A Psychoanalytic Discursive Psychology: from consciousness to unconsciousness

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ABSTRACT This article presents the position for a Psychoanalytic Discursive Psychology. This position combines two elements: an action-theory of language, derived from Wittgenstein's later philosophy, and a revised Freudian concept of repression. According to Wittgenstein and most contemporary discursive psychologists, language is to be understood as action, rather than being assumed to be an outward expression of inner, unobservable cognitive processes. However, a critical approach demands more than an interactional analysis of language acts: it requires an analysis of ideology. Because what is left unsaid can be as ideologically important as what is said, there is a need to investigate socially reproduced unconsciousness. This means taking the notion of repression seriously. Whereas Freud imagined repression to be an inner psychic process, it can, by contrast, be seen an activity that is constituted within everyday language. In this respect, language is fundamentally both expressive and repressive. The social and psychological significance of a Psychoanalytic Discursive Psychology are discussed.

KEY WORDS: *discursive psychology, ideology, psychoanalytic theory, repression, unconscious*

Everyone can agree that, in principle, the study of language should be allied to psychological considerations. To treat language purely as an abstract system of signs is to ignore the very stuff of language: namely that people constantly speak in diverse ways for diverse purposes. Even if that much is easy to agree upon, nevertheless there is a conceptual problem. How do we connect the use of language to the lives and purposes of its users? Or, to put the question somewhat differently, what is the status of psychological concepts used to describe the mentality of individual language users?

This article recommends the use of two seemingly opposing psychological approaches: discursive psychology and psychoanalytic theory. Discursive psychology, as outlined in this issue by Antaki, Edwards and Potter, links language to action, reinterpreting traditional psychological concepts in terms of language-based activities. Psychoanalytic ideas stress the importance of what is unsaid and, thus, can be useful for examining the operations of ideology. However, a psychoanalytic discursive psychology cannot be achieved simply by combining the two approaches. Unconscious factors need to be understood, not as an inner psychic force as Freud envisaged, but in relation to the activity of repression that itself operates through language.

Action not experience

Philosophically the principles of discursive psychology can be derived from the later writings of Wittgenstein. In *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein (1967) argued against the assumption that inner processes of mind lie behind outward action and that these inner processes constitute psychology's proper objects of study. Psychologists might seek to study 'attitudes', 'beliefs', or 'memories'. They assume these are real psychological entities but they cannot be observed directly. This assumption marks much cognitive psychology, as well as cognitive linguistics.

Wittgenstein produced two arguments that are particularly relevant to any critique of cognitive psychology. First, he argued against the possibility of a private language. We have a range of psychological words that seem to refer to inner, psychological states – words such as 'belief', 'memory', etc. Because language is a shared public activity, there must be agreed, public criteria for the use of such words and, thus, they cannot be merely the labels for unobservable inner states. Wittgenstein's second argument was that words are always more than words. As he wrote, 'words are deeds' (1980: 46). If one examines what people are doing when they use psychological words, they are not merely or even principally labelling some private, inner state. They are engaging in complex interactional activity.

Discursive psychology takes this position seriously, examining what speakers are doing when they use psychological terminology (Antaki, 1994; Billig, 1991; Edwards, 1997; Edwards and Potter, 1993; Harré and Gillett, 1994; Potter, 1996; Potter and Wetherell, 1987). In doing this, discursive psychologists are not denying that people have inner experiences or thoughts. It is just that these are methodologically always just out of reach. Typically when psychologists claim to be studying inner experiences they are, in fact, examining further discourse that, properly speaking, should be analysed discursively (Edwards, 1997). As Henri Bergson (1946) argued, the conventional categories of psychologists are unsuitable vehicles for describing the fleeting, fragmentary and deeply personal qualities of inner experience: the skills of novelists or poets are better equipped for such a task.

Yet, under certain circumstances it is possible to claim that the processes of thinking can be directly observed. In the to-and-fro of conversation, people are engaged in the activity of thinking, as they formulate and react to novel utterances. Given the speed of conversation, it makes little sense to assume that the thinking is always happening silently internally just before words are uttered: the thinking is occurring noisily in the social activity of talk. Methodologically, therefore, thinking is outwardly observable.

Experience and social life: an example

The assumptions of discursive psychology have a direct bearing upon cognitive linguistics. Frequently cognitive linguists use cognitive concepts but they do so without detailed psychological analysis. They will presume that a cognitive state or process lies behind the use of a particular linguistic construction. Since, as linguists, they are more interested in the linguistic construction, they do tend not to say how the existence of the presumed underlying cognitive state might be determined.

Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) is an example. This was a genuinely innovative work whose insights have contributed greatly to a critical understanding of contemporary ideology. In discussing the nature of metaphors, Lakoff and Johnson continually used the concept of 'experience': 'The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another' (1980: 5). They assert that 'no metaphor can ever be comprehended or even adequately represented independently of its experiential basis' (p. 19).

In a general sense, such claims seem unexceptional for Lakoff and Johnson are arguing that dominant patterns of discourse affect the way people think about the world. However, Lakoff and Johnson write as if the concept of 'experience' is unproblematic. One might distinguish between a loose, even metaphorical, use of 'experience' and a more precise meaning as might be used by cognitive psychologists. The precise meaning would refer to a state of mind, whose distinguishing qualities can, in theory, be specified.

It seems implausible to expect metaphors to be linked to precisely defined inner experiences. That would imply that each time someone uses a metaphor, such as 'argument as warfare', they experience a particular inner state. When people claim to be 'attacking' an opponent's argument, they would be in an 'attacking-state-of-mind'. The problem, quite apart from the implausibility of the idea, is that there is no evidence for the existence of such an internal state of mind, apart from the use of the linguistic phrase. Wittgenstein's critique of psychologism suggests that it is better to dispense with the notion of such an inner state. In the case of Lakoff and Johnson's thesis, there is an additional reason for scepticism. They demonstrate how metaphors can become idiomatic expressions. When this occurs, the speakers and auditors cease to attend to the original metaphorical meaning, using the idiomatic phrase in a literal way (Glucksberg, 2001; Billig and Macmillan, in press). There are, therefore, good

grounds for supposing that the idiomatic clichés of argument-as-warfare do not systematically evoke internal war-images or states-of-mind as they are used in ordinary talk.

Lakoff and Johnson are using 'experience' in a general way, almost as a synonym for 'understand', rather than in a technical, psychological sense. They are suggesting that arguments are understood in the same terms that warfare is understood. Again, Wittgenstein's arguments are relevant for specifying what such 'understanding' means. What would count as evidence that arguments are understood as wars? It is not the existence of inner states of experience. It is that people talk about the two topics similarly, or that they regularly debate matters of contention in aggressive ways. Deborah Tannen (1999) advances such a view in her book *The Argument Culture*. Her evidence relates to outer behaviour, especially discursive habits. Thus, evidence for an ideological effect on 'experience' requires an examination of what Wittgenstein called 'forms of life'. In this context, the notion of 'experience' does not denote inner, unobservable experience but outward social activity.

Studying ideology

These criticisms of Lakoff and Johnson are technical arguments about the use of psychological concepts such as 'experience'. They are possibly of more interest to psychologists than linguists. Lakoff and Johnson's loose use of 'experience' could easily be removed, or at least clarified, while leaving the main body of their ideological analyses untouched. Certainly, the argument against their use of psychological concepts is not an argument against the critical discursive study of ideology.

However, it might be thought that the techniques of discursive psychology tend to direct attention away from the study of ideology. Discursive psychologists have profitably adapted conversation analysis to study turn-by-turn interaction. In doing so, they have been able to make telling criticisms against researchers who ignore the interactional nature of interview material (Edwards, 1997; Puchta and Potter, 2003). For such purposes the insights of conversation analysis have been crucial. However, classic conversation analysis has shown a reluctance to study wider patterns of ideology. In its classic forms, conversation analysis is committed to analysing the details of interaction from the perspectives of the participants, rather than imposing analytic categories on the participants' actions. Accordingly, a concern with ideology is seen as an analyst's concern, not a participant's concern and, thus, has little place in conversation analysis.

Schegloff (1997, 1999) claims that conversation analysis is a critical pursuit, but social critique is typically deferred. There always seems to be more data to analyse in order to see how participants 'orientate' to each other. The result is, according to critics, that conversation analysts do not get round to linking the details of the micro processes of social interaction with the broader movements of ideology (Billig, 1999b; Wetherell, 1998). To do so, requires the addition of

other theoretical and empirical elements that cannot be read from what classic conversation analysis describes as the 'orientations' of participants.

One reason why classic conversation analysis is limited as a means of studying ideology is that it focuses on what is said, rather than what is not said. Arguably a critical approach needs to uncover patterns of action and discourse that are habitually not occurring. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) emphasized, conventional metaphors by stressing what is similar between two topics tend to hide what is different. Ideological analysis can involve recovering hidden meanings, showing why beliefs about the 'natural' may not be quite so natural. This inevitably means going beyond what is said in interaction in order to examine significant absences. A critical analysis might aim to discover how shared patterns of action might be preventing other patterns from occurring. Power is typically reproduced within interaction without the participants explicitly discussing it. Indeed, when participants bring up the topic they are likely to be challenging patterns of power, rather than routinely reproducing them. If power is reproduced 'behind the backs' of social actors, then a critical analysis involves more than detailing patterns of social awareness: it should also seek to uncover patterns of unawareness or socially produced unconsciousness.

Reinterpreting the Freudian unconscious

To raise the notion of unconsciousness while advocating a sceptical position towards 'consciousness' would seem to be contradictory. The Freudian unconscious is typically conceived as a mental entity that is even more ghostly and hidden than consciousness. When the unconscious is linked to the study of discourse, the results can be vague in the extreme, as in the work of Lacan who employs an imprecise, often misleading psychology (Billig, 2005). Nevertheless, there are ways of reinterpreting Freudian ideas to make them compatible with a discursive position. The key lies in stressing the importance of repression as a discursive activity rather than the so-called 'unconscious' as a presumed entity (Billig, 1999a).

Freud distinguished between two forms of unconsciousness: the preconscious and the unconscious proper. Preconscious thoughts are those that could be consciously entertained but which at a particular moment happen not to be. When we are concentrating on one thing, we are not attending to others that might become the focus of attention at another moment. In conversation there is always too much occurring so that participants cannot attend to everything. Linguistically, any utterance contains extra meanings that users do not specifically 'orientate' to. Speakers, in seeking to direct their auditors' attention to a particular topic, must use words to point to that topic. If these pointing words themselves become the objects of focus, then they cannot achieve their function of pointing, for in pointing to the topic they are pointing away from themselves.

On a social level, it is possible to identity features of ideology that resemble the Freudian preconscious. Many aspects of what has been called 'banal

nationalism' operate in this way (Billig, 1995; Law, 2001; Higgins, 2004). Reminders of nationhood fill the lives of nationals living in established nation-states, but these reminders frequently constitute the ground, not the figures, of awareness. They are the unwaved flags, hanging outside public building or on filling station forecourts. Nationhood is reproduced by the deictic use of small words – such as 'we', 'here' and even 'the' – that are daily used in the media and are, as such, unnoticed for they are not the discursive focus of attention, as they 'point' to other topics. In this way, small deictic words can contribute to reproduce the nation-state as the 'natural' place in which ordinary life is enacted (Billig, 1995).

To use Freudian terminology, these words function preconsciously. There is no social pressure to stop them becoming the discursive objects of focus. The taken-for-granted, but unspecified, 'we', that underwrites so many daily utterances in the mass media, can become an elaborated 'we'. The unwaved flags, as it were, can be deliberately waved in moments of self-conscious nationalist activity. Indeed, the unnoticed reminders of nationhood make possible those moments of flag-waving, 'hot' nationalism in established nation-states.

Freud distinguished the 'preconscious' from the 'unconscious', whose characteristic feature is that a thought or desire had been repressed. The activity of repression, thus, creates what Freud loosely called 'the unconscious'. However, Freud never specified how by the individual learns to repress. It has been argued that the skills of repression are integrally related to the skills of dialogue (Billig, 1997, 1999a). It is only possible to sketch the outlines of the argument here. Language is repressive as well as expressive. In learning to speak appropriately or politely, the child learns what is inappropriate or rude. The pleasures of rudeness, then, are created as objects of desire. In order for social life to be routinely enacted, the temptations of rudeness must be habitually repressed. They must be regularly driven from awareness and, if challenged, will be discursively denied. However, denied temptation does not disappear but the existence of such desires can be seen, most importantly, in the continuing pleasures of humour (Billig, 2001, in press).

If language creates the necessity for repression, then it also provides the means of repression. In acquiring the skills of conversation, the child witnesses adults routinely changing topics of conversation, keeping matters within the social bounds of propriety. If inner thought is a dialogic process, modelled upon outer conversation, then the rhetorical skills of conversation permit the possibility of routine repression within the internal dialogue of thought. As the topic of internal dialogue drifts one way, so the thinker might habitually re-direct the topic in another safer direction. In this way, outward dialogic activity, not some mysterious and hidden cognitive process, provides the basis of repression, which too is primarily a discursive activity. If repression is to occur inwardly in the thoughts of the solitary thinker, it must primarily be an outward social activity. Moreover, the necessity for repression, too, originates in such social activity.

The consequence is that repression can be studied as activity that is habitually and socially practised. Analysts can note how speakers might routinely repress, or push aside, ideologically delicate topics from conversation (Billig, 1999a). The well-known defence mechanisms of psychoanalytic theory are patterns of discourse. All, according to Freudian theory, involve an element of denial; and denial characteristically is accomplished through language. Projection is a type of explanation by which the self attributes blame and criticism to others, while implausibly denying that blame and criticism attaches to itself. Patterns of projection can be ideologically shared. Such a pattern, for instance, appears in the so-called 'third person effect', whereby people claim that they are able to resist the persuasive messages of the media, while claiming that others are easily persuaded and misled (e.g. Billig, 1992; Duck and Mullin, 1995; Hoorens and Ruiter, 1996). This common pattern of attribution constitutes a defensive solution to a major ideological dilemma of mass society: people are dependent for their information about the social world upon media but they know from the media that the media are themselves not to be trusted (for ideological dilemmas, see Billig et al., 1988). The 'solution' is not merely personally defensive but it is part of an ideological pattern that constantly identifies others as 'inferior' and that reproduces conditions of insecurity, crisis and denial.

By such a discursive reinterpretation of Freud it is possible to resolve the apparent contradiction between translating internal cognitive processes into outward discursive activity, while still according importance to unconscious factors. The unconscious is to be understood in terms of the discursive activity of repressing. Accordingly, repression is not primarily a property of the individual personality. It is a fundamental feature by which orders of power and inequality are routinely reproduced.

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