

Discourse Discourse, Ethnography and Essentialism

By Peter Armstrong

Emeritus Professor, Leicester University Management School

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Ethnography: Theory, Form and Practice

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Contact: p.armstrong@le.ac.uk

Abstract

The interpretation of ethnographic data in terms of the workings of discourse is now so commonplace as to occasion little comment, let alone a sense that the approach needs to be justified. Discourse-in-general is routinely claimed to be constitutive both of individual subjectivities and of features of the social world which were formerly theorized as structures. Discourse-in-particular is invoked as an antecedent condition of possibility of specific thinkables and, through that, of social action informed by these. Where they are justified at all, both forms of 'discourse discourse' (as I will call it) appeal not to supporting evidence but to the authority of prominent post-structuralist thinkers, notably Foucault and Laclau and Mouffe. The first section of the paper argues that both of these sources of validation are questionable as justification for a general thesis of discursive constitution.

A second section considers discourse discourse as an attempt to construct a sociology which is non-essentialist in the sense that it entails no assumptions concerning human nature. Whilst respecting the political concerns behind this endeavour it is argued that the political dangers of essentialism have been mis-stated. It is further argued that the apparent success of discourse discourse in avoiding essentialism rests on an intellectual conjuring-trick, specifically that of burying the essentialism in the process by which discourse is inscribed on a psychological 'blank slate'. A subject without characteristics which is simultaneously capable of constitution by discourse is a contradiction in terms. Human beings must have certain cognitive capacities in order to become users of language at all.

The investigation of these capacities and the manner in which they shape language itself is the province of the rapidly expanding field of cognitive linguistics. The paper concludes with an outline of three such capacities and sketches out their implications for the constitutive capacities of discourse.

Keywords: discourse, subjectivity, constitution, cognitive linguistics

Introduction

Discourse discourse, as I propose to use the term here, refers to a conversation amongst a certain set of university employees to the effect that other people's ideas are not their own. Specifically it is held that the objects of which these others speak are constituted in discourses external to the speakers and, in some versions, that the very selves of those speaking subjects are also discursively constituted. This paper is concerned with the application of these ideas to the interpretation of ethnographic data (e.g. Brown and Lewis, 2011, Thomas and Linstead, 2002). One reason for raising this question is that esoteric philosophically-based theories of this kind stand out as exceptions to Geertz' dictum that 'ethnographic theories hover low over the interpretations they govern' (1993: 25).

By lay standards, and by 'lay' I mean the 99 point something percent of the population who have not been inducted into the ways of advanced sociological thinking, these are outlandish, and even risible ideas as is exemplified in Malcolm Bradbury's satirical novel *Mensonge* (1987). For that reason alone one would expect their exponents to offer some evidence of their truth, or, failing that, some form of supporting argument. Note that I am not speaking here of the trivial observation that objects, events and ideas must be expressed in language in order to become the subjects of public discussion. In that sense discursive constitution needs no justification since it is tautological. By the same token, however, it is inconsequential, being entirely compatible with the view that language as such exerts no constitutive force whatsoever, either on the conceptualization of objects or on the subjects who do so.

Discursive constitution only becomes consequential when it refers to an extrapolation of the Whorfian view of language as a medium which shapes and places limits on human thought (Whorf, 1997). Where Whorf believed this to be true of *language*, discourse discourse extrapolates this notion to include a more specific shaping of thought by discourse, that is to say, by language as it is organized above the level of the sentence (Benveniste, 1971: 110ff.). Such a view certainly needs justification.

The most positive thing one can say of Whorfism is that it is controversial. If one is to believe Pinker (1974), it is dead in the water, its evidential basis having been comprehensively demolished. Probably the modal opinion amongst linguists is that particular languages favour the expression of some ideas over others, but that pretty well anything can be said in any natural language provided the speaker is capable of a certain degree of circumlocution (Trudgill, 1983). On the other extreme, neo Whorfian studies of language acquisition by infants are still being published. Concerning the extrapolation of Whorfism to include the shaping of thought by the superordinate organization of language into discourse, it is not even clear what kind of evidence would be required. How would one decide whether discourse is an expression of thought, thought of discourse or whether there is some sort of interaction between the two. The question does not seem to have troubled the exponents of discourse discourse.

Despite its progressive self-image it is a thesis which is profoundly unreflexive. Where reflexivity would entail an acknowledgement that discourse discourse is itself a discursive construct and an emanation of discursively constituted subjectivities into the bargain, the declarative sentences in which the doctrine is typically expounded imply that it is to be taken as fact. Thus presented, discourse discourse symptomises what Gouldner described as 'the human but elitist assumption that others believe out of need whereas [Sociologists] believe out of the dictates of logic and reason' (1970, p. 26)

Beneath the objectivist surface of its enunciation, however, there are signs of a tacit acknowledgement that discourse discourse is indeed a discourse external to its current expression. Where a scientific exposition might include some reference to evidence, that of discourse discourse is typically punctuated by citations to the effect that it is not original. Far from being considered a demerit, this admission, when it takes the form of a reference to an Important Thinker is held not only to validate what is said, but also to short circuit the endless regress which lurks within the doctrine of discursive constitution. For if A feels justified in believing something because it has previously been stated by B, how are we to account for B's belief unless by a still earlier statement by C, and so on. The category Important Thinker puts an end to this sequence of discursively constituted subjectivities by positing subjectivities which are not themselves discursively constituted, intellectual prime movers, so to speak, which possess agency within the sphere of discourse. Thus Howarth (2000: 9) announces his commitment to discourse discourse in the following terms: 'I will take the category of *discourse* to refer to historically specific systems of meaning which form the identities of subjects and objects (Foucault, 1972: 49)' [2002 in this paper].

In the following two sections I will query this intellectual provenance of discourse discourse by looking at what Foucault and Laclau and Mouffe (Howarth's second major authority) actually say about discursive constitution.

Foucault: Discursive Constitution in the Human Sciences.

Looking back at his own earlier chapters, Foucault (2002: 120) observes that 'discourse' is a term 'which I have used and abused in many different senses'. In fact it is not until his consideration of 'statements' (ibid: 119ff.) that he settles on a definition. There he explicitly states that 'discourse' - more accurately 'discursive formation' (ibid: 131) - is to be differentiated both from the linguist's broad sense of language-in-use (Benveniste, 1971: 110ff.) as well as from the philosophers' more specific sense of discussion centred on a particular topic. Instead it is to be understood in the much narrower sense of a group of *statements*, a term which is itself to be understood in a particular manner (Foucault, 2002:120) The statement, Foucault declares, is not a linguistic unit, but an 'enunciative function' which 'instead of giving a 'meaning' to these units ... relates them to a field of objects; instead of providing them with a subject, it opens up for them a number of subject positions.' (ibid: 119). This means that a discursive formation, as Foucault uses the term, is *defined* by its capacity to 'constitute' objects and subject positions when statements referring to them are uttered by the incumbents of those subject positions which are authorised by the discursive formation itself (ibid: 55).

These observations, and the care with which Foucault distinguishes between 'discursive formation' and wider notions of discourse cast doubt on the generalizability of what he has to say. With a few minor exceptions (e.g. ibid: 213-5), his empirical illustrations are drawn from what he calls 'the sciences of man [sic]' (ibid: 33), specifically psychopathology (ibid. p. 44 ff.), economics, medicine, grammar and the science of living beings (ibid: 71). These are quite particular forms of knowledge in that they are institutionally anchored in communities of practice which exhibit varying degrees of professional organization. All of them, for example, either possess, or aspire to, the custodianship of the knowledge in question and a monopoly of the right apply it in practice. It is only those discourses which are tied to a particular field of practice which might be said to incorporate 'theoretical choices' conditioned by 'the

function that the discourse under study must carry out *in a field of non-discursive practices.*' (ibid: 75, italics in original).

Moreover Foucault evidently sees his human sciences as hierarchically organized in some sense, since it is only of fields of knowledge so structured that one can reasonably ask 'Who, amongst the totality of speaking individuals, is accorded the right to use this sort of language (*langage*)?' (ibid: 55). Whilst there is a sense in which such professional knowledges can be said to constitute the human subjects and objects of which they speak, they do so in quite specific and limited ways. They construct the instruments of professional practice as embodiments of professional knowledge and as possessing the functional capacities appropriate to that professional practice. Concerning human subjects, they construct the professional practitioner as the possessor of an institutionally defined competence, and the subjects of professional practice in such a way as to justify that practice. In neither case - except that of total institutions, and sometimes not even then (Goffman, 1961) - do they construct the human subject as a totality. In the language of an older tradition in social science, what they define are *roles*, and these may be of greater or lesser salience as influences on the behaviour of the individuals concerned and of a different significance again to their 'self-identities'. Given these qualifications and concerning the discourses of the human sciences specifically, Foucault (2002: 54) can claim a degree of justification in speaking of discourses not just as 'groups of signs . . . but as practices which systematically form the objects of which they speak.'

However Foucault claims more than this. Stressing the 'provisional' and 'de facto' nature of his strategy of approaching the question of knowledge through the human sciences, Foucault argues at the outset that 'the analysis of discursive events is in no way restricted to such a field' (Foucault, 2002: 33). Towards the end of his book, Foucault repeats this claim, arguing that his analysis applies to knowledge in general (ibid: 215). This is questionable. It is questionable firstly because he simultaneously wishes to differentiate his Archaeology of Knowledge from the history of ideas (ibid: 151ff). It is questionable secondly because he provides no argument that forms of knowledge other than the human sciences exhibit the kinds of hierarchically organized institutional anchorage through these exert their constitutive effects. Nor, in contrast to his main thesis, does he offer any illustrative examples which might suggest that this is the case, his brief discussion of 'political knowledge' (ibid: 214) being entirely unconvincing in this respect. What *is* clear is that Foucault's discussion of the human sciences provides no basis for assumptions that discourse, in the broad sense of language-in-use, shares their constitutive powers, even given the qualifications already noted.

Finally there are questions concerning Foucault's *Archaeology* as a source text for the attribution of constitutive agency to discourse. Like speech act theory (Austin, 1962a, Searle, 1969), with which he draws the parallel at one point (Foucault, 2002: 120), Foucault attributes an agency to discourse which might just as well belong to the social machinery which it sets in motion. In his later discussions of the human sciences as power-knowledge, indeed, Foucault (1980) might be seen as reconsidering this balance of attribution, in which case the discontinuity which Howarth sees between the Archaeology and Power-Knowledge approaches might not be so marked at it first appears. Within the jurisdiction of the hierarchically organized semi-professions considered by Foucault, the fused concept of power-knowledge effectively captures this ambiguity of agency as between discourse and the practices which it

initiates. In other words it adumbrates the expanded notion of discourse which features prominently in the work of Laclau and Mouffe (2001). In the following section, however, I will argue that Laclau and Mouffe's extension of the concept into the wider field of public discourse is suspect.

Laclau and Mouffe – the 'expanded' concept of discourse

Laclau and Mouffe write: 'Every non-linguistic action also has a meaning and, therefore, we find within it the same entanglement of pragmatics and semantics that we find in the use of words. This leads us again to the conclusion that the distinction between linguistic and non-linguistic elements does not overlap with the distinction between 'meaningful' and 'not meaningful' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987, p. 82-3, see also 2001: 107). On that basis, Laclau and Mouffe proceed to use the word 'discourse' to encompass both linguistic and non-linguistic action.

This 'break with the discursive/extra-discursive opposition' as they call it (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, : 110) entails the rejection of a distinction between talk and action which is routinely made by all speakers of the English language, and made for what they take to be good reasons. Whilst the categorizations embedded in a natural language are not incorrigible of course, the fact that they are the product of what may be the ultimate in crowd-sourcing means that their elision is likely to entail unanticipated consequences. As Austin once put it, 'one can't abuse ordinary language without paying for it' (Austin 1962b: 2). Let us see how Laclau and Mouffe pay for it.

In fact their case for an expanded notion of discourse confuses two rather different arguments. The first is that action and its linguistic accompaniment are so intertwined that the two cannot be conceptually separated without doing violence to both. The second is that action needs to be included within the concept of discourse because it is meaningful in itself.

This entanglement of ideas is of some antiquity. This is Peter Winch writing in 1958: 'It is because the use of language is so intimately, so inseparably, bound up with the other, non-linguistic, activities which men [sic] perform, that it is possible to speak of their non-linguistic behaviour as expressing discursive ideas.' (Winch, 1970: 12). Since the persuasive arc of Winch's sentence is decisively shaped by the descriptors 'so intimately, so inseparably', this too needs to be unravelled. If it means that action is typically accompanied by words and words by action, the statement is unexceptionable, but the conclusion that action can 'express' a discursive idea does not follow. It can be claimed to enact one or operationalize it, but that is a rather different matter, since such claims are themselves speech acts, and as such may be contested. If, on the other hand intimacy and inseparability mean something like a necessary and complementary correspondence between action and words, it is patently false since there are a potentially infinite number of non-synonymous ways in which an action can be described.

Winch, as is well known, was an early adopter of Wittgenstein's ideas in the social sciences. Significantly, perhaps, it is also to Wittgenstein that Laclau and Mouffe appeal in support of their bundling together of language and practice within an expanded concept of discourse (2001: 108). In Wittgenstein's cameo, two men are building with variously shaped stones to which they have given particular names: 'block', 'pillar', 'slab' and 'beam'. One utters these words as a means of asking the other to pass the appropriately shaped stone. The men's 'language' and their activities, says Wittgenstein, cannot be

understood separately. Instead, they form an indissoluble totality which he calls a 'language-game'. To Laclau and Mouffe, this is a powerful argument for the interweaving of linguistic and non-linguistic meanings captured in their expanded notion of discourse,. In fact what Wittgenstein describes is a total institution in miniature, one in which there are only four kinds of object and one kind of action. 'Block' (for example) refers not just to a particularly shaped stone but to the action 'Pass me that kind of stone'. It cannot mean less because in Wittgenstein's cartoon, there is no other possible intention behind its utterance and no other possible response to it. It cannot mean more because his 'thin description' allows no more. The men build whatever it is they are building in a hermetically-sealed bubble of activity floating in a vacuum of non-existence. Such a scenario has affinities with the institutionally bounded knowledges discussed by Foucault (2002), albeit in extreme form. Words and action are locked together in a bounded semiosis in which the word means the action and the action enacts the meaning of the word, without shortfall and without remainder in either case.

Because it prejudices the issue in this manner, such an artificial scenario is irrelevant to the viability of a de-differentiation of linguistic and non-linguistic action as a means of understanding social behaviour. With the exception of proper nouns, the meaning of words as they exist in the language-at-large is not bound to particular contexts. This means that their use to refer to something in particular is a speech act (Searle, 1969), an assertion that the something in question falls into a particular category (Lakoff, 1990). In assuming away the gap between word and referent which is bridged by these speech acts, the expanded notion of discourse not only obscures the fact that reference is accomplishment of social actors, but - possibly more important - the fact that it is one which may be contested. This is a possibility of some importance to Laclau and Mouffe's politics of discourse since (for example) they lay great stress on the importance of contesting neo-liberal interpretations of the social order.

Concerning the idea that human action can be meaningful in and of itself, notice first the potential for confusion opened up by Laclau and Mouffe's use of the word 'meaning' to apply both to language and action. It is true that most human actions have meaning in the sense that they form part of a wider intention and also true that this intention may be inferred by observers with varying degrees of confidence. These, however, are different sense of meaning than that which applies to language. The meaning of sentence is not the same thing as the intention behind it, and nor is it coincident with the manner in which it is interpreted. Nor are most human actions signs in the sense that they refer to something other than themselves, and those which do so, are mostly natural rather than conventional signs (like a raised fist for aggression). The exceptions are sign languages and gestural conventions (like semaphore, or a pointed finger respectively). This means that the relationship between language and action is fundamentally asymmetrical. Language can refer to action but, with the exceptions of such artificial enclosures as Wittgenstein's building-site and such institutionally bounded settings as Foucault's régimes of truth, action cannot refer to language.

Whilst one can only applaud Laclau and Mouffe's recognition of the importance of non-linguistic action, neither of their arguments for a de-differentiation of the two within an expanded notion of discourse stand up to close examination. What makes sense within the institutional confines of Foucault's human sciences and insofar as their writ holds sway simply fails to allow for the openness of the relationships between words and action.

Laclau and Mouffe: Subject, Subject Position, Role

Laclau and Mouffe (2001) argue for the discursive constitution of human subjects in the following terms:

Whenever we use the category of 'subject' in this text, we will do so in the sense of 'subject positions' within a discursive structure. Subjects cannot, therefore, be the origins of social relations - not even in the limited sense of being endowed with powers that render an experience possible - as all 'experience' depends on precise discursive conditions of possibility (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 115).

Whilst defining the subject in this manner saves the logic of this statement, it does so by reducing its content to tautology. In order to see this, it is instructive to substitute an earlier terminology of role theory for 'subject' and 'subject position'. With this substitution, Laclau and Mouffe's second sentence reads, 'Roles cannot, therefore, be the origins of social relations – not even in the limited sense of being endowed with powers that render an experience possible . . .'. The redundancy of denying that roles - which *are* social relations - might be the origins of those same social relations and of the denial that they might also be capable of 'experience' - exposes the neo-Althusserian slippages of definition on which the argument depends. For both denials only make sense if the 'subjects' of the second sentence are not positions in a discursive structure at all, but real human beings. In this manner a thesis of discursive constitution of subjects is argued on grounds which properly apply only to subject positions. Roles are conflated with the performance of those role and the experience of occupying them.

This becomes even clearer when Laclau and Mouffe move on to the discuss the conditions under which relations of subordination can be transformed into sites of oppression. Subordination in itself, they tell us, does not equate to oppression because 'a system of differences which constructs each social identity as a *positivity* not only cannot be antagonistic, but would bring about the ideal conditions for the elimination of all antagonisms . . .' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: p. 54). From this it follows for Laclau and Mouffe that, 'there is no relation of oppression without the presence of a discursive 'exterior' from which the discourse of subordination can be interrupted.' (ibid. p. 154). The transformation here is not one of role or subject-position but a change in the way flesh-and-blood human beings perceive their own situation.

The conclusion to which this leads is that Laclau and Mouffe's decentering of the subject depends on a series of definitional substitutions and suppressed assumptions which auto-destruct on exposure.

Interim Conclusion

Neither Foucault's *Archeology of Knowledge* nor Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* constitute valid support for the broad thesis of discursive constitution, whether of social events and objects or of the subjectivity of the social actor. In Foucault's case this is firstly because the discourses which he considers – more accurately discursive formations – consist of statements which issue from authorized positions within those professions and quasi professions which claim the right to act on human beings and their behaviour. The constitutive effect of such statements on professional practitioners and on the objects of their practice simply cannot be generalized to discourse in the sense of language in use in the wider society. Secondly what are shown to be constituted in Foucault's *Archeology* are subject positions – roles – rather than subjectivities. Thirdly it is unclear in Foucault's

Archeology – and perhaps deliberately so - whether constitutive agency is attributed to the statement, to the workings of the social machinery which it sets in motion or to some combination of the two. The work therefore cannot support a thesis of specifically discursive constitution

Laclau and Mouffe's proposed expansion of the concept of discourse to include non linguistic practice attributes a semiosis to nonlinguistic action which does not exist outside of the limited regime of Foucault's human sciences and also fails to allow for almost infinite possible modes of articulation between words and action which exist in the wider society. Meanwhile their contention that social subjects are discursively constituted in this broader domain rests on nothing more than a definitional confusion. As in Foucault's archeology, it is subject positions which are shown to be discursively constituted, not the subjectivities of those who occupy them.

Essentialism: Sociology's Guilty Secret

A perennial embarrassment of sociology is its dependence on assumptions concerning human behaviour. This is so for a number of reasons. The first is that the claim of psychology to a particular competence in this area undermines any claim of sociology to disciplinary autonomy. A second is the implicit essentialism involved in any generalisation about the nature of human beings with all its attendant political implications. Embarrassments of this kind have led sociological theorists into a number of attempts to define their subject matter of sociology in a manner which avoids any intersection with psychology or - what amounts to the same thing - to conceive of the sociological subject in terms of specifically sociological concepts. In this respect the decentred subject of the linguistic turn, far from being a new departure, is heir to a tradition explicitly addressed to the creation of an autonomous sociology, a tradition which reaches back to Emile Durkheim via Talcott Parsons (1951). Whilst differing from discourse discourse in almost every other respect, the acting subjects of Parsons' structural functionalism were similarly decentred, being entirely formed through the norms and sanctions of the socialization process. In this respect Parsonian theory was roundly criticised as depending on an 'over-socialized' conceptualization of the human individual (Wrong 1966). Discourse discourse is surely vulnerable to the same criticism, with the additional charge that it hypostasises language not only as the repository and active agent of the socialization process but also as the medium through which it penetrates the very subjectivity of the social actor. It is true that certain discourse theorists, sensitive to the accusation of linguistic idealism (Geras, 1987) have sought to expand the notion of discourse to include non-linguistic practices (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987) but this 'extension', as well as being vulnerable to the criticisms advanced earlier, does no more than collapse the discursively constituted subject back into the wholly socialized individual of Parsonian theory.

There are problems with these attempts to avoid the psychological connection, one political and the other theoretical. The political problem is that the Lockean doctrine of the blank slate on which they depend seems just as politically charged as essentialism. Where essentialism implies an othering of whatever behaviour is considered to be unnatural, the doctrine of the blank slate implies an ethically neutral stance towards atrocity only provided its victims are taken to have been socialized (or discursively constituted) to regard their condition as normal or justified. This is the flaw at the heart of Laclau and Mouffe's project of emancipation: if subordination only becomes oppression in the presence of a discourse which defines it as such, what objection can there be to a social order in which the abused

have been persuaded to kiss the whip, so to speak? A possible way out of this dilemma is to reconsider the logic which damns essentialism as a principle on the grounds that some forms of it have legitimised cruelty and oppression. Perhaps this is not true of all forms of essentialism. Could the early Marxian idea of non-alienated labour or Habermas' ideal speech situation ever justify oppression? This might imply that the political arguments around essentialism need to be conducted on a case-by-case basis, and it could be that the very notion of emancipation is vacuous in the absence of some idea of what it is to be human.

The second objection is that the doctrine of the blank slate, whether in its Parsonian or discursive variant does not really emancipate sociology from psychology. What it does is rhetorically disappear the implicit psychology into the machinery of inscription. In the case of Parsonian functionalism, the suppressed question is that of the capabilities which human beings must have in order to respond to sanctions, to internalize norms and to recognise appropriate situations in which to apply them 'To follow a rule' as Taylor (1999) pointed out, is far from a straightforward matter, presuming as it does a degree of interpretative agency on the would-be conformist. That this is the case opens up the possibility that this capacity for agency might favour certain socializing influences over others or place limits on what can be socialized. The case is similar with the doctrine of discursive constitution, the suppressed question in this case being that of what human beings must be like in order to use language in general, and make sense through discourse in particular. By placing a no-entry sign labelled essentialism on this line of enquiry, discourse discourse promotes a kind of institutionalized incuriosity which creates the illusion of an autonomous social theory. Put simply, a discursively constituted subject which is entirely devoid of essential characteristics is a contradiction in terms. In this respect the metaphor of the blank slate may have implications unintended by John Locke. The possibility of inscribing a slate depends on a property of slate itself: that its abrasion with another piece of slate yields a white powder which contrasts with the parent material.

Within extant social theory, the major enquiry into what it means to be a user of language is Habermas' universal pragmatics (1995). Since this has been the subject of a vast secondary literature it cannot be discussed in any detail here. Suffice to say that its validity rests on the premise that language is essentially a form of communicative action in which the speaker registers various validity claims with the hearer. This linguistic essentialism translates into a tacit psychology of the lifeworld wherein human beings appear as well-intentioned explainers and debaters. Since the objections to this are well-known, I will do no more here than register the Habermasian precedent

I want instead to suggest that a second line of enquiry has been opened up by recent work in cognitive linguistics, a field which has seen the publication of a number of major readers in the last decade. The premise of this field of inquiry were announced thus by Eve Sweetser: 'much of the basic cognitive apparatus of humans is not dependent on language, and that humans therefore share a great deal of prelinguistic and extra linguistic experience which is likely to shape language rather than be shaped by it.' (Sweetser, 1991: 7. See also Lakoff, 1990: 58). From this starting point, cognitive linguistics asks precisely the question which is suppressed in discourse discourse: what must human beings be like in order to use language?

Language acquisition

The Lexical problem

To over-simplify for a moment, there are two aspects to the acquisition of language, the lexical and the grammatical. Concerning the first Chomsky observes that children learn, ‘about a word *an hour* from ages two to eight, with lexical items typically acquired on a single exposure, in highly ambiguous circumstances, but understood in delicate and extraordinary complexity that goes vastly beyond what is recorded in the most comprehensive dictionary’ (Chomsky, 1995: 15, italics added).

Let us provisionally suppose that the words in question are substantives, the common nouns, verbs and adjectives of a language. This over-simplifies the problem faced by the infant learner, but let us simplify further and take it that these words refer to categories rather than Wittgensteinian ‘families of resemblance’. On this last assumption, to know the meaning of a word is to know a rule which governs the applicability of the categories to which it refers. Since children learn most words in a context of use rather than through formal explication, one of the problems is that of making a provisional judgment of the category to which a word applies. If one thing in the world is a widget, wherein consist its widgethood and which other things in the world are also widgets? Are they things which look the same, are the same size, are made of the same stuff or give rise to the same adult reaction when one puts them in one’s mouth – and what does ‘the same’ mean here? The philosophical problem is that of the indeterminacy of reference (Quine, 1961). The practical problem is that the child has to make a provisional decision in spite of the logical indeterminacy. Pinker (2008: 167ff.) describes a number of experiments bearing on questions of this kind. What follows is an abbreviated and simplified account of just one of them

A number of two year old children were each shown a single object and told ‘This is my Tolver’. The reason for this form of words will appear presently. Some of the objects were solid, with a definite geometric shape. Others were amorphous blobs of gel. The children were then shown a number of other objects and asked to ‘Point to the Tolver’. Those who had been originally shown the solid object picked out others of the same shape irrespective of their colour or the material from which they were made. Those who had been shown the amorphous blobs picked out other blobs of the same substance irrespective of their actual shape, or even the number of blobs. Pinker interprets the result thus, ‘Names for solids with a noteworthy shape are taken to apply to objects of that kind; names for nonsolids with an arbitrary shape are taken to apply to substances of that kind . . . language [is] unnecessary for inculcating in children the distinction between objects and substances . . .’ (Pinker 2008: 170). Notice that there is no logically watertight distinction between ‘noteworthy’ and ‘arbitrary’ shapes and that between solids and globs of substance is not much more definable. Both are practical distinctions rooted in the toddlers’ extensive experience of hammering at hard objects and smearing spreadable substances. In this microcosm of the language acquisition process, the child (provisionally) forms discourse and not vice-versa.

Importantly, for the case being argued here, the experiences which form the child’s axes of distinction are extra-linguistic, possibly prelinguistic, and are reproduced in the language which is to be learnt. In other words, the child ‘knows’ some of the topography of the language in advance on the basis of its

experience of the physical world, and can use this knowledge to guide its learning of linguistic rules. In the case under discussion, the grammar of adult language differentiates between count-nouns (applicable to solid objects) and mass-nouns (applicable to amorphous blobs). The rule is that count nouns can be pluralized (ball → balls) whereas mass nouns cannot (plasticene → *plasticenes). The child does not construct this rule on a word-by-word basis. Rather it extrapolates from a few cases to apply the pluralisation rule to its experience-based distinction between objects and substances.

Language acquisition, evidently, is an active process. Though imitation is involved it cannot account for the child's production of sentences which they have never previously heard. Though behavioral reinforcement may be involved, children tend to persevere with their improvised grammars in the face of adult corrections. The evidence points to the conclusion that children 'form rules and construct a grammar' (Fromkin and Rodman, 1988: 375-379). In other words, there is a sense in which every child re-creates the language in the process of learning it. One of the features of language which makes this possible is that there exists a degree of correspondence between the categories of language and the categories of extra-linguistic cognition. Though the substantives of language are not, or need not be, natural kinds, they nevertheless extend in ways which correspond to the categories of extra-linguistic cognition (Lakoff, 1990). How much of this might be common to all humanity – and thus an essentialism - is very much an open question. Certainly it is not one to be legislated by the dogmatists either way.

The Grammatical problem

The lexicon, however, is only part of it. Guided only by the fragmentary and frequently flawed examples which they hear in adult speech, children from the age of two onwards begin to form sentences on their own account. Something of what this entails is captured in this quotation from a standard textbook: 'Before they can add 2 + 2, children are conjoining sentences, asking questions, selecting appropriate pronouns, negating sentences, forming relative clauses, and using the syntactic, phonological, morphological, and semantic rules of the grammar.' (Fromkin and Rodman, 1988: 367). The errors which children make in the course of learning these things suggest that they do so by 'form[ing] the simplest and most general rule they can from the language input they receive, and [are] so "pleased" with their "theory" that they use the rule whenever they can.' (Fromkin and Rodman, 1988: 367, Pinker 1994: 282).

The enormous disparity between the child's linguistic capabilities and the 'degenerate quality and narrowly limited extent of the available data' from which they are constructed (Chomsky 1965, quoted in Fromkin and Rodman, 1988: 382) has led Chomsky to posit that human beings possess an innate capacity for language – precisely the kind of essentialism which discourse discourse seeks to evade. In Chomsky's case this is hypothesized to take the form of certain underlying principles (a 'Universal Grammar') which are hard-wired into the human mind and are consequently common to all language. If this is true, it means that the language acquisition process is structured in advance, that children are pre-programmed, as it were, to examine samples of language for the parameters which define the application of the principles of universal grammar to particular languages (Pinker, 1994: 112). Though some progress has been made in identifying the principles in question, Chomsky's ideas are not universally accepted and the research program must be regarded as ongoing.

An alternative approach is to examine the cognitive capacities which are presupposed in the competent handling of language. Pinker's discussion of the 'causative alternation' is an example which seems to undermine some of key presuppositions of discourse, specifically that discourses possess the capacity to naturalize social constructs. He begins with the observation that there are many verbs of human action which can be used both transitively and intransitively. Thus:

The egg boiled

Bobbie boiled the egg

This 'causative alternation' involves a gestalt shift, the first sentence focusing on the boiling object and the second on the agent which performed the boiling. The ability to understand and use this transformation therefore depends on the capacity to perform the gestalt shift which it signifies. This ability appears to be present in quite young children and, in the following example from actual speech, appears to *precede* the acquisition of competence in the grammatical transformation through which it is expressed:

Don't giggle me!

'Mistakes' of this kind – and they are common in street coinages as well as in the speech of young children – signify cognitive operations which are not prefigured in language and, indeed, operate against its grain, so to speak. Since 'giggle' does not occur as a transitive verb in adult speech, it is likely that the child here is applying the alternation rule to a verb which has only been heard in its intransitive usage. This suggests, in turn, that the child is using a linguistic rule (over-extending it as it happens) in order to express a gestalt shift. It is unlikely to have learnt this capability through language, since the shift in perspective concerned is not ordinarily explained to young children and nor is the passive – active grammatical transformation through which it can be expressed. The conclusion is that the child's 'mistake' symptomizes a sophisticated capacity for reframing situations which originates in some extra-linguistic capacity. As far as discourse is concerned, the point is that any speaker of the language whose competence includes a mastery of the causative alternation is, by the same token, capable of subverting any discourse which uses intransitive forms as a means of naturalizing a given state of affairs.

Human Co-operative communication

Where the mainstream of cognitive linguistics conceptualizes the language learner-user as an individual confronting the phenomenal world, the work of Michael Tomasello and his associates focuses on language as a means of communication within co-operating groups. Tomasello's basic contentions are:

Conventional communication, as embodied in one or another human language, is possible only when participants already possess: (a) natural gestures and their shared intentionality infrastructure, and (b) skills of cultural learning and imitation for creating and passing along jointly understood communicative conventions and constructions.

Tomasello 2008: 12

Since proposition (b) is relatively uncontroversial, Tomasello and his co-workers have attempted to support proposition (a) with extensive empirical studies. In particular they have sought to demonstrate that the acquisition of language in the relatively natural setting of mother-child learning-games is based on two forms of natural signification – pointing and pantomime in a setting of shared intentionality. The shared intentionality is important in narrowing down the indeterminacy of the referents of these natural signs, and hence of the linguistic signs which accompany them. Its absence from individualized variants of cognitive linguistics may be an important theoretical lacuna inasmuch as this offers no explanation of the manner in which the child hazards a guess at the referent of a word.

Tomasello and Rakoczy (2003) argue that the capacity for shared intentionality is distinctively human, and thus an essentialism as the term is used here. In support of this contention, he and his associates have presented a number of studies of signification amongst the great apes. The broad conclusion of these studies is that although these point and pantomime just as do humans, these gestures cannot be shown to be anything more than purely expressive. The capacity for shared intentionality and common conceptual ground through which they might serve as the basis of language appears to be absent and instances of apparent co-operative behaviour amongst apes can all be accounted for by the pursuit of individual sub-goals.

Tomasello's explicitly essentialist conclusions do not rest solely on these data. He also points out that some of his contentions have been anticipated in the writings of philosophers of language, notably Grice's 'principle of co-operation' (1999) which is based on the observation that much ordinary conversation is simply unintelligible in the absence of strong assumptions about the speaker's intentions. The importance of shared conceptual ground is also implied by Wittgenstein's observation that the infant's possibility of breaking into the 'code' of language logically depends on some prior means of understanding the intentions behind it (Tomasello, 2008: 58). All of this suggests that the 'fusion of horizons' to which hermeneutics lays specific claim is actually fundamental to the human condition (Ricoeur, 1981) If this is so, it suggests that discourses which depend on the 'othering' of sections of humanity are always subject to the erosion of everyday discourse, being at odds with the fundamental co-operative basis of language as such .

Interim Conclusions

The findings reviewed in this section of the paper tend to undermine the claim of discourse discourse to provide a non-essentialist understanding of the human subject. For if language itself depends on prior capacities to hazard inductive generalizations, to perform gestalt shifts, or on shared intentionality, it is impossible that the capacity to apprehend discourse and to apply it to one's understanding of the world could depend on anything less. Nor can the perception of objects, events and situations be entirely an effect of discourse since the very possibility of comprehending the language in which it is couched depends on a variety of extra-linguistic comprehensions of the world. What has been said here of the implications of cognitive linguistics for the discursive turn in sociological theory is no more than a first-pass attempt. Unless it is to survive as a deliberately unknowing cult, the sociology of discourse will have to engage with this rapidly expanding body of work sooner or later. Whether and how it will emerge from this engagement is very much an open question.

Conclusions

A prevalent paradigm in contemporary interpretations of ethnographic data is that which depicts human subjectivity as discursively constituted. The warrant for such an approach depends not on the existence of evidence which might substantiate its core presuppositions, but on its antecedent enunciation by certain prominent post-structuralist thinkers, notably Michel Foucault, Ernesto Laclau and Chantalle Mouffe. This paper has queried the authenticity of these sources of validation.

Foucault's consideration of discourse in the context of the quasi-professions which he calls human sciences depends critically on the capacity of these sciences to monopolize both the knowledge to which they lay claim and the practice which is based upon it. These features do not generalize to knowledge as such and still less do they apply to discourse in the wider society. In Foucault's specific settings moreover, it is uncertain whether constitutive agency is to be attributed to the discourse or to the institutional machinery with which it is associated, an ambiguity self-consciously encapsulated in his concept of power-knowledge. What is constituted in these settings, moreover, are objects *insofar as* they are the objects of the human sciences and institutional subject positions rather than the subjectivities of those who occupy these positions.

This last observation also applies to the work of Laclau and Mouffe, with the difference that the distinction between subject and subject position which is (mostly) clear in Foucault is confused in Laclau and Mouffe. As a means of countering the charge of linguistic idealism, the latter authors also perpetuate Foucault's melding of discourse and practice in an 'expanded' concept of discourse. A tenable move in the Foucault's relatively enclosed systems of interlinked discourse and practice this cannot work in the wider society where the possible articulations between discourse and practice are virtually unlimited.

One of the advances claimed for the discourse-constitution paradigm is that it avoids essentialist conceptions of the human subject with all their attendant philosophical and ethical pitfalls. This paper argues that the ethical difficulties have been overstated and that dogmatic anti-essentialism entails ethical problems of its own. It also queries the success of discourse sociology in avoiding essentialism since the ability to comprehend discourse and use it to construe the world presupposes human essentialisms of its own.

The paper then pursues this line of thought, pointing out that the subject matter of cognitive linguistics is precisely the psychological preconditions of language acquisition and use. Three examples are presented as an indication of the possibilities. Firstly the acquisition of the substantive terms of a language depends on an ability, indeed a tendency, to induct hypotheses of general application from a few or single instances. Secondly, a mastery of the active-passive transformation depends on an ability to perform gestalt shifts in the perception of a situation. Thirdly, there are grounds for believing that the possibility of language itself depends on a specifically human capacity for shared intentionality. All of these indicate that there are conditions and limits on the extent to which discourse is capable of shaping human thought and self-concepts.

These are just examples from an expanding field of study. How the sociology of discourse will emerge from an engagement with it is an open question: one of those which make research an absorbing and worthwhile endeavour.

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