

Writeup of Frohmann (1994)

Frohmann, B. (1994). Discourse analysis as a research method in library and information science. *Library and Information Science Research*, 16(2), 119-138.

Summary

Frohmann (1994) introduced discourse analysis as a method and suggested its application within the library and information science (LIS) field, presenting a few examples of such use. He began by defining discourse analysis as a method that “takes discourse as its object of analysis. Its data is talk; not what the talk refers to, but the talk itself” (p. 120). It focuses on those “serious speech acts” which have significant social consequences to organization(s), culture(s), discipline(s), or institution(s) (p. 120). Frohmann noted that LIS had discussed “its ‘keywords’—‘information,’ ‘information users,’ and ‘information uses’”—throughout its history, and these “discursive practices” set and continue to evolve the boundaries of the discipline as a practice and as a research field, defining the problems, data, and methods of interest (p. 121). LIS theories, being “the field upon which ... [these] central [concepts] ... are sown, nurtured, and pruned,” could serve “as data” for a discourse analysis (p. 122). “Theory-talk” (p. 123) was and is evident in many different strands of LIS research, including those (a) arguing for and against positivism, interpretivism, and the like; (b) discussing the paradigms or viewpoints within the field; (c) “champion[ing] conceptual imports” from other fields (p. 123); and (d) of a “celebratory, inspirational, evangelical, and self-consciously ideological” nature (p. 123). Frohmann next argued that “theory construction is a social process of intellectual labor,” and thus—under discourse analysis—is assumed to be “caught in the network of institutional power relations” (p. 124). Little explication of such issues had occurred in LIS, and thus Frohmann argued that “a ‘reflexive critique’ of LIS” was necessary to “show how” the discourse of “LIS theories ... enable specific institutional exercises of power over the production, organization, distribution, and consumption of information” (p. 126). He proceeded with three “very brief and oversimplified” examples of how discourse analysis could be applied to “historical and contemporary” LIS research and practice (p. 126), suggesting research questions each raised. First, he used it to analyze Dewey’s “technobureaucratic discourse” (p. 126), drawing on Garrison and Miksa’s analyses to conclude that Dewey influenced librarianship as a “systematic, rational, and bureaucratic” practice of “professional management” that considered “books and reading ... [as] intellectual capital” (p. 130). Second, he analyzed the introduction of

Rananathan's faceted subject analysis, featuring both "revolutionary and conservative tendencies" (p. 131); he noted this established a struggle—still present today in LIS—between camps that differ not just on their favored classification method but also on how "intellectual capital" should be accumulated and controlled (p. 132). Finally, he examined "the shift ... to information user[s]" as a chief focus of LIS (p. 133), arguing discourse analysis should examine how "the identities of users are constructed in LIS theories" and "challeng[e] the assumption that the identities studied ... are 'natural,' or 'found' [i.e. objective] identities" (p. 134).

Analysis

Frohmann's article was generally understandable and coherent when talking about what discourse analysis is—or at least one approach to it, a distinction he did not make clear—and how it can be applied. Some of the conclusions and suggested questions from his examples of such analysis, however, were a little more difficult to follow. He clearly has a strong personal interest and investment in analyzing the politics of LIS, and thus most of the research questions proposed tend heavily towards such considerations, ending up sounding relatively bureaucratic and political in tone (to apply some informal discourse analysis). While this approach could put off some who linger too long over such questions, the remainder of his article is strong and general enough in its discussion of an approach to discourse analysis to be applicable to areas lying outside such a political viewpoint. This is not to say that Frohmann's political and interpretivist bias is a problem; it certainly does not overpower the article's purpose of introducing discourse analysis and explaining its use. Based on Frohmann's article, I wasn't completely sure whether I favored this particular approach to discourse analysis; it appeared not to have the same degree of rigor and theoretical strength as content analysis or hermeneutics. After reading Budd's article I am somewhat less of that opinion, although still would question the rigor to an extent. I would recommend Frohmann's article to researchers and students who are interested in analyzing documents and discourse using qualitative methods, albeit would suggest it be read alongside Budd's excellent article on discourse analysis and other literature on content analysis, hermeneutics, and the like.

Keywords: discourse analysis, library and information science (LIS), talk, speech, social consequences, discursive practices, theory-talk, theory construction, intellectual labor, institutional power, Dewey, Ranganathan, user-centered research, user identity, politics of LIS

Writeup of Budd (2006)

Budd, J. M. (2006). Discourse analysis and the study of communication in LIS. *Library Trends*, 55(1), 65-82.

Summary

Budd (2006) provided an excellent overview of “two [different] families of discourse analysis”—both examining “language beyond the clause or sentence level” (p. 66) and “address[ing] more than an utterance” as might be analyzed through content analysis (p. 75)—and how they have been and can be applied within LIS. The first focuses on “linguistic-oriented examination ... as a form of applied semantics” (p. 66), a “message-oriented” approach otherwise termed “transactional language” by Brown and Yule (1983, as cited in Budd, 2006, p. 67). At its heart is “the difference between what *could* be said and what *is* said” (Sassure's *langue* and *parole*; Budd, 2006, p. 67); how signs, what they signify, and the grammatical and semiotic structure of language relate to each other. Signs, in particular, are “determined by ... [both] the language system ... [and by] social construction” of their meaning (p. 68). Applying this family of analysis requires focusing not just on a literal transcription, but also on the pauses and on other “phonemic and phonetic sounds” (p. 70). Budd noted this had relevance for research examining the reference interview and its discursive practices, also discussing what this means for digital reference where the medium and its unique characteristics will, in his view, affect the reference interview and associated discourse. Next, he moved onto “the second family of discourse analysis” (p. 72), which focuses on “what people say as part of efforts to be understood by, and to understand, others” (p. 66). It “embraces ... social, cultural, political, and other communicative acts” (p. 72), building on Foucault’s premises of archeological and genealogical analysis of discourse. The focus is on the particulars of language “in the context in which it occurs” (p. 72) and how it “not only reflects social relations and social action” but also “contributes to the construction of them” (p. 73). Budd discussed applications of this approach within the LIS field, most notably by Frohmann. He also related two possible problems with Foucault’s approach: first, at least as originally proposed it did not include substantial scope for interpretation of discursive practices; and second, Foucault asserted “that knowledge ... does not really have any objective existence” and thus only “power ... has meaning” (pp. 74-75). Budd continued with a further overview of research that had applied this second family—albeit not always in a “Foucauldian sense” (p. 76)—to problems and issues in and relating to LIS. He noted

such work raised the challenge of whether its conclusions were “possible without interpretation” (p. 78). As such, he argued for including such interpretation via the social and institutional contexts, environments, and “points in time” that discursive practices occurred in (p. 78), albeit this being somewhat limited to “public utterances” that are linked to institutions and available as research data (p. 79). He concluded that both families of discourse analysis “offer[ed] a way of seeing things, of envisioning what is happening and what has happened” (p. 80) through descriptive and normative practices that are not “mere mechanism[s] ... [or] blueprint[s] to follow,” but require “creativity” (p. 81).

Analysis

Budd’s article was a better introduction to discourse analysis, in my view, than Frohmann’s article was. The former presented two different approaches to discourse analysis—albeit focusing somewhat more on the second—and clearly said “there are many ways [other than these] to study discourse” (p. 66), making it clear to the reader there is not just one approach as one might assume after reading Frohmann. Budd does have some of the same interpretivist bias as Frohmann, although it is still not an issue and I feel Budd is better at explaining the reasons for his bias and opinions. His focus on discourse analysis as studying the role discourse plays in constructing social organizations and institutions in contexts is not altogether dissimilar from other methods, particularly hermeneutics; the latter still appears a little more rigorous to me, although I see the usefulness in discourse analysis’s creative approach to such an analysis. Data analysis that takes elements from multiple methods—hermeneutics, content analysis, and discourse analysis—as well as elements of interpretivism, theoretical rigor, and a degree of structure, would probably fare well in analyzing documents, interview transcripts, and the like. Of course, there is not always scope in a study to draw in multiple elements and methods, and so choosing between these becomes something the researcher must carefully think about. As an excellent introduction to discourse analysis and a useful resource to help compare it against content analysis and hermeneutics as a method for analysis, I would highly recommend Budd’s article to prospective and current qualitative researchers in the LIS field.

Keywords: discourse analysis, discursive, content analysis, linguistics, applied semantics, semiotics, transactional language, *langue, parole*, sign, signified, social construction, reference interview, understanding, meaning, social, cultural, political, context, interpretation, creativity