SPOKEN DISCOURSE

The study of people's talk is an important part of many social researchers' methodologies. This interpretation of spoken language is a rich source of evidence about people's lives. However, there is an argument to be made that research subjects' talk is not simply data, but also discourse; that is, a representation of the way that we think about ourselves and our societies, and especially our role within that society. Therefore, there is something to be gained by examining talk, group discussions and even spoken narratives as discourse, using the insights and techniques of discourse analysis. Such an approach does not necessarily require the researcher to undertake a highly technical linguistic analysis because he or she is examining the talk only insofar as they are relevant or that they affect the interpretation of data in ways that matter for any particular piece of research. Researchers would do well to keep in mind the words of Hutchby and Wooffitt, 'it is not the case that respondents are simply imparting information to a passive recipient' (1998, p. 201). Rather , 'talk is actively constructing the accounts they give for a certain kind of recipient in a particular situation' (Cameron 2001, p. 145).

Cameron (2001) goes on to provide guidance to researchers considering analysising spoken discourses. Firstly, he encourasges social researchers to consider that two of the main research encournters present in quantitative research – interviews and focus groups – are not just an encounter between two or more people. Rather, he urges us to consider that interviews and focus groups are a certain kind of speech event. He writes that this 'encounter takes place for a particular purpose among persons who are playing particular roles'. People conduct their behaviour according to certain more or less well-defined social conventions. Wolfson (1976) and Briggs (1986) have both explored what happens when one party does not understand the context. Briggs, in

particular, is critical of the way that many sociologists decontextualize the content from these research encounters through the analysis. Cameron suggests that there is a 'Tendency to treat informants talk as a container for information, paying attention to what is said in a stretch of transcript, but not how it is said or how it fits into the overall flow of the event.' (2001, p. 147).

It is also necessary to consider that participants in interviews and focus groups often want to give an account of themselves; that is, they want to present themselves in a certain way. Cameron urges researchers to pay attention to the way that informants try to manage the risk in designing the answers they give to those questions:

> The answers people produce to questions about their experiences, habits, affiliations, opinions and preferences are not just designed to convey relevant factual information, then, but also very often to address what the respondent rightly or wrongly believes to be thei ntentions and preconceptions behind the question. (2001, p. 148)

Further Reading:

Briggs, C. L. (1986). Learning how to ask: A sociolinguistic appraisal of the role of the interview in social science research (Vol. 1). Cambridge University Press.

Cameron, D. (2001), Working with spoken discourse in social research, in Working with spoken discourse, Sage, London, pp. 145-160.

Wolfson, N. (1976). Speech events and natural speech: Some implications for sociolinguistic methodology. Language in society, 5(2), 189-209.

TEXTUAL METHODOLOGIES

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