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A discursive psychological approach to the analysis of talk and text in applied linguistics

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Introduction

Discourse analysis is a diverse, interdisciplinary collection of approaches to the study of talk and text. Amid such diversity is the following unifying assumption: language can be studied for its social functions as well as its forms (i.e., as social action rather than a neutral medium for communicating ideas and information). To contribute a fresh perspective among the myriad handbooks, manuals, and encyclopedias that have proliferated over the past two decades, this chapter focuses on a comparatively recent discourse analytic tradition – discursive psychology – which is poised to become one of the most generative theoretical innovations in applied linguistics.

Like its ethnomethodologically inspired (Garfinkel, 1967) discourse analytic cousins, conversation analysis and membership categorization analysis, discursive psychology pays close attention to the sequential and locally built nature of social actions, and their relevance and procedural consequentiality in real time, and it seeks to make visible interactants’ various communicative resources, competences, goals, and accomplishments. In contrast with the research traditions of conversation analysis and membership categorization analysis, which developed in sociology, discursive psychology originated in (social) psychology, where its radical potential for applied linguistics can be glimpsed. For close to 30 years, researchers in discursive psychology have been upsetting disciplinary norms about everything from ontology and methodology to such iconic psychological topics as cognition, learning, emotion, memory, perception, attribution, and mental schemas.

We begin by sketching a brief historical overview of discursive psychology, highlighting its key analytic features and contributions to social psychological research. We then go on to discuss how conversation analysis and membership categorization analysis contribute to the programmatic and analytic aims of discursive psychology, particularly in terms of how its constructionist orientation and project of respecification offer a renewed perspective on the definition and treatment of topics commonly investigated in applied linguistics. We also consider prevalent dilemmas encountered by researchers working in all three of these overlapping approaches. Finally, we address how a discursive psychological perspective can productively contribute to the ‘applied’ aims of the field.
A brief description of discursive psychology

Of the several streams of discursive psychology, the most prominent has been the work of Derek Edwards, Jonathan Potter, Alexa Hepburn, Elizabeth Stokoe, and colleagues (e.g., Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter & Edwards, 2013; Tileagă & Stokoe, 2016; Wiggins, 2017), which built on Michael Billig’s (e.g., 1987, *inter alia*) groundbreaking scholarship in ‘rhetorical psychology’, as well as Potter and Wetherell’s (1987) discourse analytic work and various lines of linguistic philosophy (e.g., Austin, 1962; Wittgenstein, 1958) and post-structuralist thought (e.g., Derrida, 1967; Foucault, 1972). Contemporary discursive psychology applies both an ethnomethodological sensibility (i.e., an interest in interactional orderliness achieved through people’s everyday common sense and competence) and the sequential and categorial analytic repertoires of conversation analysis and membership categorization analysis to the study of commonly accepted ‘psychological’ topics. Creating confusion for students and novice researchers, discursive psychology is sometimes referred to as ‘discourse analysis’ by its practitioners or simply viewed by others as a brand of conversation analysis applied to the domain of psychology. As we explain in this chapter, discursive psychology is not a research method but a distinctive programmatic perspective that uses conversation analysis, and to a lesser extent, membership categorization and other types of analysis, to analyze psychological matters in social interaction (and sometimes text).

Discursive psychology’s constructionist orientation

What makes discursive psychology particularly compelling for applied linguistics is its explicit commitment to discursive constructionism (e.g., Edwards, 1997; Potter, 2012; Potter & Hepburn, 2008), one of a variety of social constructionisms that are part of the broader social and discursive turns in the social sciences. Discursive constructionism is unique among social constructionisms in its attention to discourse and interaction in the construction of knowledge and the social world. As Potter and Hepburn (2008) explain, discursive constructionism:

studies a world of descriptions, claims, reports, allegations, and assertions as parts of human practices, and it works to keep these as the central topic of research rather than trying to move beyond them to the objects or events that seem to be the topic of such discourse.

(p. 275)

At first glance, this close or ‘micro-level’ approach to discursive practice may appear overly narrow or even reductive. But such misapprehension overlooks the theoretical primacy of discourse in discursive constructionism, as the “fundamental medium for action” in social life, that is, the “central way of studying mind, social processes, organizations, and events as they are continually made live in human affairs” (Potter & Hepburn, 2008, p. 275). Language in discursive constructionism is, in other words, conceptualized as far more than an autonomous system of conventionalized form-meaning relations. Language is discourse: constructed and constructive, “an action-oriented, world-building resource, rather than a tool of transmission and straightforward communication from one mind to another” (Tileagă & Stokoe, 2016, p. 10). In short, discursive constructionism provides researchers with the theoretical rationale and the methodological obligation “to render visible the social practices through which people and their practices are made accountable and factual” in versioning the realities of everyday life (Wiggins, 2017, p. 3).
Discursive psychology’s project of respecification

Supported by a discursive constructionist perspective is the applied project in discursive psychology of respecification, which derives from ethnomethodology, Garfinkel’s (1967) famously distinctive form of sociology. Respecification in discursive psychology has transformed what are conventionally considered to be individual, human-internal matters (e.g., emotions, attitudes, etc.) to situated discursive practices that are “socially managed and [thus] consequential in interaction” (Wiggins, 2017, p. 22). This has had major ramifications for data analysis, clearly, as what are conventionally considered to be *intra*-psychological topics morph into observably *inter*-psychological matters that are available for analysis using, for instance, conversation analysis, membership categorization analysis, and/or other discourse analytic approaches.

Approaching the analysis of talk and text

The activities of conducting research and collecting (or generating) data are part of the process of analysis: the decision of what to audio/video record and/or collect, and what to transcribe, is a multilayered process of inclusion, exclusion, and synthesis which informs analysis. However, once researchers have their data, how do they proceed?

We have noted that discursive psychology is best considered a broad, meta-theoretical framework rather than a methodology per se (Potter, 2012). Instead, discursive psychology draws heavily on both the ethnomethodological sensibility and the analytic affordances offered by conversation analysis and membership categorization analysis. For this reason, and because these approaches overlap in significant ways, in the following sections we first describe the analytic stances and repertoires of conversation analysis and membership categorization analysis. We then describe key principles of data analysis informed by discursive psychology.

Conversation analysis

In applied linguistics, conversation analysis (frequently abbreviated as CA) is a widely recognized and respected approach to the study of language-in-use, language development, and other verbal and nonverbal conduct (Gardner & Wagner, 2004; Hall, Hellermann, Pekarek Doeahl, & Olshner, 2011; Hellermann, 2008; Kasper & Wagner, 2014; Markee, 2000; Richards, 2003; Seedhouse, 2004; Sert, 2015; Wong & Waring, 2010). Conversation analysts are known (and sometimes criticized) for their close examination of recorded conversation, institutional talk, and other naturalistic, ‘real-world’ (rather than scripted) interactions, which are painstakingly transcribed to render talk, gesture, gaze, prosody, and other interactional details. But it is this close attention to the sequentiality of turn-taking, repair, and other social actions, and their relevance and procedural consequentiality in real time, that allows the analyst to make visible the ordered infrastructure supporting everyday human interaction – as well as interactants’ local actions, understandings, communicative resources, competences, goals, and accomplishments.

The conversation analysis program has contributed greatly to the study of language use, learning, teaching, and socialization across a range of topics and contexts of interest to applied linguists, including second language acquisition (SLA), especially the CA-SLA program (Kasper, 2006, 2009; Kasper & Wagner, 2011; Markee, 2005; Seedhouse, 2004), language classrooms (Hellermann, 2008; Talmy, 2015; Wong & Waring, 2010), university office-hour consultations (Chiang & Mi, 2011), study abroad (Wilkinson, 1998), language testing and assessment (Kasper & Ross, 2007), business (Firth, 2009; Ford, 2008), health care (Barnes, 2005), police encounters (Carter, 2010), and courtrooms (Komter, 2013). The field is also
seeing an increasing number of longitudinal conversation analytic studies that trace the development of learning, participation, and linguistic and interactional competence over time (see Pekarek Doehler & Fasel Lauzon, 2015).

At the beginning of this decade, Kasper and Wagner (2011) observed that discursive psychology “has only just begun to make a cautious entrance” (p. 137) into the growing body of CA-SLA studies, and that as yet remains the case. However, we can see how discursive psychology dovetails neatly with conversation analysis in terms of the project of respecification increasingly being brought to bear on such traditionally cognitive SLA constructs as learning (Brouwer, 2003; Markee & Seo, 2009), cognition (Kasper, 2009; Kasper & Wagner, 2011), communicative competence (Lee, 2006a), communication strategies (Burch, 2014), display questions (Lee, 2006b, 2007; Richards, 2006), language expertise and word searches (Brouwer, 2003), and noticing (Gardner, 2008).

Conversation analysis has also opened up for analysis our frequently taken-for-granted research practices in applied linguistics, including research interviews (Prior, 2014, 2016a; Roulston, 2010; Talmi & Richards, 2011), psycholinguistic experiments (Hillman, Ross, & Kasper, 2017), role plays (Kasper & Youn, 2017), think-aloud protocols (Deschambault, 2012, 2017) and even paper-based survey questionnaires (Wernicke & Talmi, 2017).

Handling data with conversation analysis

Handling data in conversation analysis requires a sensitivity to the ways in which talk functions as a product of and a producer of interaction. It is therefore crucial to understand the conversation analytic stance toward language. Seedhouse (2005) notes that “conversation analysis’s primary interest is in the social act whereas a linguist’s primary interest is normally in language” (p. 165). Thus, analysis is focused not on isolated fragments of language data but on the joint achievement of social actions and the multi-semiotic means used to achieve them. Central analytic foci include sequence organization, turn-taking, repair organization, and recipient design (see, e.g., Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998; Liddicoat, 2010; Markee, 2000; Seedhouse, 2004; Wong & Waring, 2010).

As part of its ethnomethodologically informed approach to talk-in-interaction, a fundamental premise in conversation analysis is that there is “order at all points” (Sacks, 1984, p. 22) and that such order is analyzable (by participants and the researcher). Analysis in conversation analysis thus seeks to make visible and explicate that order as well as the resources, actions, and activities that create and are created by it. Pomerantz and Fehr (1997) and ten Have (2007) have provided apprentice analysts with a helpful set of procedures for undertaking a rudimentary (single-case) analysis, which we have adapted in Table 39.1.

Transcription, a technical and deeply interpretive activity (Ochs, 1979), is an integral part of the analytic process in conversation analysis. Because transcription involves selectively representing and attending to particular interactional details over others, it not only supports analysis, it is analysis (Zimmerman, 1988). Conversation analysis has developed a detailed, conventionalized transcription system (Hepburn & Bolden, 2017; Jefferson, 2004) to render the linguistic, paralinguistic, interactional, multimodal, and other details of interaction. In tandem with the original audio- and video- recordings, the transcript is an important tool for individual and collaborative analysis. It also provides an important measure of analytic accountability and reflexivity as researchers represent and disseminate their work to wider audiences.

Excerpt 1 comes from Lee’s (2007) study of the initiation–response–feedback (IRF) sequence, among the most well-known of conversation analysis’s contributions to the study of classroom interaction (Mehan, 1979). This interaction occurs in a university-level ESL composition class. Although we are strong proponents of integrating sequential and categorial analyses, as they are highly complementary (e.g., Watson, 1978), for the purposes of this chapter, we have separated them.
Table 39.1 Some guidelines for doing conversation analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analytic Steps</th>
<th>Points to Consider</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Select a specific sequence for preliminary analysis.</td>
<td>What sequences and sequence boundaries do you notice? Where does a particular action and/or topic start and finish?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Characterize the actions in the sequence.</td>
<td>What actions can be seen in each consecutive turn in the sequence? For each turn, ask: what is a participant doing in this turn (e.g., greeting, complaining, disagreeing, telling a story)? (Note: these characterizations are provisional and will likely be revised.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Consider the ways interactants package their actions and the topics of talk.</td>
<td>What specific formulations and delivery formats are selected over others? How do they provide for certain understandings of those actions and topics? What are the interactional consequences of a particular selection or ‘packaging’ over another? What understandings do the participants display?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Consider how the timing and taking of turns provide for certain understandings of the actions and the matters talked about.</td>
<td>How are the turns initiated, how do they unfold, and how are they completed/terminated? How does a speaker obtain, maintain, and give up a turn? How are speakers selected? How does the timing of turns shape the interaction and participants’ understandings?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Consider how the ways the actions are accomplished implicate certain identities, roles and/or relationships for the interactants.</td>
<td>How are the terms, topics, and actions associated with various persons, objects, places, activities, etc.? How do they index and implicate particular identities and relationships? What identities (and their rights, obligations, expectations, etc.) do interactants negotiate and make relevant – and how?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Pomerantz & Fehr (1997), pp. 71–74; ten Have (2007)

Excerpt 1 (from Lee, 2007, p. 1209)

102. T: What are we going to look for, in terms of doing this peer review, what criteria are you looking at?
104. (3.0)
105. S1: Aha:: topic sentence
106. (2.0)
107. ► T: Oh::kay:: before that?
110. ► T: OK, let’s:: make sure you’ve got a thesis statement.
111. ((Writing on the board “thesis statement”)).

It may be tempting to simply gloss this as a lesson on English academic writing in a teacher-fronted classroom. But what about this interaction indicates that these people are doing what is recognizably a ‘classroom lesson’? The answer may seem obvious, but this is part of the power of conversation analysis, as it allows analysts to show how interlocutors themselves are interpreting local interactional contingencies, in this instance, to do the work of classroom teaching and learning. While the analyst uses the transcription labels of ‘teacher’ (T) and ‘students’ (S1, S5), in conversation analysis such labels are applied based not on interactants’ institutionally assigned ‘roles’, but on what they are doing.

In terms of the activity, we can see that it is the teacher who initiates the sequence (line 102), solicits and responds to the ‘correctness’ of student responses (lines 105, 107, 110), and it is
the students who in turn produce the responses projected by the teacher’s prompts (lines 105, 109). If we look more closely at how the turns unfold, we can observe that teacher and students coordinate themselves around the local expectations, understandings, and practices tied to knowledge and learning. For example, the teacher’s first turn (lines 102–103) is formulated as a display question (where the answer is already known by the teacher), which invites a response that aligns with and thus furthers the current activity. In the 3-second gap of silence in the ensuing transition space, the teacher withholds the “correct” answer, projecting an opportunity for students to contribute a response turn (line 104). Although S1 responds to the prompt (line 105), the teacher withholds immediate feedback, allowing a 2-second gap of silence to form, which signals this answer as inadequate. The teacher further indicates that “topic sentence” was not the desired response through a trouble-implicative sound stretch (“Oh::okay::”), and then leads students to the correct answer by redirecting them to an earlier stage of the writing process (“before that?”). In lines 108–109, we can see two students producing the desired response in overlap, which the teacher confirms as correct (“okay”) before moving on to the next stage of the lesson.

It is important to emphasize that this single, isolated excerpt would not suffice for a conversation analytic study. Conversation analysis primarily involves assembling collections of similar phenomena to examine recurrent patterns and to test out particular descriptions for their explanatory adequacy. Yet, while a goal of conversation analysis is to specify generic practices (e.g., adjacency pairs, repair) that support human interaction, such practices are regularly deployed in context-specific and designedly recipient-specific ways (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974).

**Single-case analysis** (Schegloff, 1987) is another mode of conversation analytic research, though Wagner and Gardner (2004) insist “CA is not about single case analyses” because “the collection is the crucial part of the entire analytic enterprise” (p. 7). Nevertheless, as a number of researchers (e.g., Prior, 2016a, 2016b; Rapley, 2012) have shown, using single case analyses to closely examine our research and teaching practices (including episodes that are ‘curious’ or may even be considered ‘failures’), can lend much insight for reflection and training. Additionally, there is an abundance of studies that use conversation analysis for their own research purposes, for instance, in ethnography (e.g., Moerman, 1988; also see Antaki, 2011, for more on different ways conversation analysis can be harnessed for ostensibly ‘non-CA’ research endeavors, including those with strong a priori theoretical commitments such as critical, interventionist research traditions).

**Membership categorization analysis**

Membership categorization analysis builds on ethnomethodology as well as Sacks’ (1992) earliest work, even if it has not received the same attention and uptake as conversation analysis (Stokoe, 2012). Membership categorization analysis’s distinctive concern is with common-sense cultural reasoning surrounding explicit and implied category labels and the accountability of those categories (Day, 1998; Schegloff, 2007; Stokoe, 2012). It thus helps explicate the culturally specific norms and practices by which various identity categories (e.g., ‘woman’, ‘child’, ‘student’), their relational pairs (e.g., ‘child–adult’, ‘student–teacher’, ‘doctor–patient’), and their groupings or collections (e.g., occupation, nationality, family) get assembled and transformed for particular purposes and occasions. This approach offers a powerful, analytically grounded perspective on the ways in which identity categories and their various inferences are (or are not) invoked, (re)produced, rejected, and managed across various contexts (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Schegloff, 2007; Stokoe, 2012). In applied linguistics, membership categorization analysis has not had the same visibility as conversation analysis, but this is changing, particularly with the growing interest in producing robustly theorized and

**Handling data with membership categorization analysis**

The well-known story excerpt (Sacks, 1972), “the baby cried, the mommy picked it up” is the canonical example used to introduce membership categorization analysis, probably because it does its work so well. This example comes from an elicited story told by a child who was nearly three years old, which showed that even young children grasp the rules of categorizing the social world and making categorial inferences. Sacks was interested in explicating the commonsense reasoning behind how it is, for example, that we hear ‘the mommy’ as the mother of ‘the baby’ (rather than of some other baby). The solution, he explains, is that the two categories (‘baby–mommy’) are linked as a *standardized relational pair*, or binary set, within the membership categorization device ‘family’. Membership categorization devices have two features: a collection of various categories (e.g., ‘mother’, ‘child’, ‘father’, ‘grandparent’) plus their rules of application. Based on Sacks’ *economy rule* (whereby a single category is sufficient to invoke a membership categorization device), and the *consistency rule* (when a single category from given collection is invoked, then other categories from that collection will likely also be invoked), we tend to hear (based on cultural norms) ‘baby’ and ‘mommy’ as part of the same collection. In other words, the baby is *this mommy’s* ‘baby’, just as the mommy is *this baby’s* ‘mommy’.

That various categories can be linked together to form category pairs and collections indicates that there are many possible ways of categorizing or describing persons. Because the selection of a particular category or description over another carries “different resonances and inferences” (Stokoe, 2012, p. 291), categories and their categorial relations are not inconsequential but index different sets of *predicates*, that is, actions, attributes, competences, rights, and obligations that are normatively associated with or “bound” to particular categories (Jayyusi, 1984). ‘Baby’ and ‘mommy’, for example, are embedded in a ‘morally ordered’ system (i.e., culture) where a mother is expected, even morally obligated, to care for a crying baby. We can see, then, that analysis in membership categorization analysis “involves examining the practices that display ‘culture-in-action’ in relation to the accomplishment, negotiation and repair of social and moral organization” (Housley & Fitzgerald, 2009, p. 346).

Following these basic principles, in Table 39.2 we list some guidelines for conducting a rudimentary membership categorization analysis.

To briefly illustrate this analytic approach, we return to the previously discussed classroom extract from Lee (2007).

102. T: What are we going to look for, in terms of doing this peer review, what criteria are you looking at?
103. (3.0)
104. S1: Aha:: topic sentence
105. (2.0)
106. ▶ T: Oh::kay:: before that?
110. (Writing on the board “thesis statement”).
111. ((Writing on the board “thesis statement”)).
Table 39.2 Some guidelines for doing membership categorization analysis (based on Lepper, 2000; Schegloff, 2007; Stokoe, 2012)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analytic Steps</th>
<th>Points to Consider</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Collect data</td>
<td>Data selection can be either <em>purposive</em> (based on an a priori interest in a category) or <em>unmotivated</em> (noticing a category’s use and pursuing it across multiple discourse sites).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• explicit mentions of categories;</td>
<td><em>MCDs</em> might include ‘occupation’, ‘stage of life’, ‘family’, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• membership categorization devices (MCDs);</td>
<td>Category resonant predicates/formulations imply categories, e.g., “don’t be so dramatic” conveying someone is being a ‘drama queen’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• category-resonant predicates, descriptions, formulations (e.g., which don’t explicitly mention a category but that imply one).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Locate the sequential position of each categorial instance within the ongoing interaction, or within the text.</td>
<td>Where do categorial mentions and/or descriptions occur within turns/discourse sites? Across turns/discourse sites? Is sequential positioning within/across turns/discourse sites implicated in how particular mentions or descriptions are heard or understood?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Analyze the design and action orientation of the turn or text in which the category, device, or resonant description appears.</td>
<td>What linguistic, paralinguistic, and other resources are mobilized to assemble a turn at talk? What candidate actions are accomplished (e.g., repair, invitation, complaint), and/or what actions does the turn coordinate, advance, or constrain? How is turn design implicated in how the category, device, or description can be heard?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Look for evidence:</td>
<td>How do interactants show (e.g., through words, topics, actions, nonverbal cues) that a particular category (or categories) is invoked, made relevant, or activated?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• that recipients orient to the category, device, or resonant description;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• of the interactional consequences of a category’s use;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• of how interactants build and resist categorizations.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Following what is outlined in Table 39.2, there is one explicit category mention in the data extract, that of “peer” (line 102), and several category resonant formulations: “peer review” (line 102), “topic sentence” (line 102), “thesis statement” (lines 109–111), and “let’s make sure you’ve got a thesis statement” (line 110). Connecting participants to the activities of writing on the board (line 111), giving instructions (line 110), asking questions (lines 102–103, 107), answering them (lines 105, 108, 109), providing feedback on answers (lines 104, 107, 110), and so on, we can see that the interlocutor labeled “T” is the one who is asking the questions, writing on the board, evaluating answers, and so forth, while “SI” and “S5” are answering the questions, displaying orientation to new information (“aha” in line 105), and changing inadequate answers (lines 105 and 109). These are predicates that are normatively bound to the membership categories comprising the relational pair of ‘teacher’ and ‘student’: it is how these participants together *do* the identities of ‘teacher’ and ‘student’, in a lesson on peer review, one instance in the broader social endeavor of ‘education’.
It should now be apparent how membership categorization provides strong warrants closely linked to interactional data for precisely those identities – “T” and “S” – that are so labeled in the transcript. This brief analysis thus demonstrates how powerful membership categorization analysis can be in explicating the taken-for-granted identity work that people carry out in everyday life.

**Handling data in discursive psychology**

Like conversation analysis, membership categorization analysis, and other discourse analytic approaches, discursive psychology tends to work with a data corpus and collections of particular phenomena. As with conversation analysis and membership categorization analysis, there is no single best approach to analysis, but there are some general principles that can be used as a guide: (a) discourse is action-oriented, (b) discourse is situated, (c) discourse is both constructed and constructive, and (d) discourse is produced as psychological (Potter, 2012; Wiggins, 2017). While the first three principles overlap with conversation analysis and membership categorization analysis, the fourth embodies discursive psychology’s distinctive analytic agenda of explicating how psychological talk and matters are part of people’s descriptions and methods for organizing, understanding, and navigating their social worlds. For more information on methodological matters, we advise the reader to consult the works cited here as well as recent empirical studies using discursive psychology.

In a very accessible introduction to ways to embark on a discursive psychology analysis, Wiggins (2017) provides a list of six interrelated stages of data analysis, which we have adapted in Figure 39.1 and will discuss.

After the researcher has transcribed or coded the data in Stage 1, Wiggins recommends repeated data readings/hearings/viewings. Once familiar with the data, the analyst can then refer to the transcripts (in the case of audio/video recordings). Stage 2 entails describing the data. This involves making initial notes and observations about what is noticed, taking care not to
prematurely exclude anything that may be of potential relevance. Areas of attention will include what was said/written (e.g., words, phrases, expressions), how it was said/written (e.g., delivery, prosody), and when it was said/written (e.g., within the turn, within the overall sequence, in relation to preceding and subsequent turns). Analysts should also attend to who is part of what is spoken/written (e.g., the speaker/writer, the recipients, the persons being talked about).

Stage 3, identifying social actions and psychological constructs, gets to the heart of a discursive psychological analysis. The aim is to take our previous noticings and work to understand the actions that interactants are constructing. ‘Social actions’ refers to what the interactants are doing with their communicative resources (e.g., asking questions, complaining, greeting, inviting, joking, telling a story). But these actions can only be identified as they emerge in situ. That is, while “hello” may be used to do the action of ‘greeting’, it may also do a number of other actions (e.g., seeking a person’s attention, complaining about rude behavior), none of which can be determined or ruled out in advance. Similarly, even prosody (e.g., pitch contour, word stress) and other paralinguistic cues (e.g., gaze, gesture, pauses) can carry out a range of social actions (such as to display ‘surprise’, ‘resistance’, ‘hesitation’, ‘solidarity’, and so on).

There is a large body of published research in discursive psychology and conversation analysis on the various discursive devices (e.g., terminology, categories) that people deploy across a range of casual and institutional contexts in generic and creative ways. These devices include pronominal use, stance and footing, assessments, hedging, hesitation markers, lists, contrasts, ECFs (extreme case formulations) such as never and always, epistemic markers (‘oh’, ‘I know’), affect displays (crying, laughing, smiling), emotion categories (‘angry’, ‘sad’, ‘pissed off’), membership categories and category pairs (‘teacher–student’), specificity and vagueness, metaphor, narrative structures, and so forth. When examining these various actions and devices, we must resist the temptation to assign particular psychological states or intentions to people; rather, a discursive psychological approach is interested in how speakers/writers (through their various semiotic resources) make psychological matters identifiable and relevant.

Stage 4 involves focusing on a specific analytical issue. Narrowing the scope is essential to carrying out an in-depth and meaningful analysis, but it is one of the most difficult parts of any research process. Wiggins (2017) offers some advice on how to proceed:

Once you have your list, then you can return to the research literature and your own research question. What was it that inspired this project in the first place? What were you looking for or aiming to analyse? What does the literature suggest is an important (or missing) area of research? Consider each possible ‘issue’ in your list in light of these considerations. Which might be the most fruitful for analysis? Which ones, ultimately, are you most interested in or intrigued by? . . . You should then identify one or two issues to focus on first.

(p. 130)

In Stage 5 of the analytic cycle, the researcher collects other instances of the phenomena of interest from the larger corpus (and the published literature). This requires reviewing the whole corpus again, (re)identifying relevant segments, and (re)transcribing data. It is important that each of the transcribed instances include some sequential details (i.e., a few lines of context before and after).

Stage 6, the last stage, involves more focusing and refining of the analysis. This is a recursive process that takes a great deal of time, patience, and much revision. Here the analyst returns to Stage 3 by (re)analyzing the data segments in the collection to see whether they accurately represent the analytic focus, are coherent as a collection, and follow similar or recurrent patterns. It is common to find examples that do not fit the general pattern. In such
cases, the researcher may need to continue refining the object of analysis. Divergent examples may also constitute ‘deviant cases’, which should not be discarded because they can be helpful in explicating the ‘regular’ pattern (Schegloff, 1968; Sidnell & Stivers, 2013). Wiggins (2017) recommends writing out the analysis at this point, because it can help to organize and make sense of the patterns being identified.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we provided a theoretical and methodological overview of a discursive psychological approach to the analysis of talk and text. We also outlined conversation analysis and membership categorization analysis and how they provide discursive psychology with strong theoretical and methodological priorities, particularly in terms of its discursive constructionist orientation and its explicit project or objective of respecification. Although discursive psychology remains notably underrepresented in applied linguistics, it offers researchers a renewed, empirical perspective with the tremendous potential to dramatically expand not just what is studied, but how those topics can be conceived, taught, and researched: as discourse phenomena that are observable in mundane talk-in-interaction.

Notes

1 For discussions of the historical development of discursive psychology and some of its varieties, we refer the reader to Potter (2010), Prior (2016a), Tileagā and Stokoe (2016), Wiggins (2017), and Wiggins and Potter (2010).

2 While many researchers use the terms ‘constructionism’ and ‘constructivism’ interchangeably, we distinguish between social/discursive constructionism, as we discuss here, and the cognitive constructivism of Piaget and the social constructivism of Vygotsky (cf. Crotty, 1998).

3 Despite substantive theoretical differences, there are also important alignments between ethnomethodology and social constructionism, including, for instance, the ‘strong interest in tacit, ‘street level’, situated conduct . . . and the mundane work that sets up and maintains the ‘objective’ accountability of social and natural orders” (Lynch, 2004, p. 323).

4 Conversation analysts would ordinarily have access to the audio (or video), as that is the primary data record, not the transcript (which is always a rendering of that record).

5 Related lines of research, formulation analysis, and occasioned semantics (Bilmes, 2011; Prior, 2016b), extend membership categories to other objects and labels.

References


Analysis of talk and text