

TRANSITION BETWEEN STRUCTURALISM AND POSTSTRUCTURALISM

Source: Carol Grbich : 2003

Many of the above critics came from the structuralist tradition and have been responsible not only for initiating the move into poststructuralism, but also for the continuity and linking of this newer approach with that of structuralism.

As time passed, the overall focus shifted from the structures which generate meaning, to the process of documenting.

This was to show how the generative capacity provided by the framing and content of the texts themselves was displaced by the possibility of an endless deferral of meaning among various range of signifiers.

POSTSTRUCTURALISM

Two arenas of poststructuralism currently dominate the field: Foucault and 'discourse' and Derrida and 'deconstruction'.

Neither Foucault nor Derrida have provided precise instructions as to how the processes of analysing discourse or undertaking deconstruction might be carried out in research.

All they have done is to hint at some strong indications of the general principles and processes that could be followed.

Discourse

The notion of discourse comes primarily from Foucault, who was concerned with the ways in which knowledge had been created and sustained in cultures.

In particular, how had it been developed and maintained? And in creating the discourse, have powerful interests obscured other voices, protests or challenges put up by others with an interest in this piece of knowledge?

Discourses are 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak. ... Discourses are not about objects; they do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention' (Foucault, 1972).

Discourses whether they are spoken, written or visual representations, they characterize a topic or a cultural practice in an area.

They dictate meaning in the text and their analysis may indicate the individuals or groups whose views have dominated the scene at that time. Once a discourse has been established, Foucault suggests that it disperses throughout the society.

He uses the metaphor of the body to represent society in order to show discourses filtering through the body and the physiological processes at the end enable maintenance and reinforcement.

The binary opposites of structuralism, in particular 'good' and 'evil', serve to persuade the population that truth is singular and notions of 'confession' serve as a further micro-form of control and confirm.

Meaning and myth then become the products of power relations. Power is a key aspect of discourse.

Foucault, in his work, traces the development and institutionalized control of the population both physically and mentally through technologies of power.

The interlinking of sovereign power with dominant modes of disciplinary power is seen as being managed through the 'normalization' of particular discourses through surveillance and monitoring, and these are enforced by police, warders and the courts.

If we examine the structure and system of Panopticon, a model prison designed by Jeremy Bentham in the nineteenth century, that Foucault mentions to exemplify his concept, we will understand this power relation better.

Foucault used the Panopticon as a metaphor for the articulation of powerful discourses and the technologies of their maintenance in society.

The Panopticon is a circular structure with glass windows between each cell and a central watchtower and from each cell to the outside – to let light through.

The wardens can observe activity in each cell from the watch-tower, but the prisoners cannot get to know or even distinguish themselves when he is actually being observed.

Each cell becomes a stage and the performance is a public one for those under surveillance.

All this anticipated observation is said to produce self-monitoring – the most effective form of discipline maintenance and one for which, once established, minimal observation by ‘watchers’ is required.

Making sense of this complex process presents great level of difficulties. In *‘The Order of Things (1970)’*, Foucault has suggested that in constructing his discourse in the history of ‘truth’, he is avoiding the solid foundations of previously accepted discourses by endeavoring to de-centre information so that no central argument is constructed or privileged.

He expands this in the *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972) when he states about the discourse of truth that 'it does not set out to be a recollection of the original or a memory of the truth. On the contrary, its task is to make differences ... it is continually making differentiations, it is a diagnosis' (1972: 205–6).

The process of diagnosis is to get inside the text and to track the historical processes by which it has been constructed and produced.

History is that which transforms documents into monuments. In an area where history deciphers the traces left by men, it deploys a mass of elements that have to be grouped, made relevant, placed in relation to one another to form totalities' (Foucault, 1972: 7).

So, the whole process becomes like an archeological dig, a process of search amongst the traces that are left, and are now erased 'like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea' (Foucault, 1970: 387).

His argument is very profound and also to a great extent, he tries utilizing his best efforts to guard his ideas from all kinds of fallacies.

We must understand that he has a huge task to include the historical development of knowledge in his proposal, but he does not want to buy this knowledge at the face value, and thus tries to examine and evaluate it with the present line of thinking and make great use of it.

Foucault further indicates that: 'Archaeology tries to define not the thoughts, representations, images, themes that are concealed or revealed in discourses; but those discourses themselves and let them be there for evaluation and adaptation'.

In the archeological dig of discourse analysis the artifacts found comprise a set of statements which can transform and change over time with new knowledge.

Unity is unlikely to be a feature of any discourse and thus the task of the researcher is to discover the rules which define the discourse.

S/he is not to interpret it, but to identify the limits of disunity which hold groups of discursive statements in a particular pattern.

As with chaos, there will be patterns of order within disorder and disorder within order.

These interrelated structure will flow into one another, shifting and changing as a result of chance, and forces from within and without.

According to Foucault (1972), the basic element of discourse analysis is the *statement*.

Foucault's 'statement' is more than just a sentence, it must comprise the following aspects:

First, some identifiable person who is making the statement;

Second, the statement must be part of an arena where other statements can be found (e.g. a domain such as medicine or politics, which will have had an impact on delimiting, excluding, appropriating or controlling the discourse);

And finally, the statement must be meaningfully related (relevant) to the issues around which the discourse has developed.

Discursive regularities (objects, forms, concepts, statements and themes relating to a particular issue) are the aspects which constitute a discourse.

The conceptual organization of the discourse is made up of forms of succession (particular arguments), forms of co-existence (relations among all statements – accepted or excluded), and procedures of intervention (the rewriting and re-ordering of information into systems of ideas, usually by powerful individuals or groups).

These aspects occur within a particular historical and social context, which provides meaning.

Discourse analysis is a way of questioning in both social and scientific areas, ways of thinking, writing and speaking about particular topics.

This is in order to discover the rules, assumptions, and how and why these changes occurred. In short, how a discourse works and how it has developed is something that must be discussed.

Guidelines for discourse analysis

According to Foucault, two areas need to be addressed in undertaking a discourse analysis:

1. The outside looking in: This means that we must examine the historical development of a discourse over time, identify the social, economic and political reasons that helped its development.

Locating challenges and seeing what happened to these ?

And if they were rejected, how were they dispensed with? And by whom? For what purpose?

Please try relating these issues with the research goals that we have discussed.

2. The inside looking out: This is to identify constituents in terms of statements, themes, arguments, traces of challenges, traces of ideas which changed directions.

Seeking disunity and the limits to the discourse, monitoring dispersion and tracking discontinuity.

Lupton and Chapman (1995) have investigated the discourses on diet, cholesterol control and heart disease.

The historical context of the identified discourses was presented in the literature review and the data-base was formed by the collection of eight months of press clippings in national and regional newspapers.

This was followed by 12 semi-structured focus groups, which sought to understand how the general public was making sense of the conflicting information which the press constantly report.

The concept of risk and risky behavior underpinned the findings and the location of power resided in two competing locations – medicine and individual life experience.

In another study Julie Hepworth (1999) explored medical documentation from the late 19th century to expose five discourses in the medicalization of anorexia nervosa:

1. *femininity* (women as emotional and deviant psychological, mental and reproductive entities);
2. *medical* (the search for scientific organic causes);
3. *clinical* (the prescriptive treatment and the (moral) quality of relationships);
4. *discovery* (the link between medicine and psychiatry); and
5. *hysteria* (the link between femininity and the psycho-medical framework through the notion of hysteria).

The power of medicine in the maintenance of the enduring discourse of *femininity* (irrational female behavior) was exposed.

Deconstruction

One of the major aspects of poststructuralism, the notion of deconstruction of the text through the critique of its structural integrity, was introduced by Derrida in *Of Grammatology* (1976).

The word 'deconstruction' itself has been subject to different interpretations.

Derrida (1985) 'Letter to a Japanese friend' has tried to clarify the meaning that he conceived of the term in his work.

He explains the orientation of this term by utilizing several dictionary definitions: 'Deconstruction: action of deconstructing. ... Disarranging the construction of words in a sentence.

Of deconstruction, common way of saying construction. ... To disassemble the parts of a whole.... To deconstruct verse, rendering it, by the suppression of meter, similar to prose etc.' (Derrida, 1985: 1–5).

Thus, the deconstruction of text appears to be a positive and a negative process of change.

Although it has been argued by some that it is more a destructive process (Habermas, 1987: 161).

However, 'rather than destroying, it was also necessary to understand how an "ensemble" was constituted and to reconstruct it to this end' (Derrida, 1985: 1–5).

Deconstruction is less a method or stage-by-stage approach and more a natural un-raveling which the text invites by presenting this opportunity within its own structure.

The word 'deconstruction', like all words, is not a unity in itself but is also subject to deconstruction.

Its value is relative to the other words, sentences and concepts, against which it appears in context and to which it is linked.

Most systems constructed during the era of structuralism were seen as centered and self-referential and all meaning(s) referred back to this center.

According to Derrida 'the center is, paradoxically, within the structure and outside it' (1978b: 279), allowing 'the free play of its elements inside the total form' (1978b: 278–9).

Centered systems are usually created and maintained on the basis of binary oppositions.

For example 'God' and the 'Devil', 'Good' and 'Evil', etc., where one reflects a positive value and the other a negative value in society.

These central concepts provide meaning and the sense of something meaningful, which exists beyond the system of these constructs' (Derrida, 1976: xxi).

For Derrida, hierarchical oppositions cannot be absolutes as each contains a trace of the opposite term.

Derrida uses the binary opposition of 'presence' and 'absence' to clarify this and what he termed 'logo-centrism' – the privileging of speech (presence) over writing (absence of presence).

In Greek, *logos* means speech and presence connotes the power of the word as the foundation of knowledge (perhaps 'god'-given). This seems to exist in itself and linked to reason and truth.

The presence of a body and the act of speaking words have been seen as a more transparent thing (e.g. the speaker, the listener and the utterance are all present).

It is, therefore, a superior process and closer to producing true meaning and beyond the possible distortion of the process of writing which is supplementary to the knowledge (addition/substitution to speech involving derived and reconstructed representations of the original spoken thoughts).

However, to Derrida, these differences are an illusion because presence and absence cannot be separated easily.

Presence is only meaningful in the context of the notion of absence and because in each present there is a trace – a sign left by the absent thing.

The concept of '*différance*' (Derrida, 1972/1982) which has two aspects: difference (to differ, linked to identity) and deference (time and the constant deferral of meaning) served to break down the power of such oppositions.

Every sign is a signifier and every signifier is linked to other signifiers in a never-ending process.

The overall purpose of deconstruction is to erase the boundaries of these binary oppositions in order to illuminate the similarities and interdependency between each oppositional pair.

This is done by demonstrating in a way that each member of the pair is not a complete opposite,

That there are elements of one within the other (e.g. male and female), to show the dependency of the positive member of the pair on the negative member

And to demonstrate how the marginalization of the negative member has in fact centered it.

This exposure of societal values causes rigid boundaries to blur and collapse and the oppositions become meaningless.

Thus both deconstruction (boundary removal) and construction – putting into free play the relationships among signs and allowing new possibilities of meaning to emerge – have occurred.

Rather than developing new binary oppositions, conclusions become infinite with the constant referral/deferral of multiple interpretations of meaning.

Sometimes a 'hinge' (*la brisure* – an internal device such as double meaning, trace, statement) can break open the text and put *différance* into play (Derrida, 1976: 65).

Many meanings thread together to make up the discourses within any-one text.

With deconstruction, one thread leads to another and to another and slowly the text unravels.

Barthes has said that 'in the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered*; the structure can then be followed to "run" like the thread of a stocking' (Barthes, 1977b: 147).

Each sign carries traces of references to many other signs in an interconnected network of possibilities.

Language and meaning depend on '*différance*' (from other signs) and deferral of meanings.

Interpretations are thus inter-textual, differing among the author, the text and the viewer, as well as constantly shifting and subject to revision.

The viewer is empowered and both viewer and creator are part of the 'jubilant multiplicity of self-references' (Derrida, 1984: 174).

Closure or finite meanings are impossible. Fragmentation and pluralism dominate.

Deconstruction: indications of process

Derrida is quite clear that there is danger in formalizing a method of deconstruction and thus he says:

I would say that deconstruction loses nothing from admitting that it is impossible; ... For a deconstructive operation *possibility* would rather be a danger, the danger of becoming an available set of rule-governed procedures, methods, accessible practices. Deconstruction is inventive or it is nothing at all; it does not settle for methodological procedures, it opens up a passage-way, it marches ahead and marks a trail; its writing is not only performative, it produces rules – other conventions. ... Its *process* involves an affirmation, this latter being linked to the coming [*venir*] in event, advent, invention. (Derrida, 1992: 312–13)

Although the process of disentangling or unraveling appears fairly simple as a visual construct, when faced with a complex text, the actual process of locating a key thread could be fairly complex.

Rosenau (1992) has collated a number of principles from various sources and these have been expanded in an attempt to indicate some suggestions for guiding the procedure.

They can be listed in the following manner:

- allow the arguments of the text to challenge each other;
- identify any contradictions and inconsistencies (ideas, metaphors etc.)
- locate any generalizations and use these to undermine any principles used;
- place argument against argument;
- seek out and disentangle the complexities of all dichotomies, binary oppositions and hierarchies;
- try reading against the grain of the document to discover alternative readings;
- seek out links with other texts.

Afterwards, examine the margins and identify marginalized voices and concealed information, and at the end consider the following things in writing up the procedures to accomplish the act:

- write so as to allow as many interpretations as feasible;
- avoid making any absolute statements;
- stay close to the language of the text;
- cultivate ambiguity and ambivalence;
- remember that this is a transitional not a finite text that you are creating – it should resist closure.

(Adapted from Rosenau, 1992: 120–1)

Researchers who have attempted deconstruction have employed various approaches such as:

- placing texts against each other in order to trouble them,
- interrupting texts in an attempt to prevent them closing and avoiding other interpretations,
- and by creating another structure we tend to allow a freer play of language.

POSTSTRUCTURALISM: BASIC CONCEPTS

Let us sum up some of the ideas of poststructuralism in terms of various concepts:

Language: There is an acceptance that our major mode of communication is language but there is a rejection of the existence of deep structure or form and a recognition that the meanings signified by signs are conventions.

It is no longer accepted that the language system is stable and closed with signs that have clear meanings.

Instead, signifiers dance in an endless play of meaning with no relation to any integrated center.

There is no one all-encompassing explanatory concept such as 'god' or 'science' which can explain the genesis and operation of the universe.

Further, there is recognition that discourses exist and limits the way we think, read and write.

A process of naturalization has taken place, which has smoothen over the discourses, making them appear to be transparent and 'truthful'.

However, the privileging of certain discourses and texts will leave sufficient traces for a process of unraveling and exposure of formerly hidden aspects to emerge.

Truth There is considerable skepticism about this concept. Knowledge is viewed as unreliable if it comes from language alone.

History, and the discourses they have been a part of, influence meaning. There is no absolute truth beyond or beneath the text.

Reality is fragmented and diverse, and analysis has tended to highlight texts, language, history and contextualized cultural practices.

Meaning is fluid and it is focused either within the text or between and among texts.

All that we can know is textual and related to discourses. There is constant referral of meaning, the signifier/signified breaks down and everything becomes a signifier with never ending possibilities.

This allows many readings of the text to occur, thus emphasizing that the original writing may change meanings over readers, time and culture.

CRITICISMS OF POSTSTRUCTURALISM

Poststructuralism has been criticized regarding the complexities that it provides.

In particular in terms of its tendency towards nihilism –the deconstruction of the deconstructed text can lead very quickly to meaninglessness.

The emphasis on un-interpretability through the constant deferral of meaning also presents difficulties in terms of evaluation and policy decisions.

The process of de-centering the author doesn't take into account the fact that the author still composes the structure of the text, has selected the 'voices' and manipulated the direction of interpretation.

Although deconstruction could clarify this, but it, in deed, becomes a lengthy and painstaking process.

Is there so much difference between deconstruction and good critique?
(Donoghue, 1989: 37)

And the answer does not seem to be very convincing. A good critique in many ways include most if not all processes that of the 'deconstruction'.

The question that remains unanswered then is as to why should we altogether have a new theory!

Is deconstruction any more than an older desire of the author that s/he had for the appropriation of the text?

The answer is again 'No'!

At last, how will the contradictions between culture and science be explained without re-course to the language claims of structuralism?

The poststructuralists are criticized a lot for not accepting any distinction specific function of the science and culture.

The structuralism had put so much time and effort to make the scientific methods accept the social value for the creation of any knowledge system, but post-structuralism diminishes the distinction between these two elements and this was a great flaw into their approach to the whole issue.

That's all 😊