

## DISCOURSE ANALYSIS VS. CONTENT ANALYSIS: METHODOLOGICAL SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

**Orest Semotiuk**

*Ivan Franko National University of Lviv,  
General Chuprynka str, 49, 79044, Lviv, Ukraine  
e-mail: [orest.semotiuk@gmail.com](mailto:orest.semotiuk@gmail.com)  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7922-380X>*

In this paper we outline the key features of discourse analysis, contrast it with content analysis, and then consider the extent to which these two methods can be seen as either complementary to, or in conflict with, each other. Our underlying premise is pluralist in that while we recognize that these two methods are based in very different philosophical camps and play very different roles in social science research, we also believe that they can be seen as complementary and even mutually supportive in the exploration of social reality. Furthermore, given the recent “linguistic turn” in social science and the related increasing interest in the study of texts of various kinds, the contrast between these two methods provides a particularly useful context in which to discuss assumptions about the nature of language and the role of linguistic methods in social research.

*Key words:* methodology, content analysis, discourse analysis, text, meaning, social reality, social research.

### **Introduction.**

One of the essential features of modern science is its interdisciplinarity, namely the combination of methodological approaches of different branches of knowledge. More and more social sciences use the methodological tools of linguistics, and linguistics, in turn, actively uses quantitative methods, combining them with traditional research techniques. This article seeks to trace the methodological and methodological differences and similarities of discourse analysis and content analysis, methods that today play a central role in linguistics and the social sciences.

### **Discourse analysis and its methodological features.**

Discourse analysis is a methodology for analyzing social phenomena that is qualitative, interpretive, and constructionist. It explores how the socially produced ideas and objects that populate the world were created and are held in place. It not only embodies a set of techniques for conducting structured, qualitative investigations of texts, but also a set of assumptions concerning the constructive effects of language<sup>1</sup>. Discourse analysis differs

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<sup>1</sup> Burman, E. and Parker, I. (1993), Against discursive imperialism, empiricism and constructionism: Thirty-two problems with discourse analysis. In: *Discourse analytic research: Repertoires and Readings of Texts in Action*, edited by E. Burman and I. Parker (pp. 155-172). London: New York.

from other qualitative methodologies that try to understand the meaning of social reality for actors<sup>2</sup> in that it endeavors to uncover the way in which that reality was produced. So, while it shares a concern with the meaningfulness of social life, discourse analysis provides a more profound interrogation of the precarious status of meaning. Where other qualitative methodologies work to understand or interpret social reality as it exists, discourse analysis tries to uncover the way that reality is produced<sup>3</sup>.

Discourse analysis also presupposes that it is impossible to strip discourse from its broader context<sup>4</sup>. Discourses have no inherent meaning in themselves and, to understand their constructive effects, researchers must locate them historically and socially. The meanings of any discourse are “created, supported, and contested through the production, dissemination, and consumption of texts; and emanate from interactions between the social groups and the complex societal structures in which the discourse is embedded”<sup>5</sup>.

Discourse analysis is thus more than a method: it is a methodology based on two primary assumptions. First, discourse analysis is founded on a strong social constructivist epistemology. Social reality is not something that we uncover, but something that we actively create through meaningful interaction. The study of the social thus becomes the study of how the objects and concepts that populate social reality come into being<sup>6</sup>.

Second, discourse analysis grows out of the belief that meaning, and hence social reality, arise out of interrelated bodies of texts – called discourses – that bring new ideas, objects and practices into the world. For example, the discourse of strategy has introduced a series of new management practices over the last fifty years<sup>7</sup>; the discourse of AIDS has empowered groups of patient-activists<sup>8</sup>. Discourses are thus “concrete” in that they produce a material reality in the practices that they invoke. Accordingly, a discourse is defined as a system of texts that brings objects into being<sup>9</sup>. From this perspective, social science becomes the study of the development of discourses that support the myriad of ideas that make social reality meaningful. And, since discourses are embodied in texts, discourse analysis involves the systematic study of texts to find evidence of their meaning and how this meaning translates into a social reality<sup>10</sup>.

#### **Content analysis as method of social research**

Content analysis, as it is traditionally employed, differs from discourse analysis quite profoundly even though it is similarly concerned with the analysis of texts. Most

<sup>2</sup> Geertz, C. (1973), *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York, NJ: Basic Books.

<sup>3</sup> Phillips, N. and Hardy, C. (1997), Managing multiple identities: discourse, legitimacy and resources in the UK refugee system. *Organization* 4 (2): 159-186.

<sup>4</sup> Fairclough, N. (1995), *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. London: Longman.

<sup>5</sup> Hardy, C. (2001), Researching organizational Discourse. *International Studies in Management and Organization* 31 (3): p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> Wood, L.A. and Kroger, R.O. (2000). *Doing discourse analysis: Method for studying action in talk and text*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

<sup>7</sup> Knights, D. and Morgan, G. (1991). Strategic discourse and subjectivity: Towards a critical analysis of corporate strategy in organisations. *Organisation Studies* 12(3): 251-273.

<sup>8</sup> Maguire, S. Phillips, N. and Hardy, C. (2001). When “Silence = Death” keep talking: Trust, control and the discursive construction of identity in the Canadian HIV/AIDS treatment domain. *Organization Studies* 22: 287-312.

<sup>9</sup> Parker, I. *Discourse dynamics*. London: Routledge, (1992).

<sup>10</sup> Chalaby, J.K. (1996). Beyond the prison-house of language: Discourse as a sociological concept. *British Journal of Sociology* 47 (4): 684-698.

importantly, it adopts a positivistic approach – the fundamental activity is hypothesis testing using statistical analysis<sup>11</sup>. At a practical level, it involves the development of analytical categories that are used to construct a coding frame that is then applied to textual data. Content analysis as a mode of textual analysis is characterized by a concern with being objective, systematic, and quantitative<sup>12</sup>: objective in the sense that the analytic categories are defined so precisely that different coders may apply them and obtain the same results; systematic in the sense that clear rules are used to include or exclude content or analytic categories; and quantified in the sense that the results of content analysis are amenable to statistical analysis. Underlying this concern is the belief that the meaning of the text is constant and can be known precisely and consistently by different researchers as long as they utilize rigorous and correct analytical procedures<sup>13</sup>. Content analysis is the study of the text itself not of its relation to its context, the intentions of the producer of the text, or the reaction of the intended audience.

While discourse analysis and content analysis are both interested in exploring social reality, the two methods differ fundamentally in their assumptions about the nature of that reality and of the role of language in particular. Where discourse analysis highlights the precarious nature of meaning and focuses on exploring its shifting and contested nature, content analysis assumes a consistency of meaning that allows for occurrences of words (or other, larger units of text) to be assumed equivalent and counted. Where discourse analysis focuses on the relation between text and context, content analysis focuses on the text abstracted from its contexts. On the surface, the difference between the two methods could not be more stark (see Table 2). While discourse analysis is concerned with the development of meaning and in how it changes over time, content analysis assumes a consistency of meaning that allows counting and coding. Where discourse analysts see change and flux, content analysts look for consistency and stability.

It is, however, worth pointing out that there are forms of content analysis that look much more like discourse analysis. More qualitative forms of content analysis that do not assume highly stable meanings of words but, rather, include a sensitivity to the usage of words and the context in which they are used are compatible with discourse analysis and can, in fact, be used within a broad discourse analytic methodology in the analysis of social reality. In Table 1 we demonstrate how content analysis might be used in a way that is compatible with discourse analysis. As one moves from simple counting to more complex interpretation, the two forms of analysis become increasingly compatible, although at the expense of positivist objectives. For content analysis to form part of a discourse analytic methodology, it is necessary to weaken the assumption that meaning is stable enough to be counted in an objective sense. From a discourse analytic perspective, all textual analysis is an exercise in interpretation and while clear exposition of the methods used to arrive at a particular interpretation is a hallmark of good research, it cannot remove the necessity for interpretation. With this proviso, content analysis can, through its focus on being systematic and quantitative, play a potentially useful role in expanding our understanding of the role of discourse in constructing the social.

<sup>11</sup> Schwandt, T. (2001). *Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry*, 2nd Edn, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

<sup>12</sup> Kassarian, H. H. (2001), Content analysis in consumer research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 4: p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> Silverman, D. (2001). *Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for Analysing Talk, Text and Interaction*, 2nd Edn, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

In conclusion, while discourse analysis and content analysis come from very different philosophical bases, they can be complementary. Traditionally, the differences mean that they provide alternative perspectives on the role of language in social studies. In this regard, they are complementary in terms of what they reveal despite conflicting ontology and epistemology, which is most easily seen in the focus in content analysis on reliability and validity, contrasting sharply with the focus on the interpretive accuracy and reflexive examination that characterizes discourse analysis.

More interpretive versions of content analysis also complement discourse analysis in that they may be usefully combined in a single study: the more structured and formal forms of discourse analysis are compatible with the more interpretive forms of content analysis.

From this perspective, the research can be retraced as an exercise in creative interpretation that seeks to show how reality is constructed through texts that embody discourses.

In this regard, content analysis provides an important way to demonstrate these performative links that lie at the heart of discourse analysis. The combination of these two methods can provide reliable and objectively results and enhance the effectiveness of the research work. The possible research questions concerning the use of content analysis within Discourse Approach are listed in Table 1.

*Table 1. Using Content Analysis within a Discourse Analytic Approach*

<b>Dealing with Meaning</b>	There is no inherent meaning in the text; meanings are constructed in a particular context; and the author, consumer, and researcher all play a role. There is no way to separate meaning from context and any attempt to count must deal with the precarious nature of meaning.
<b>Dealing with Categories</b>	Categories emerge from the data. However, existing empirical research and theoretical work provide ideas for what to look for and the research question provides an initial simple frame.
<b>Dealing with Technique</b>	The categories that emerge from the data allow for coding schemes involving counting occurrences of meanings in the text. Analysis is an interactive process of working back and forth between the texts and the categories.
<b>Dealing with Context</b>	The analysis must locate the meaning of the text in relation to a social context and to other texts and discourses.
<b>Dealing with Reliability</b>	The results are reliable to the degree that they are understandable and plausible to others i.e. does the researcher explain how she/he came up with the analysis in a way that the reader can make sense of?
<b>Dealing with Validity</b>	The results are valid to the degree that they show how patterns in the meaning of texts are constitutive of reality.
<b>Dealing with Reflexivity</b>	To what extent does the analysis take into account the role that the author plays in making meaning? Does the analysis show different ways in which this meaning might be consumed? Is the analysis sensitive to the way the patterns are identified and explained?

*Table 2 Content Analysis vs. a Discourse Analysis: methodological differences*

	<b>Discourse Analysis</b>	<b>Content Analysis</b>
<b>Ontology</b>	Constructionist – assumes that reality is socially constructed	Realist – assumes that an independent reality exists.
<b>Epistemology</b>	Meaning is fluid and constructs reality in ways that can be posited through the use of interpretive methods.	Meaning is fixed and reflects reality in ways that can be ascertained through the use of scientific methods.
<b>Data Source</b>	Textual meaning, usually in relation to other texts, as well as practices of production, dissemination, and consumption.	Textual content in comparison to other texts, example over time.
<b>Method</b>	Qualitative (although can involve counting).	Quantitative
<b>Categories</b>	Exploration of how participants actively construct categories.	Analytical categories taken for granted and data allocated to them.
<b>Inductive/ Deductive</b>	Inductive	Deductive
<b>Subjectivity/ Objectivity</b>	Subjective	Objective
<b>Role of context</b>	Can only understand texts in discursive context	Does not necessarily link text to context.
<b>Reliability</b>	Formal measures of reliability are not a factor although coding is still justified according to academic norms; differences in interpretation are not a problem and may, in fact, be a source of data	Formal measures of intercoder reliability are crucial for measurement purposes; differences in interpretation are problematic and risk nullifying any results
<b>Validity</b>	Validity in the form of “performativity” i.e. demonstrating a plausible case that patterns in the meaning of texts are constitutive of reality in some way.	Validity is in the form of accuracy and precision demonstrating that pattern in the content of texts are accurately measured and reflect reality.
<b>Reflexivity</b>	Necessarily high – author is part of the process whereby meaning is constructed.	Not necessarily high – author simply reports on objective findings.

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## АНАЛІЗ ДИСКУРСУ VS. КОНТЕНТ-АНАЛІЗ: МЕТОДОЛОГІЧНІ ВІДМІННОСТІ І ПОДІБНОСТІ

**Орест Семотюк**

*Львівський національний університет імені Івана Франка,  
вул. Генерала Чупринки, 49, 79044, Львів, Україна*

*e-mail: [orest.semotiuk@gmail.com](mailto:orest.semotiuk@gmail.com)*

*<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7922-380X>*

Однією із істотних рис сучасної науки є її міждисциплінарний характер, тобто поєднання методологічних і методичних підходів різних галузей знань до вирішення тих чи інших наукових проблем. Щораз більше суспільних наук використовують методичний доробок лінгвістики, а лінгвістика своєю чергою активно послуговується кількісними методами, поєднуючи їх із традиційними для неї дослідницькими техніками. У цій роботі ми окреслюємо основні особливості дискурсного аналізу, протиставляємо його контент-аналізу, а потім розглядаємо, наскільки ці два методи можна сприймати як взаємодоповнюючі, так і такі, що суперечать один одному. Аналіз дискурсу є одним із якісних конструктивістських методів аналізу та інтерпретації феноменів соціальної дійсності. Цей метод має на меті дослідити, як в соціумі виникають певні ідеї, які потім поширюються та утверджуються в суспільстві. Метод контент-аналізу у його традиційному розумінні істотно відрізняється від аналізу дискурсу, хоча його теж застосовують для аналізу текстів. Його методологічним підґрунтям є позитивізм. Основним завданням контент-аналізу є перевірка дослідницької гіпотези з допомогою статистичних розрахунків. Якщо аналіз дискурсу зосереджується на мінливій, непостійній природі значення і його вивченні, то контент-аналіз виходить із незмінності, постійності значення, яке уможлиблює трактувати слова і тексти як повністю еквівалентні дійсності та можливості їх кількісного аналізу. Попри різне методологічне підґрунтя, яке зумовлює різне бачення ролі мови у дослідженнях соціальної дійсності, обидва методи можуть поєднуватися спільним об'єктом аналізу – соціальною дійсністю, яку вони намагаються вивчити і описати, незважаючи на онтологічні й епістеміологічні відмінності. Ці відмінності виявляються в тому, що контент-аналіз зосереджується на категоріях валідності та достовірності, а аналіз дискурсу головно акцентує на точності тлумачення та рефлексивності дослідження дійсності. Поєднання цих двох методів забезпечить достовірні об'єктивні результати і посилить ефективність праці дослідників.

*Ключові слова:* методологія, контент-аналіз, аналіз дискурсу, текст, значення, соціальна дійсність, соціальні дослідження.