

## Analyzing Qualitative Interview Data: The Discourse Analytic Method

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The article presents discourse analysis as a method of analyzing qualitative interview data. Using examples from a study of users' library conceptions, it is argued that participants' interpretations are much more context-dependent and variable than normally recognized, and that this has important implications for the use of interview data. Instead of producing definitive versions of participants' action or beliefs, interview data may be used to reveal regular interpretative practices through which participants construct versions of actions, cognitive processes, and other phenomena. This method does not take the individual as the principal unit of analysis, but strives to recognize cultural regularities in participants' accounts in order to examine the phenomena studied at a macrosociological level.

In 1993, Bradley and Sutton wrote that "the serious cultivation of the potential of qualitative research has yet to emerge" (p. 405). Four years later, Vakkari (1997, p. 458) concludes that the development in library and information studies (LIS) is methodological proliferation: both quantitative and qualitative techniques are applied, although qualitative techniques have become more popular, at least for information needs and seeking research. A recent trend in qualitative research in LIS is the shift of attention from data-gathering methods to the methods of data description, analysis, and interpretation. Qualitative methods are increasingly being understood as explicitly theory-dependent ways of describing, analyzing, and interpreting data. Such approaches as discourse analysis (Frohmann, 1994), frame analysis (Chelton, 1998), phenomenography (Bruce & Klaus, 1998), conversation analysis (Solomon, 1997), and deconstructionism (Olson, 1997) require specific norms and guidelines for data analysis; they do not use a generally descriptive, hermeneutic, or naturalistic method.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, methodological discussion in the social sciences was still essentially bound up in the contrasting of qualitative and quantitative methods. While the contrastive model was "neither accurate nor particularly helpful" (Sutton 1993, p. 411), it is the reason why assessments of the merits and weaknesses of qualitative research have been almost entirely connected to the data-gathering phase, while the methods of data analysis and interpretation have often not been discussed in similar detail. The contrastive model is based on the conception that researchers have to choose between a "humanistic," subject-centered approach aiming at capturing participants' indigeneous meanings and experiences, or a "hard," statistical approach

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describing concrete facts or society's larger structural processes. In LIS, qualitative methods have mainly been viewed as a welcome alternative to survey-dominated user studies conducted from the information systems' or institutional point of view (see, e.g., Dervin & Nilan, 1986).

This article introduces a method of qualitative analysis in which the basic analytic unit is the interpretative repertoire (see Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1988), and attempts to show the value of a method of qualitative analysis which does not aim at capturing participants' authentic intentions, meanings, or experiences. In discourse analysis, interview data are analyzed at a macrosociological level, as social texts. Discourse analysis is an approach which surpasses the dichotomy between subjective meanings and objective reality, as well as the dichotomy between user-centered and system-centered research (see Talja, 1997). It concentrates on the analysis of knowledge formations, which organize institutional practices and societal reality on a large scale.

Discourse analysis is a part of the linguistic turn in the social sciences and the humanities which emphasizes the role of language in the construction of social reality. It is one of the dominant or mainstream research approaches in communication, sociology, social psychology, and psychology. Although several articles have discussed the application of discourse analysis in information studies (e.g., Budd & Raber, 1996; Frohmann, 1994; Talja, 1997; Talja et al., 1997; Tuominen & Savolainen, 1997), it has, thus far, been used relatively little as a concrete research method. This article demonstrates, with examples from a study of library users' library talk (Talja, 1998), how the discourses existing in a particular field can be identified.

Some critics have argued that discourse analysis directs LIS researchers' attention to "private language use." It should be noted, however, that the term "discourse" is used within diverse research approaches, which do not necessarily have common theoretical footings. The version of discourse analysis described in this article differs in focus from the interest in interaction and mundane talk dominant in discursive social psychology and conversation analysis. As Frohmann (1994, p. 120) emphasizes, Foucault-influenced discourse analysis does not study the rules and conventions of mundane talk; rather, it examines "serious speech acts," institutionalized talk or practices. This does not mean that the participants of the study should be institutionally privileged speakers. Instead, regardless of the roles and positions of the participants, talk is studied as an example of more general interpretative practices.

Discourse analysis studies practices of producing knowledge and meanings in concrete contexts and institutions - be they in library organizations, information studies, information society strategies, database interfaces, or the Dewey Decimal Classification. Discourse analysis systematizes different ways of talking in order to make visible the perspectives and starting points on the basis of which knowledge and meanings are produced in a particular historical moment. It pays attention to the way in which discourses produce and transform social reality, and makes it possible to evaluate the practical consequences of different ways of approaching a particular phenomenon.

The article introduces the basic research strategy of the analysis of interpretative repertoires: the systematic examination of context-dependent variability in talk and texts. Second, it explains how the discourses existing in a particular field can be identified. The terms “discourse” and “interpretative repertoire” are synonyms. The identification of interpretative repertoires is the endpoint of discourse analysis, and a repertoire is a named discourse. Third, the article explains how discourse analysis differs from the hermeneutic reading of qualitative data. Fourth, the criteria of validity and reliability in qualitative research are discussed. Finally, the article discusses the application of discourse analysis in LIS research.

### **CONTEXT-DEPENDENT VARIATION IN INTERVIEW TALK**

The constructivist method of interpretation used in discourse analysis problematizes some traditional approaches in qualitative analysis. Interview talk is approached with very different expectations from how we have learned, as members of culture, to interpret people’s talk in everyday life. Participants’ accounts, or verbal expressions, are not treated as descriptions of actual processes, behavior, or mental events. Interview talk is by nature a cultural and collective phenomenon. The meaning of an answer is not a straightforward matter of external or internal reference, but also depends on the local and broader discursive system in which the utterance is embedded (Wetherell & Potter, 1988, p. 169).

Qualitative analysis is often started by analyzing and counting the distribution of answers question by question. The researcher selects some sections of participants’ discourse as providing the satisfactory answers to his or her questions, whereas other parts of participants’ discourse are ignored or treated as unimportant. It is assumed that this procedure will result in a logical and coherent picture of the researched groups’ actions or views, and can be generalized to classes of social action (e.g., information-seeking behavior) and to whole groups of actors (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984). The difficulty with taking a collection of similar statements produced by participants as literally descriptive of social action is the variability in participants’ statements about a particular topic. Not only do different actors tell different stories, but over an entire interview, it is often exceedingly difficult to reconstruct or summarize the views of one participant, because each actor has many different voices (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984, p. 2). The following illustrative example is from an interview with a user of a public library music department. Participants were asked to give their views about the main functions and principles of music library services (see Talja, 1998).

#### **Example One**

##### **Extract 1**

Q: What do you think should be taken into account when building the library collection?

A: Real people, quite simply. It should be the starting point that library services are for the ordinary people. Although I don’t listen to mass

music, to the Rolling Stones, or to Madonna, it does not mean that I can deny others such music. If the majority of people like the music, then the library should offer it. And if I want something special, I can ask for it, and they can order it as a remote loan. The library should take care of ordinary people and their needs, their cultural needs, and recreational needs. It is the starting point that the library *should serve the majority of people*, and it should not be turned into a money machine, like our government is aiming to do. (Interviewee 8)

## Extract 2

Q: Do you think this (music) department's collection or profile is different from the music you hear on the radio? Or, do you think the profile should be somehow different?

A: I think the library *should be an alternative to mass culture*. It should be an outlet, so that you can find - if you listen only to Radio City or Radio One, you can't get a picture of the world of music as a whole. I think the library should definitely provide alternatives. The library should be - it can be said that it is - the cradle of counter culture. If it didn't exist, people would be much poorer culturally and spiritually. (Interviewee 8)

In the first interview extract, the interviewee's response is formulated in the context of public discussion about library fees, an issue which tends to surface especially in times of economic recession. In the second extract, the answer is equally clearly a reaction to the contextualization of the question. The interviewee's views could naturally be summarized as "the respondent thinks that the library must serve the majority of people, but that it is also important to provide alternatives". However, such summary solutions are problematic, because consistency is an achievement of the researcher rather than a feature of the participant's discourse, and the context-dependent nature and cultural logic of the answers are missed. In different sections of the interview, the interviewee approaches the topic from different angles, and expresses mutually contradictory views ("if I want something special, I can ask for it as a remote loan," and "the library should definitely provide alternatives"). In each section of talk, one view is convincingly given as the participant's authentic, fundamental view about the topic in question, and powerful, persuasive arguments are presented in support of that view ("the library should not be turned into a money machine," "people would be much poorer culturally and mentally"). Let us take another example.

## Example 2

### Extract 1

Q: In your opinion, what should be considered when selecting materials to the library collection? If you were a librarian, what would you emphasize?

A: My starting point would be that the responsibility of the library is not to represent - in my mind it absolutely may NOT represent - any school or any direction in particular. To make acquisitions just because we want to guide people's tastes. It is not - *it must be based on the demand*. It must answer to the USER'S needs. If I were a librarian, I would register the queries. And then, of course, the ideal situation would be that the computer system would do this. And one way would be to conduct research on these users' needs. (Interviewee 22)

## Extract 2

Q: Is there any kind of music you think is not as necessary in the library collection?

A: No, I think the collection must be balanced. But, of course, it is quite a well-founded choice now, with all these local radio stations, many of which function just as - the ether is full of rock and other kinds of light music, there is so much of that available, from so many channels, that in comparison to the general societal availability of classical music, it is not balanced at all. Therefore, that group is in a minority position when the general availability of music is considered. And, therefore, in the name of impartiality, this unbalanced situation could be balanced by investing to classical music. And, it must be considered that the collection in the library dictates to a considerable extent the general profile and atmosphere of the library. If, for instance, some library specialized in rock music, the atmosphere there would correspond to that. And, the library is, after all, an institution that is above shopping centers. Yes, I think to offer classical music, in my opinion the library *could guide the person to reach for higher destinations* than what he or she might have at this moment, arouse curiosity. (Interviewee 22)

In the first extract, the interviewee emphasizes that the library should not strive to cultivate users' tastes. Collection work should be systematically based on demand or researched user needs. In the second extract, the library is an institution that encourages people to aim at higher goals and educates them by its very atmosphere and the nature of its collections.

## PARTICIPANTS' INTERPRETATION WORK

The kind of variation and inconsistency seen in the extracts is not an exception, nor is it a product of the interview situation (for similar examples, see Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984; Machin & Carrithers, 1996; Potter & Mulkay, 1985; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Inconsistencies can also easily be found in the answers to survey questionnaires.

However, such variation is usually managed by analytic strategies of restriction, for instance categorization, coding and selective reading, because researchers are accustomed to regarding the individual as a coherent, consistent unit, and the natural starting point for their investigations (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1988). Variability between the accounts that people give is not part of this picture. Moreover, it is customary to assume that the object of talk, for instance the library, exists as a permanent and coherent whole of which different people simply have different opinions and experiences.<sup>1</sup>

In the discourse analytic approach, the researcher abandons the assumption that there is only one truly accurate version of participants' action and belief. Interview talk is, by nature, *interpretation work* concerning the topic in question. It is *reflexive, theoretical, contextual and textual*, because the objects of talk (e.g., the library) are not abstract, ideal entities everyone sees in the same way. When talking about the library, participants do not only produce a neutral description and express their opinion. They produce a *version* of the library ("a cradle of counter culture," or "an institution above shopping centers"), and this version contains an evaluation. As Wittgenstein (1971) has noted, in normal language each expression not only states, but also evaluates. The nature and essence of the library institution are defined in interinterview talk, and speakers' opinions concern these specific formulations, context-dependent versions of the library. Descriptions, evaluations, and large-scale cultural models of accounting are inseparably bound together (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). A third example represents a library professional's talk:

### Example 3

- Users make the library what it is through their own presence. They also select the library's collections, if libraries are user-centered.
- At this moment we in the library have to consider very carefully what is most important for our customers. Is it education, research, and study; is it recreation and entertainment; or is it the everyday following of events? We have come to the conclusion that the first consideration is, by far, the most important. If we gave up investing in education and study, the consequences would be serious.
- The diversity of the collection has not yet badly suffered. If the library wants to function as a forum for alternative views, it should not eliminate the alternatives. We must be able to explain to the customers why this opinion magazine comes to the library, but not every ladies' journal. (From a librarian's interview, see Verho, 1993, p. 131).

First, there is the user-centered library, then the institution supporting education and study, and finally the forum for alternatives. The versions contain mutually contradictory views about users' position and influence ("users select the library's

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<sup>1</sup>This is particularly evident when considering the tradition of social surveys and opinion polls, which is based on the assumption that neither the questionnaire's formulation and contextualization of the topic nor the persuasiveness and cultural status of particular statements in a specific moment in time and space significantly affects the answering. It is assumed that people actually hold such one-dimensional and context-independent opinions as described by the conclusions the research enabled.

collections if libraries are user-centered,” and “we must be able to explain to the customers why this opinion magazine comes to the library, but not every ladies’ journal”). Again, the example shows that when the topic is approached from different angles, different aspects of it come into sight and get a privileged position. The “truth” about the library is different and is supported by different kinds of “facts” (“users make the library what it is,” “if we gave up investing in education, the consequences would be serious,” and “the diversity of the collection has not yet badly suffered”).

In discourse analysis, this kind of variability and inconsistency in explanations is not seen as a potential source of error when trying to make coherent sense of participants’ views. Interview talk is the resourceful, context-dependent application of common interpretative resources. The variability of interpretations does not mean that there is no regularity at all in participants’ discourse; it only signifies that regularity cannot be pinned at the level of the individual speaker (Wetherell & Potter, 1988, p. 172). There are considerable similarities in ways of making sense of the library as an institution (e.g., all three examples contain the “user-centered” library version and the “forum of alternatives”), but all interpretations and arguments are not equally logical and acceptable in a particular speech situation. In similar conversational contexts, similar arguments tend to be used.<sup>2</sup>

As seen in the extracts, the inconsistencies in answers are not necessarily evident or a problem for the speakers themselves, because, in a normal conversation, the speakers are simultaneously able to retain in memory only two or three of their latest turns (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984). If, however, two different viewpoints are taken into consideration in the same section of talk, the speakers usually show an awareness of their possible inconsistencies, and attempt to resolve them.<sup>3</sup> If this orientation towards the resolvment of potential contradictions does not appear when different versions of the topic are produced in different sections of talk, it is a clear sign of the existence of different interpretative repertoires (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984; Wetherell & Potter, 1988).

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<sup>2</sup>When interpreting things it is always possible to bring up several different aspects. The chosen or privileged interpretation depends on the context of talk and to whom the talk is directed. For instance, if an adolescent reader is asked to give her opinion about a Nancy Drew book, description to her best friend is likely to be different from the one offered to a teacher in a classroom setting. Both interpretations are equally authentic, because the reading experience is, in itself, seldom unambiguous. Usually, it consists of multiple, both positively and negatively experienced, impulses. In the linear process of reading, the reader and the text are in symbiosis. The reader identifies with the implicit reader of the book (Vainikkala, 1989). The spoken description of the reading experience is necessarily an afterwards rationalization, in which some of all the manifold impulses are chosen as important, and the reading experience itself receives a form and a meaning.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, “the library is a supporter of education” -discourse, the general education repertoire, and the user-centered demand repertoire are linked together by *compromise talk*: the library should make compromises between demand and quality in order not to exclude any user group from library services. It is noteworthy that this emphasis does not neutralize the differences between the two repertoires. The general education repertoire assumes that “demand” mainly consists of adolescent users’ requests for light pop music, which is not to be acquired because of its short-lived character. In the demand repertoire, “demand” is defined as the interest structure of the local user community, something to be systematically researched in order for the collection work to be successful and economical (Talja, 1998).

## THE IDENTIFICATION OF INTERPRETATIVE REPERTOIRES

The analysis of interpretative repertoires is like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. Interviews are not interpreted as stories having a clear and distinguishable message and meaning; instead, all the accounts produced by the participants are taken into consideration and analyzed in order to identify significant patterns of consistency and variation in them. Thereafter, the researcher starts to ask: What is the starting point behind this account? On what kinds of limitations of perspective is this particular description based? What other statements in participants' interview talk are based on the same perspective? The endpoint of analysis is the systematic linking of descriptions, accounts, and arguments to the viewpoint from which they were produced, and the naming of the different interpretative repertoires - usually by concepts which repeatedly occur in participants' talk and which tend to be used when the topic is approached from a particular angle.

The discourses existing in a particular field can be discerned on the basis of the interpretative conflicts, or points of incompatibility, present in the texts under study (Foucault, 1972, p. 65; Parker, 1992, p. 13). The search for the pattern of repertoires includes three phases. The first phase consists of the analysis of inconsistencies and internal contradictions in the answers of one participant. The second phase consists of the identification *regular patterns in the variability of accounts*: repeatedly occurring descriptions, explanations, and arguments, in different participants' talk (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). The third phase consists of identifying the basic assumptions and starting points (in Foucauldian language, "statements"), which underlie a particular way of talking about a phenomenon.

In discourse analysis, inconsistencies in participants' accounts are interpreted as differences between relatively internally consistent interpretative repertoires. What is, then, an interpretative repertoire? Wetherell and Potter (1988, p. 172) define interpretative repertoires as "bounded language units" constituted out of a restricted range of terms used in a specific stylistic and grammatical fashion. These terms are derived from one or more key metaphors and the presence of a repertoire will be signalled by certain tropes or figures of speech (e.g., "cradle of counter culture," and "reach for higher destinations") (Wetherell & Potter, 1988, p. 172). Foucault (1972, p. 49), on the other hand, defines a discourse as a practice which systematically forms the objects of which it speaks. He emphasizes that discourses do not consist merely of single meanings or interpretations: they are *knowledge formations, entities that provide an effective and limited lens for producing knowledge about a topic*.

According to Foucault (1972), the internal coherence of a discourse is *not* based on: (1) the object of talk, (2) the style or manner of speech, (3) a coherent and logical system of terms, or (4) established themes. When it is possible to discern *a limited viewpoint on the basis of which the objects, style, and themes of talk are selected and common concepts are defined*, one can speak of a discourse (Foucault, 1972).

Interpretative repertoires cannot be "bounded language units" consisting of a restricted range of terms, since the same terms are used in different discourses, in which their meanings are constituted differently (see Foucault, 1972, pp. 34-35; 1981, pp. 100-101). Language contains only a limited number of concepts, and distinctions like "alternative,"

“commercial,” or “mainstream,” are widely used in different fields and contexts. Words are *many-accented*: words having strong positive connotations, such as “knowledge,” “quality,” or “diversity,” receive divergent social meanings in different discourses and contexts of speaking (Volosinov, 1986). Discourses interpret common concepts (like “demand,” see footnote 3) in a way that corresponds to the viewpoint on which the discourse is based.

Thus, the different starting points of discourses are discernible from the way common concepts are understood and defined. Terms that have been linked together on the basis of a particular background assumption, lose their link on the basis of a different assumption, and are linked to other words. Discourses are also classification practices: analyzing discourses involves analyzing the selection, linkage, and ordering of terms.<sup>4</sup> Words are articulated with other words differently in discourses, and they implicate different ideas and ideologies. As Volosinov (1986) puts it, all the minuscule and passing moments of social changes are crystallized in words.

There are simultaneously several, more or less conflicting discourses existing in a particular field of knowledge or a particular institution at a certain point in time, because novel or alternative interpretations emerge as corrections to prior discourses. These earlier discourses appear in some respects erroneous or one-sided. Changes in social experiences and possibilities slowly render historically strong discourses less valid and accurate. These discourses seem to misinterpret some of the essential features or the “true nature” of the discussed phenomenon. Established ways of conceptualizing and approaching phenomena do not, however, vanish as their validity begins to be questioned. Novel interpretations gradually become established, and alternative discourses exist side by side in the same field of knowledge. That is why discourses are internally relatively coherent, but mutually contradictory and alternative.

## STATEMENTS AND ABSENCES

According to Foucault (1972), each discourse is based on a few background assumptions, or *statements*, as he calls them. Statements are unspoken theories about the nature of things, and they are the necessary and implicit starting points behind a particular way of speaking about a topic. On the basis of the statements, a particular state of things is assumed (e.g., “if we gave up investing in education, the consequences would be serious”). The statements building a discourse provide a particular angle from which a topic is approached, and they limit other ways in which

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<sup>4</sup>Saussure (1983) has noted that the signs of language describe values, not real and permanent “essences.” Language is basically a system of distinctions, in which the meaning of a single word depends on its difference from other words. Language consists of distinctions, but, in permanent use, a word can get cemented as one-accented, so that it seems to have only one unchangeable meaning (Volosinov, 1986). That is why it is not necessarily noticed that talk about “quality,” for instance, can be meaningful only if it has opposites: entities that are not considered to represent quality. On the other hand, “quality” must also be linked with attributes, which specify the meaning of the term by their presence. One significant point of incompatibility in library talk can be found in interpretations of what kinds of entities represent and which attributes define “quality.”

the topic could be constructed (Hall, 1992, p. 291).<sup>5</sup> This limiting effect of statements leads to *absences*, some possible interpretations or explanations are not voiced or even thought of when the topic is approached from a particular viewpoint (Foucault, 1972). The perspective that builds a discourse involves, above all, strategic selection of meanings. Discourses differ from one another in what kinds of (factual) statements about the nature of things they legitimize, and what kinds of meanings are absent or ignored.

In the examples, the speakers legitimized their views by appealing to generally accepted “facts”: “the ether is full of rock and other kinds of light music,” “you can’t get a picture of music as a whole by listening only to the radio,” and “if we gave up investing in education, the consequences would be serious.” It could equally well be claimed that there are radio channels (at least in Finland) which only play classical music, that the supply of publicly-funded radio channels aims at broadness, and that the function of school and academic libraries is to support education and study. However, the facts legitimizing a particular version of reality are rarely ever simply true or false (Foucault, 1972). The variability in participants’ accounts results from the fact that even generally-accepted facts or empirically supported truths, and logical, well-founded opinions can be in conflict with one another (Billig et al., 1988). The constitution, interpretation and weighing of facts always depends on what is considered as important, valuable, or desirable. Volosinov (1986) emphasizes it is always a particular viewpoint, or horizon of evaluation, that brings “the facts” into speakers’ sight.

When made visible, the statements building a discourse are always relative, susceptible to dispute and denial (Foucault, 1972). However, because statements are a part of an established and naturalized way of speaking, they are not normally, in themselves, taken under scrutiny. The utterances produced on the basis of established discourses are normally received simply as “grammatical,” that is, as logical and believable descriptions of “how things are” (Foucault, 1972).

Discourses, in the context of their rules and conceptualizations, provide the space in which things can be talked about (Hall, 1992, p. 291). On one hand, they limit the ways in which it is possible to make sense of things, but, on the other hand, they provide conflicting and variable viewpoints. As discourses provide the language for talking about a topic, for presenting knowledge and views, in a profound sense, they construct the lived reality (Hall, 1992; Wetherell & Potter, 1988). The perspectives and horizons of interpretation that give structure to social action, practices, and relationships are not normally consciously reflected, because they are part of the everyday order of things. The choices of perspectives also have practical consequences, but analyzing these consequences does not mean speculating about individual speakers’ intentions. It means exploring the connotations, allusions, and implications which particular discursive forms evoke (Foucault, 1972, 1980; Parker, 1992). Discourses are not individuals’ creations: they have taken their shape with the passage of time, they reflect the whole history of the societal form, and they have effects which no one has consciously meant.

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<sup>5</sup>For instance, the “guide for higher destinations” library metaphor is based on the statement that there are cultural products which educate, or lead to spiritual growth, and which merely entertain. The “cradle of counter culture” metaphor is based on the classification of cultural products to commercial and conventional “mainstream” and noncommercial, deviant “counter culture” or “alternatives.”

## INTERVIEWS AS SOCIAL TEXTS

Discourse analysts are not interested in processes taking place either in individuals' minds or in reality. They concentrate on the regularities of language use: what kinds of descriptions and accounts of a topic are possible, what kinds of evaluations are they based on, how do different modes of accounting construct different versions of the topic or produce different kinds of truths, and what do these versions accomplish (Wetherell & Potter, 1988). It is seen that discourses are "historical facts," but the speakers using them, topics to which they are applied, and attitudes towards them can, and do, change continuously (Foucault, 1972; Machin & Carrithers, 1996).

The basic assumption of discourse analysis is that interview answers are manufactured out of pre-existing linguistic resources with properties of their own, "much as a bridge is put together using girders, concrete and cable" (Wetherell & Potter, 1988, p 171). Historically-formed discourses are *repositories of starting points, definitions and themes that position the speakers* as they give meanings to phenomena (Hall, 1982; Parker, 1992). Many researchers find this idea objectionable, because it seems to render individual subjects into "opinion automat." If people change their attitudes from moment-to-moment and from setting-to-setting, what is left to give direction to their actions? When looked at more closely, the idea that discourses produce both the objects of which they speak and the speaking subjects, is no more objectionable than Wittgenstein's (1971) well-taken critique of private languages. For example, the interview extracts showed how the speakers employed culturally strong interpretations about the societal function of the library institution in a way that enabled them to present their views, argue for them, and defend them in an effective and convincing way. In this process, the participants allowed themselves to embody different kinds of persons, or, to put it more precisely, the subject positions offered by discourses provided them with varying identities. In the first section of extract two, the interviewee first aligned herself against librarians wanting to guide tastes. In the second section, the same interviewee aligned herself with librarians who could encourage people to reach for goals higher than their present aspirations. Similarly, the library professional first took distance from a library-centered perspective by saying that it is users who make the library what it is. This person then talked about "we in the library" who must make the important decisions and be able to explain them to the users.

This kind of navigation between different subject positions, or temporary identities and categories of person, strongly clashes with the traditional view that qualitative research should aim at capturing the speakers' authentic intentions, experiences, meanings, or behavior. This aim is based on a conception of individuals holding a static set of attitudes, values, or knowledge structures across different occasions, unaffected by local conversational settings or cultural resources of interpretation. Discourse analysis emphasizes that subjects are not as unidimensional, sovereign, and static as is commonly assumed, since in different social contexts and speech situations the individual uses variable linguistic resources and moves between different discourses quite naturally and skillfully (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

The starting point of discourse analysis is that meanings, values, and ethical principles are not individual creations, but entities that people create together in communication and social action. This view of language, mind, meaning and selfhood is *dialogic*, emphasizing that we are not “self-contained” (Sampson, 1993) selves, but “owe our character as the individuals we are to our living, embodied relations to the others and othernesses around us” (Shotter, 1998, p.1). As Bakhtin (1984, p. 287) puts it: “To be means to communicate... To be means to be for another, and through the other, for oneself. A person has no internal, sovereign territory, he is wholly and always on the boundary; looking inside himself, he looks into the eyes of another or with the eyes of another.”

It may seem irrelevant whether the research object is defined as the subject’s sensemaking or linguistic practices. Surely, talk expresses what is in an individual’s mind. In normal life people do have to act on the basis of the assumption that language straightforwardly and accurately describes both mental events and the outside reality. However, language is not just a tool to be taken up and put down at will, when we have something to communicate (Williams, 1977). Language is also an indispensable part of the subject’s self-understanding, since words are present in every act of interpretation (Volosinov, 1986).

According to Bakhtin (1981), the words of language are always half someone else’s: when subjects use words, they formulate themselves and their thoughts from the point of others, from the point of view of their community. Words become speakers’ “own” as they use them for their own purposes, include their own intentions in them (Bakhtin, 1981). Individuals cannot, however, invent new words to express their intentions. They have to use the same expressions that have been used countless times before (Volosinov, 1986). For instance, libraries are routinely defined as providers of education and recreation, even if at closer reflection people probably do not think that serious reading could not be entertaining, or that entertainment could not educate. It is as if the words called for quotation marks to be set around them. “Language’s own talk” is, however, supreme in its power compared to individual speakers’ views, since pre-existing conceptualizations and ways of classifying phenomena have to be used even by speakers whose conscious intention it is to oppose them (Hall, 1982). Individuals are not able to modify the resources of interpretation freely, since they are limited by the episteme of a specific cultural and historical phase. However, discourses, like individual subjects, are variable, conflicting, and continuously changing and developing.

## **VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY IN DISCOURSE ANALYTIC RESEARCH**

Alasuutari (1995) distinguishes between two different approaches in the analysis of qualitative interview data, the factist and specimen perspectives. In the factist approach, researchers want to find out about the actual behavior or attitudes of the participants. The analysis concentrates on the *contents* of interview answers, which reveal something about phenomena or processes occurring either in participants’ inner realities or in external reality. These phenomena or processes are the true object of study, and therefore the factist perspective makes a clear distinction between research

data and the reality it gives information about (Alasuutari, 1995, p. 54). If the object of study is information-seeking behavior, for instance, it is seen that observation or self-observation provide more direct and reliable research data than interviews. Interviews provide secondary, interpreted data, which can be influenced by the research situation and participants' ability to remember past information-seeking situations. In the factist perspective, the reliability of research results depends on how unbiased and accurate information the interview answers provide about the phenomenon studied.

The criteria of validity and reliability are very different in the specimen perspective. Interview answers are analyzed as linguistic expressions, not as facts about how users think or behave. Participants' expressions are examined from not only the point of view of their content and meaning, but also their implications and effects in constructing different versions of reality. The reliability of research results does not depend on the trustworthiness of participants' answers, since even a speaker who lies applies cultural forms and interpretative resources which, in themselves, are neither true or false, but simply exist (Silverman, 1985). In the specimen perspective, no research data are in themselves more authentic, unbiased, or accurate description of reality. All forms of talk and texts represent situated speech which provides evidence of the various ways in which a particular phenomenon can be approached. Research data do not describe reality, they are specimens of interpretative practices.

In the specimen perspective, the validity and reliability of research results do not depend on the empirical level, the nature of research materials, or on the nature of researcher-researched interactions. The reliability of findings depends on the verifiability of the researcher's interpretations. The interpretations must, in a consistent and identifiable way, be based on the research data. In discourse analysis, extracts from the texts studied have a different role in the research report than in the factist perspective. The texts are not descriptions of the object of research; they *are* the object of research. Text extracts are a necessary basis for the researcher's argumentation in the research report, and they also provide the linguistic evidence for the researcher's interpretations (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

In the factist perspective, research results are usually more generalizable when the quantity of data is large. In the specimen perspective, the question of generalizability is approached from a different direction: a key concept is possibility (Peräkylä, 1997). *Social practices that are possible*, that is, *possibilities of language use*, are the central objects of analysis. The possibility of a particular model of interpretation can be considered generalizable even when it cannot be shown how widely the model is used across different settings. Usually, there is no logical reason to doubt that a particular model of argumentation could not be used by any competent member of society. The research results are not generalizable as descriptions of how things are, but as how a phenomenon can be seen or interpreted.

The aim of discourse analysis is to produce interpretations which are intrinsically macrosociological. This does not mean the quantity of research data should be large. Even one interview may suffice to indicate what kinds of interpretations are possible. As discourse analysis is very labor-intensive, it makes sense to start with a thorough analysis of few interviews. The model of interpretative repertoires identified is then tested against a larger set of data. In this process, the model also gets more detailed

and rich, and the researcher's understanding of the starting points and statements behind different ways of talking increases.

In the factist approach, the reliability of research findings can be increased by methodological triangulation using multiple data-gathering methods (e.g, observation, interviews, and diary techniques). In the study of interpretative practices, the reliability and generalizability of research findings can be enhanced by combining different types of research materials, interviews, and written texts; and by *contextual* triangulation. According to Foucault (1972), one criterion for the existence of a "discourse" is that it is used in a variety of contexts and that it can be applied in the handling of a variety of themes. If the analysis of interviews can be extended by making explicit comparisons between different settings or contexts of discussion, the research does not comprise a case study with restricted generalizability.

In the study used as an example in this article, the interpretative repertoires found in users' library talk were compared to handbooks of music library activity and library professionals' writings. The themes and concepts that were disputed in professional discourse were also themes of discussion in users' talk. Next, library talk was compared to texts outlining broadcasting and radio politics, as well as official reports outlining governmental cultural policy. All these texts contained the same conflicting viewpoints (which were called the general education repertoire, the alternative repertoire, and the demand repertoire). In this way, it could be shown how the formation of the library institution, often viewed as a product of library professionals' action, depends on more general, historical knowledge formations.

### **DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AS A RESEARCH METHOD IN LIS**

This article has described a method of analyzing qualitative interview data in which the basic analytic unit is an interpretative repertoire, and which systematizes the discourses existing in a particular field or institutional context. Discourse analysis differs significantly from the hermeneutic and factist methods of reading qualitative interview data, because it is, in a way, indifferent towards individual speakers' intentions. However, the hermeneutic research approach which aims at capturing the speakers' authentic meanings can sometimes be quite univocal, dominated by the authorial voice of the researcher (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984). Discourse analysis focuses on the variability of interpretations, and brings out the starting points and background assumptions which are rarely voiced, but which are implicitly a part of a particular way of talking about things (Parker, 1992). It makes visible "ongoing conversations," important debates, and interpretative conflicts existing in the society, and the genuine ambivalence of many social questions and issues.

Looking at the constitution of discursive practices is a more practical research interest than what it may seem, because discourses mediate nearly all understandings of the world. It is not possible to produce meanings that are ultimately realized as practices otherwise than by the linguistic tools and conceptualizations provided by discourses. Discourses do not only express, for instance, the library institution's meanings, they, in fact, make it possible to produce meanings about the library. That is why the way in

which meanings are organized is also the way in which a particular organization is organized (Taylor & Van Every, 1993).

What, then, is the value of this research approach for LIS? Like all methodologies, discourse analysis is, to some extent, a research program of its own. It directs the researchers' attention to particular questions and phenomena. Most discourse analytic studies in LIS have, thus far, concentrated on the professional discourse of LIS (e.g., Budd & Raber, 1998; Frohmann, 1992; 1997; Radford & Radford, 1997; Tuominen, 1998). Frohmann (1994) emphasizes that studies of information users form a major component in LIS research, and therefore the single most important task for discourse analysts is to study the ways in which information, its users and uses, are constructed in LIS theories. While this is indeed an important area for research, this article has suggested that discourse analysts study interpretative practices in general. In order to study serious speech acts and institutionalized talk, the speakers of the study need not be institutionally-privileged speakers. For instance, information-seeking narratives, reading narratives, information society narratives, Internet narratives, and library narratives can be studied from a variety of texts. The combination of interviews and written texts, or texts representing different contexts of discussion, enhance the generalizability of research results.

Discourse analysis is, in a way, a traditional research approach, because it has a close relationship to rhetorics, which was the established form of critical analysis from the ancient world to the 18th century. Rhetorics examined the way in which texts are weaved together in order to achieve particular effects. No difference was made between talk and writing, or philosophy and fiction, as objects of study. All texts were analyzed in the same way as forms of social action, power, and public persuasion.

Similarly, the aim of discourse analysis is not only to identify interpretative repertoires, but to point out the power and influence of particular narratives, and to analyze their potential societal and institutional functions and effects. This is not to say that discourse analysts should argue that some discourses are inherently more truthful and valuable than others. The uses and effects of discourses are context-dependent. However, it is a central feature of discourses, knowledge formations, that they organize social reality at a large scale. The aim of discourse analysis is to make it possible for the readers to weigh the practical consequences of different discourses, and to show the problems and possibilities created by their existence (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

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