A Discourse Analysis Approach to Interview Data: The Guidance Tutor Role in Higher Education
Introduction

This example focuses on an approach to the analysis of data called discourse analysis. The approach taken here is to apply discourse analysis to interview transcripts. This example focuses on the role that language plays in constructing an understanding and depiction of a particular role: that of the guidance tutor in a Higher Education setting. This dataset is designed to be introductory in nature. The example follows four basic steps: reading transcripts, identifying themes, identifying the language that constructs those themes, and identifying commonalities in the use of language in relation to each theme.

The interview transcripts used in this exemplar were provided by Jamie Harding, a Senior Lecturer at Northumbria University. The research carried out was inductive and the objectives were to explore lecturers’ motivation in choosing their career, their experiences of teaching students and their views on reflective practice and change in higher education. This example focuses on one aspect of the lecturers’ role: that of guidance tutor.

Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis relies on a researcher reading a text in a particular way. In common with other qualitative analysis, it involves interpretation. The researcher must always acknowledge the possibility of alternative interpretations. Reflexivity
throughout the process of analysis is important when approaching a discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is a wide-ranging tool and can be applied to a range of forms of data including the written and spoken word, such as research interviews and newspapers articles (Bryman, 2008: 499). It is constructionist. This means that we will study how discourse constructs a particular depiction of the matter being discussed. Discourse analysis is defined by Muncie (2006: 74) as: ‘…designed to reveal how knowledges are organised, carried and reproduced in particular ways and through particular institutional practices’.

A detailed study of the difference between Discourse Analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis is beyond the scope of this dataset. However, it is important to be aware of the two terms. Discourse analysis that considers power or inequality – and how this is manifested and reproduced through discourse – is generally referred to as Critical Discourse Analysis. If it had been decided to demonstrate critical discourse analysis in this dataset, the interviews might have been analysed to determine whether the language used by lecturers to discuss students sought to maintain and reinforce their own position of power. Instead this example demonstrates how discourse analysis can be used to consider the role of language to construct descriptions, stories and accounts of the guidance tutor role (a role that involves the provision of pastoral support to students). In other words, this example will not question the motivations of the interviewee as would be standard in a Critical Discourse Analysis.

(See Woofitt, 2005 for more on the distinction between Critical Discourse Analysis and Discourse Analysis).

Data Exemplar

The interview data was collected in the Faculty of Social Sciences at a case study university by an interviewer, under the supervision of Jamie Harding, a Senior Lecturer at Northumbria. The full transcripts are available as downloadable data.
This example will focus on the following lecturers (the names are pseudonyms):

- Fern was a senior member of staff who had been employed continuously at the case study university for a substantial period of time.
- Susan was a lecturer who had experience of working for other universities before moving to the case study university.
- Rachel was also a lecturer who had experience from other universities; in addition she had worked outside higher education. She had recently moved to the case study university.
- Lewis had a management position within the Faculty of Social Sciences although he continued to teach and research. He had been employed at the case study university for a substantial period of time.

**Analysis: Discourse Analysis**

As with other forms of analysis, it is important to use the original transcript when conducting discourse analysis. However, beyond this, there is little practical guidance available as to how discourse analysis should be conducted. As Muncie (2006: 75) notes: ‘It is easier to trace the theoretical underpinnings of discourse analysis than to identify and describe the formal processes of actually carrying out such research. This is partly due to the often intuitive and reflexive nature of the skills involved.’

However, for the first time user of discourse analysis, it is helpful to visualise discourse analysis and to do this Jamie Harding has identified a series of simple steps. These steps first identify themes, before considering the language used to construct these themes:

1. Read the transcripts.
2. Identify themes in the data.
3. Identify the language that is used to construct each theme.
4. Identify commonalities in the use of language in relation to the construction of each theme.

Jamie will now talk through how he followed these steps to undertake a discourse analysis on the topic of the guidance tutor role.

---

**Step 1: Read the Transcripts**

The first task I undertook was to re-read the full transcripts. I was looking to identify the relevant sections where the interviewees discussed their role as guidance tutors. It is important to read the text closely, as interviewees may refer back to earlier issues, repeat or contradict their earlier position or develop on their original arguments. Full transcripts of the interviews are available in the Download Data section of this dataset.

**Step 2: Identify Themes in the Data**

The second step is to identify themes in the data. Although a new researcher can find guidelines for identifying themes, it may be helpful to remember that there is a creative, artistic, element to this process. Interpretation is important at this stage. Depending on the complexity of the topic or issue, this step of identifying themes may be a time-consuming task that requires a more pragmatic approach. A new researcher will want to consider summarising relevant information in data memos or looking for themes between interviews using comparison tables. As the data available in the transcripts on the guidance tutor role is not too onerous, I was able to easily identify the following thematic findings:

- A number of respondents indicated that guidance tutoring was a heavy **burden** when considered alongside the other tasks that they needed to undertake.
- However, several commented that guidance tutoring was a **rewarding** task,
which could facilitate more personal relationships with students.

- A number noted that guidance tutors needed to be aware of the appropriate **boundaries** to their role.

---

**Step 3: Identify the Language That Is Used to Construct Each Theme**

I will now show in detail how I carried out the distinctive third step of the process, identifying words and phrases by which these themes were constructed. I began by annotating the section of Lewis’ transcript relating to guidance tutoring, marking key words and phrases that I considered to construct the themes of burden, reward and boundaries:

I like guidance tutoring, I think it’s an important part of the job that we do. I think it’s difficult in this faculty because we have around **45 students**, [BURDEN] each member of staff, and that’s *too many*. [BURDEN] It’s too many for them to be able to make appointments and to see you, so some of the students do get to know you so, but it’s hard to make contact, and it’s too many to get to know people really well. So I know a small proportion of those students pretty well, and another proportion okay and some frankly I won’t see from one year end to the next. So I think it’s an important role, I’m committed to being a guidance tutor –I’ve been promoted but I don’t want not to be a guidance tutor; I think I should still be a guidance tutor. I like doing that, *I like helping people with their problems* [REWARDING] but I also think there’s a limit to what guidance tutors do and we can help and advise *about academic issues* [BOUNDARIES] and so on but we also have to be very clear that sometimes *that’s not our job* [BOUNDARIES]. If students have *real emotional problems* [BOUNDARIES] or something then we have to refer them on, and I’m not sure we always do because *it’s much easier to be sympathetic* [BOUNDARIES] and listen to a student but it might be *bad*...
This exercise was then repeated three other lecturers: Susan, Rachel, and Fern. Each of these transcripts were read and annotated for the themes of burden, boundaries and rewarding. I ended up with four annotated transcripts where the interviewees discussed these themes.

Step 4: Identify Commonalities in the Use of Language in Relation to the Construction of Each Theme

With discourse analysis we are interested in the language that is used to construct stories, descriptions and accounts. In this fourth step I explored the commonalities in the manner in which the perceptions of burden, reward and boundaries were constructed. To take first the example of burden, there were three main methods of construction:

1. Stating an approximate number of students that each member of staff was required to be a guidance tutor to. This method was used by Lewis who, as noted above, said: ‘we have around 45 students, each member of staff, and that’s too many.’ By reading the downloadable transcripts we can see that Susan made the same point with a slightly different figure: ‘The most difficult part of it is having nearly 50 guidance tutees – that’s phenomenal, managing that many is too many.’

2. Using words and phrases that did not involve a numerical estimate but still indicated very large quantities. Susan’s use of ‘phenomenal’ in the quote above is one example of this. Rachel exaggerated by saying that some students needed to be seen ‘hundreds of times’ and Fern, when asked how much guidance tutoring she had to do, said ‘gallons of it’.

3. Giving accounts that highlighted the difficulty of balancing guidance
tutoring responsibilities with other parts of the jobs. Susan constructed the idea of burden by describing a problematic scenario in which the need to support a student was in conflict with the need to prepare teaching: ‘I find that I move my other commitments to do outside of work so my work-life balance goes because you can’t tell your student “Oh I’ll see you at eight o’clock tonight”. So you see your student during the day, so the writing of lectures will get moved. I’ll do that at night to make sure that I can accommodate students during the day.’

So the use of discourse analysis demonstrated three methods by which the respondents sought to persuade the interviewer of the heavy burden that they faced in meeting their commitments to guidance tutoring alongside other elements of their work: using numbers, using words and phrases to indicate large quantities, and providing scenarios/anecdotes to demonstrate the difficulties of fitting guidance tutoring around other responsibilities. The storytelling element demonstrates again the particular focus of discourse analysis on the personal construction of the experience under study.

It may become clear at this point that discourse analysis, like other structural forms of narrative analysis, is unlikely to lead to practical recommendations. If such recommendations had been the required outcome, further thematic analysis could have examined questions such as what respondents found rewarding about guidance tutoring and how this element of the task could be developed further. Instead, the focus on the language used to construct the idea of burden meant that a contribution could be made to an understanding of the lecturers’ perspective without pointing to actions to bring about practical change.

Reflective Questions

1. Using the data available in the data download, identify the key words
and phrases used by Lewis, Rachel, Susan and Fern to construct
guidance tutoring as a task where appropriate boundaries are
required. You should then make a list of the common elements in
the language used by these four respondents and generalise where
possible the main methods of construction (use steps 3 and 4 to help
you)

2. Using the full transcripts available in the data download, follow through
steps 1–4 using the theme of guidance tutoring as a ‘rewarding’
experience. Try to identify the areas of the transcripts that led Jamie to
establish the theme; annotate the transcripts appropriately to identify
the key words and phrases; and make a list of the common elements
in the language used.

References

Press.

social research methods. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

and critical introduction. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.