presentation are so central, the empirical to many researcher becomes equal to text' (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 1994: 254). To the discourse theorist, text is the same as the empirical. The

question is not raised about how empirical the text is, that is, how the empirical data are related to the reality that the text is extracted from.

The relation between the theoretical on the one hand and the reality that is being analyzed on the other is normally taken care of in discussions about method. It is the description of the method that builds the bridge between theory and the empirical. The method confronts theory with the empirical, the researcher with reality. The selection of informants, the development of an interview guide, the procedure of the interview etc., contributes to raise the validity of the findings. In discourse theory this possibility is not exploited, as method in its traditional understanding is subordinate to the analytical strategies applied (Åkerstrøm Andersen 2003).

In discourse theory the fundamental assumption is that the empirical data are dependent upon the theory applied and the method of analysis. The empirical is in other words not outside science, but is brought forward as a result of scientific practice (Hagen 2006; Popper 1959). In other words, the empirical or reality is not what your study takes as its point of departure, which your findings can be confronted with. This is for that matter a consistent argument. The problem is just that where you normally find the relation between research and reality discussed in, for instance, debates about method, it is less obvious how this relation can be discussed and criticized in discourse theory.

Some accepted guidelines remain to be developed for such a discussion. With the rejection of the split between the empirical and theory, discourse theorists can easily evade this challenge by stating that the interest is not in how the world is, but how it is brought into being; there is in other words no difference between the investigation of the world and the world itself. The objection is therefore rejected and claimed to be a positivist view on science.

However, if the discourse theorist succeeds in evading the challenge on the issue of method, does not the same problem occur when the results of the research meet with the reality that the researcher claims to state something meaningful about? What about all the discourses and the empirical facts that the discourse theorist does not say anything about? Do they not exist? I think it is meaningless to claim that 'there is nothing outside the text' (Derrida [1967] 1976: 158) and I therefore think that it is still necessary to answer the question about how to understand the relation between discourse theory and empirical data. One can say that the ambition was not to investigate all the empirical sources of relevance to the phenomenon under study; the study only aimed at revealing the conditions that made possible a particular emergence of the phenomenon. However, should not a social scientist also have the ambition to present to the reader clearly how this analysis is to be understood in relation to all the other existing scientific and unscientific ways of understanding? The least one should do therefore is to be clear about the understandings to which a discourse theoretical analysis cannot contribute.

When this is said, it will apply for all research traditions and projects, that they will create and insert their empirical data into their own frame of reference. In other words, if you are eager to understand how a phenomenon occurs to the subject, your interpretations of the empirical data and findings will differ from those you would employ if you believed that the subject is simply the place where the discourse appears. In the first case, you take the

pre-given identity of actors as a point of departure ; in the other it would be more useful to study the discourse.

Discourse theory can make it evident that something is constructed and it can make visible the way it was constructed. Discourse theoretical studies, assuming that society is constructed, thus could be likened to a visit to a construction site, and 'when you are guided to any construction site you are experiencing the troubling and exhilarating feeling that things could be different, or at least that they could still fail' (Latour 2005: 89). Thereby such an analysis can contribute to a reflection about the way we approach reality and the effect of this (Foucault 1983). The discourses contribute to narrowing the possibilities for our action, and therefore insights into how the discourses work have a deliberating effect on us and can give us more options for action in the future.

6. Concluding Remarks

Discourse theory has been criticized on two important accounts in this paper. Firstly I claim that discourse theoretical studies fail to acknowledge the analytical value of participating in qualitative interviews. Secondly, interviews provides for an opportunity to gain insight into the resistance of the subject or other non-discursive forces against discourses, but this opportunity is not exploited in discourse theory. This problem does not only concern the question of method, it also reveals that discourse theory fails to be explicit about how it relates to reality, and also what is the difference between discourse theoretical studies and other research traditions that do not regard the symbolic as primary to the constitution of society. One way of answering to this critique would be for discourse theoretical studies to approach qualitative interviews in a different manner, for instance by inviting the informants into the analytical process during the interview.

In our study of local ways of understanding place we did perform a qualitative group interview. In our case we could have started the analysis during the interview, instead of just encouraging the informants to engage in their daily discursive terrain, reserving the analysis for the transcript of the interview. A local discrepancy on the importance of creating employment opportunities in local businesses was evident even as we performed the interview, and this later turned out to be one of the main distinctions between the two discourses. We could have encouraged a more thorough discussion on the existence, relevance and effect of this distinction, which could have altered and enriched our analysis. Such a discussion could also have given us insights into the possible tension between the structuring force of the discourses and how locals perceive and produce the place. This would improve the validity of our study.

The post-structuralist rejection of the split between language, subject and materiality surely provides us with a fruitful and different approach to the reality producing force of discourses. However, the above discussion reveals that discourse theorists does not exploit qualitative interviews as much as they could have in their attempt to break with structuralism by studying society where language is being used.

Notes

- ¹ The concept of qualitative interview will not be nuanced in this paper, since the main purpose of the paper is to discuss how this method, regardless of which subtype or subgenre is applied, could be exploited better in discourse theoretical work

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