

**A Guideline to Discourse Analysis:
With Personal Construct Psychology undertones. Second Edition.**

Dr. Robin Hill (2012)

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Much has been written about discourse and discourse analysis. It seems a useful approach to the analysis of verbal, textual data. It is a procedure for identifying and studying the underlying “voices” or “ways of speaking” in a text or conversation.

Discourse analysis has its roots in the role that language plays in shaping meaning and the sense that we make of the world. “Sense making” and “meaning making” are also central to Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) (see Hill 2012 for an entry level synopsis). Social Constructionists may refute a parallel with PCP, since the role of language and social interaction is central to their view of discourse and its analysis. PCP on the other hand is concerned with one’s personal sense making and way of viewing the world. Language and social interaction is not a necessary condition. However, PCP is detailed theoretically and the corollaries to the theory accommodate social constructionist ideas. In brief PCP acknowledges that much of our sense making does occur as a function of what we hear from others. We spend a great deal of time negotiating the ways our sense making is similar and yet different from that of others. Although PCP emphasises the personal individuality of our sense making it also acknowledges that groups, communities, cultures of people (discourses) share some sense making “constructs” in common.

Parker (1994) provided a step-wise procedure for carrying out Discourse Analysis. Steps 1 to 12 represent the process for analysis of a text. Steps 13 to 20 represent deeper analysis into discourse.

Discourse analysis should not be carried out alone but by several collaborating people. This is in acknowledgement of the reflexive and personally constructed nature of interpretation on the part of the analyst.

In this guideline I reproduce the steps suggested by Parker (1994). However, I have complemented these with some useful techniques out of PCP, which provide vehicles for carrying out some of the procedures that Parker suggests. These PCP techniques include *repertory test* and aspects of *self characterisation technique*.

Repertory test. In a nutshell repertory test is a process of listing objects of thought (known as “elements”), considering these in groups of three (triads), to discover some way in which two members of the triad are similar to one another yet on the same bi-polar dimension, different from the third. For example, take the three animals, tiger, cow and dog. It is not unusual for people to construe this triad on the bi-polar dimension (carnivore --- herbivore). Tiger and dog are similar as carnivores yet different from cow, which is herbivore. (See Hill, 2012).

Self-characterisation is a method of story analysis. It provides a series of “tricks” for identifying key messages within the story and for seeing alternative messages. Some of these are included, below.

The Steps.

Step 1

If not already in written form (eg. visual), then convert the text into written form.

- This therefore akin to a transcript.
 - *The example used by Parker. is a packet of children's toothpaste. It is described in words along with a transcript of the directions on the packet.*
 - *"Directions for use: Choose a children's brush and add a pea-sized amount of toothpaste To teach your child to clean teeth, stand behind, place your hand under the child's chin to tilt it back and see the mouth. Brush both sides of teeth as well as tops. Brush after breakfast and last thing at night. Supervise the brushing of teeth until age of eight. If your child is taking fluoride treatment, seek professional advice concerning daily intake. Contains 0.8% Sodium Monofluorophosphate."*

Step 2.

"Free Associate" to the text.

- Write down the first things that come to mind.
 - *What comes to mind when reading the transcript?*
- "Free Association" is a technique derived from Freudian psychoanalysis. Other theoretical orientations, including PCP, have devised other techniques for achieving the same outcomes. The following techniques from self characterisation might make a good start point.
 - *Take the first sentence in the transcript as if that is all that there was. What is the message from that one sentence taken alone.*
 - *Take the last sentence in the transcript as if that is all that there was. What is the message from that one sentence taken alone.*
 - *How are the two messages different? The first sentence gives instructions for use. The last sentence gives information about percentage of ingredients.*
 - *Divide the text into three parts: Beginning, middle and end. Carry out a Rep. Test. In what way are two of these parts similar and yet on the same dimension different from the third?*
 - *Possibly: "Makes assumptions about child ability and behaviour --- Makes assumptions about parental ability and behaviour"*

Step 3.

Systematically itemise "objects" that appear in the text.

- A useful rule is: Identify the nouns in the text. List each and write a brief descriptor after each.
 - *List the nouns in the toothpaste transcript. A subset include:*
 - *"The directions" (procedures for the application of the product)*
 - *"Advice" (mode of communication with medical professionals).*
 - *"Children" (Categories of being for whom the toothpaste is intended)*

Step 4.

Consider these now, to be the “objects of your study.”

- As such, in a PCP sense these become like the elements of rep test. But in discourse analysis these elements are “the ways of speaking” and hence they are discourses
 - *“Directions” are a different way of speaking compared to “advice.”*

Step 5.

Systematically itemise the “subjects” (the categories of people) who appear in the text.

- Some of the “subjects” will previously have been listed as “objects.”
- Apart from those specifically listed in your transcript there are always two categories of subject that may not be explicitly mentioned. They are the addressor (the “author” of the original text) and the addressee (the reader or audience). The “authors” are imaginary construals of the discourse.
 - *“Children” are an example of subjects also identified as objects.*
 - *The addressee or audience is the intended “buyer” of the toothpaste. In this case it is “buyer as parent.”*

Step 6.

Construct the rights and responsibilities of the most important subject in the set that describe the network of relationships that position this subject with others.

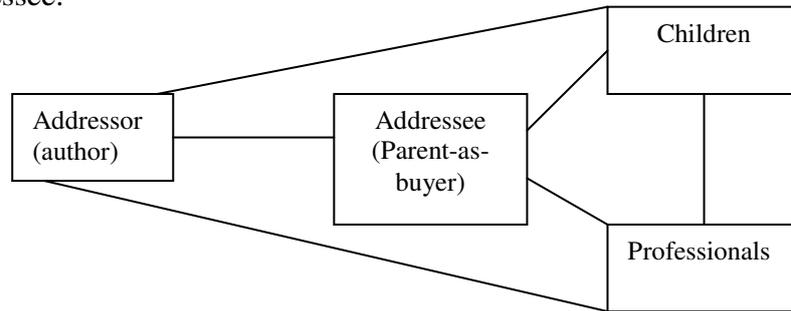
- For example if the main subjects were “teachers” construct a network of the rights, responsibilities and relationships with “pupils,” “parents.” Etc.
 - *In the example the main subject is “buyer as parent.” The text implies relationships with “children” and “dental professionals.”*

Step 7.

Map the different versions of the social world that co-exist in the text.

- In a way this suggests constructive alternativism and double loop thinking. Consider the inherent assumptions that the addressor makes about the addressee, then consider what the case would be if the world was different from those assumptions.
 - *In the example, the “buyers as parents” are considered in a rather nomothetic way. There is an assumption about the “average/normal buyer” as “average and respectable parent” and some sort of stereotype in that respect. It is assumed they are permanently in charge of the children, that they are rational, they have money and facilities to consult with dental professionals if need be.*
 - *But now imagine the case where this might not be so. Where the “buyer” is “buyer as older sibling,” or “buyer as hired housemaid.” Consider poorer communities where there is insufficient money to assume ready consultation with dental professionals. Consider the more ideographic possibilities of “buyer as unique individual.”*

- Another way to do this, might be to draw a “map” of linkages between subjects, then carry out triadic rep. test “in terms of assumptions the addressor makes about the addressee.



- Addressor/Addressee/Children: “Assumed to have the rationality of adults --- Assumed to have the immaturity/non-rationality of children.” (Rational --- Non-rational)
- Addressee/Children/Professionals: “Assumed to be persons who act upon others or for their good --- assumed to be the target objects of others who act upon them.” (Active benefactors --- Passive recipients).
- Consider the implications of a subject who breaks these assumptions and the aligned constructs of the addressee. The process becomes one of identifying the construct pole used by the addressor (author), then generate the contrast of that pole and reconsider the message in light of an addressee characterised by the contrast pole.

○ <u>Addressor assumptions</u>	-----	<u>Addressee contrast</u>
<i>The buyers are rational.</i>	-----	<i>The buyers are non-rational</i>
<u><i>Good parents</i></u>	-----	<u><i>Bad, dangerous parents</i></u>
<i>Buyers are active benefactors</i> -----		<i>Buyers are passive recipients</i>

Step 8.

Speculate upon the counter-argument of the addressor, and their treatment of addressees who objected to the addressor stance and who took the contrast stance.

- What defensive steps are likely to be applied?
- What letters to the editor would be written, and by whom? How would “society” respond.
 - *Imagine a parent who stated openly “I refuse to read or take any notice of your instructions, since you interfere with my right to raise my child as I see fit and not in accordance with what you say.” To what extent would the responses be” “Get real you moron!” or “Well be it on your head when your child gets sick from gum disease and dies!” “You’re anti-science deviant!”*

Step 9.

Identify contrasts between “ways of speaking.”

- A good way to do so would be the “Self Characterisation” technique of reading in normal voice, highlighting emphasised words. Then highlight

different words in the same sentence and re-read it in that voice. How does the message change?

- *“If your child is taking fluoride treatment, seek professional advice concerning daily intake.”*
- *“If your child is taking fluoride treatment, seek professional advice concerning daily intake.”*
- *Notice how the message changes from one of advice to one of command directed explicitly at a parent. A change from “advice” to “telling.” Notice too how emphasis of the word “your” reinforces the assumption of “buyer as parent” and their expected role as parent. In the former, this same phrase reinforces that the intended product user is children.*
- *In the example there can be found “instructional,” “supervisory” and “professional/expert” ways of speaking.*

Step 10.

Identify where these “ways of speaking” overlap (and also where they remain apart?)

- Identify the shared and unshared agenda of the different “voices.” One way to do so might be to Rep test the different voices for their similarities and differences.
 - *Instructional: Use the product this way and this often*
 - *Supervisory: Teach your children the technique and supervise teeth brushing every day until they are age 8.*
 - *Expert: Consult a dentist for advice if your child takes fluoride.*
 - *The first two overlap in terms of assuming a familial relationship between buyer and child-user compared to the latter assuming a professional relation between family and dentist.*

Step 11.

Consider other texts in the same domain and how the different ways of speaking address different audiences, or the same audience in different contexts.

- *Compare the text of this toothpaste box with those of other toothpaste boxes aimed at the same buyers. But do more than this and also...*
- *Compare how the same target audience are addressed in other communications & contexts – for example in communications from their MP soliciting their vote, newsletters from their child’s school.*

Step 12.

Choose appropriate terminology to label the emergent discourses that you have identified.

- Again a triadic rep test might help. In other cases the labels will be self evident.
 - *The example identified 4 discourses: “Rationalist,” “Familial,” “Educational” and “Medical.” 4 different voices showing through.*

At this point you have largely completed the analysis of the text in question. However this is just the beginning of considering it within the wider discursive context.

Step 13.

Engage in a study of where and when these discourses developed.

- *Where and when did the rationalist discourse develop?*

Step 14.

Describe how the discourses have operated to so naturalise the things they referred to that they have become “taken for granted” and that it appears perverse and nonsensical to question them.

- Identify the cultural “taken for grantedness.”
- What institutions do they champion and reinforce?
 - *They reinforce and champion the institutions of family and medicine.*

Step 15.

Examine the role of the discourses in reproducing and preserving these institutions.

- *How do the discourses preserve the accepted concept of **family** and **medical authority**.*

Step 16.

Examine which discourses subvert the above

- *Which other discourses subvert the accepted concept of **family**. Pacific island extended families? Cultures that use the leverite (care of boys carried out by a maternal uncle rather than biological father). Hippy communes. Those who send their children to boarding school as early as 4 or 5 years old?*
- *Which other discourses subvert **medical authority**. Homeopathic discourses. Divinity cultures. * Astrologers, palm-readers???*

**Divinity cultures are those where the shaman or “medecine man” uses processes of divination to forecast and diagnose and prescribe. Tarot card reading is closely related to some of these forms of divination.*

Step 17

Who would be advantaged, disadvantaged, supported and threatened by each of these alternative discourses.

- *Who would be supported by and who would be threatened by an emergence of popularity for divinity cultures? The medical profession, pharmaceutical companies and biological/chemical scientists would be threatened. Religious cults, marginalized cultures, tarot readers, astrologers etc. might be supported.*

Step 18

Who would choose to support and who would choose to discredit these alternative “ways of speaking.”

- *Who might choose to support divinity cultures? Some anthropologists. Freudian psychoanalysts. Eastern and African cultures.*
- *Who might choose to discredit divinity cultures? Western scientific community. Possibly Western Christian religions.*

Step 19.

How does each discourse entail other discourses that enjoy power.

- Entailment occurs when it is a true proposition that one condition is necessary for another. Where the reverse of the proposition is not true then it does not entail. For instance to be a runner it is also necessary to be energetic, hence entailment between the two. However if a person is energetic it does not necessarily follow that they will be a runner – it does not entail.
- In relation to the above, do these discourses necessarily align with or follow from other discourses that enjoy power?
 - *Among those who may support: Maybe...Academic institutions with strong reputations in arts, religions and social sciences. Academics, “intellectuals” and artisans.*
 - *Among those who may discredit: White anglo-saxon protestant cultures that champion the two-parent nuclear family, especially the physical sciences and economics branches. WASP scientists and industrialists.*

Step 20.

How do these reproduce or challenge mindsets as to what can change and what is possible for the future.

- *One set seems to promote change and alternatives perhaps by challenging young minds in universities to think via a broader base. The other look intent on preserving territorial and material advantages, quite possibly again, through educational institutions that promote rationality in sciences and economics.*

As a result, we see that a rather innocuous set of directions on the side of a packet of children’s toothpaste carries messages, voices, “ways of talking” and “ways of making sense of the world” that are not readily apparent at first glance – and which for most people don’t warrant a second glance. The discourses in operation provide that “taken for grantedness” that characterises a culture and distinguishes it from other cultures. However, deeper discursive analysis reveals (perhaps) that these seemingly innocuous directions (unintentionally upon the part of the author) serve to socialise and enculturate “citizens” and play their part in the preservation of those highly esteemed institutions within the culture. In particular in this case the preservation of the western concepts of family and medicine.

References.

- Hill, R.A. (2012). *Personal Constructs and Career Exploration*. Hamilton, NZ: ReConstrue; and Kindle Books ASIN B00878FLV0.
- Parker, I. Discourse Analysis (1994) In P. Banister, E. Burman, I. Parker, M. Taylor, and C. Tindall, (Eds) *Qualitative Methods in Psychology: A Research Guide*, Buckingham: Open University Press.