

THE DISCOURSE OF MIND

A Social Constructionist Linguistics outlook

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Abstract: The present paper argues for the essential relationship of discourse with the human mind. Drawing upon recent critical approaches to psychology, the present paper outlines a first Social Constructionist Linguistics (SCL) account of mind--cognition, emotion, self and consciousness. It is argued that our thinking and feeling are discursive in nature because they are culturally constructed through, presumed in, mediated by, modelled upon, and born out of, discourse. In conclusion, socially relevant and helpful implications of a discursive conception of the inner experience are discussed.

Introduction

1. The way the present paper is intended to contribute to the New Relativity Session is, not through causal explanation or statistic correlation with respect to language, thought and culture, but through interpreting the human mind as itself a discursive phenomenon.
2. In particular I shall attempt to formulate a Social Constructionist Linguistics (SCL) account of human mind. Basically this means that I proceed from a broadly social constructionist understanding of language and reality and defend a version of the human inner experience as part of language use or discourse for short. Such discourse I term the discourse of mind (DM).

3. It is important to note here that the phenomenon that concerns me here has a different status than that of psychologists'. Namely, instead of presuming 'mental' phenomena 'behind/underlying' social conduct, I shall try to argue for a notion of mind as an integral component of discourse.
4. And yet, the present SCL style of approach to mind is, obviously, directed at cognitive (social) psychology. The present deliberation is an attempt to demystify the psychologisation of mind by highlighting the specific discursive, rhetorical, social-interactional qualities of the ontology of mind. Further, this discursive theory of mind should have relevance to other human and social disciplines as well, because, there, mind is usually not part of the theory but treated as independent entities.

Kinds of the discourse of mind

5. The notion of the human mind as having an independent existence has by and large characterised the whole of western psychological discourse, a notion that can be traced through Cartesianism to Platonism. In more recent years, however, Cultural Psychology (CP) has drawn our attention to the inter-penetration of culture and psychology. From a different perspective, Discursive Psychology (DP) has pointed to the inextricable bond of real-life circumstances with psychology and to the central role of discourse in constructing psychological experience. Because all of these intellectual trends as well as others form the important reference frames for my subsequent arguments I shall briefly outline them first.

Modern western psychology

6. Modern western psychology is characterised by individualisation in theory and, consequently, idealisation in practice. A caricature as it is, the fact that little has been offered in the way of human conduct in real life circumstances and much less in educational reform or socio-cultural conflict more specifically, as Wertsch rightly points out (1991: 1-5; see also Bruner 1976) says enough of these tendencies.

Within this tradition, the language-related approach proceeds from the assumption that language is a kind of window onto mind and therefore uses it as a means to understanding it. This is what has been called the mapping view (Edwards 1997). This is by the way the mainstream approach in western psychology.

Discursive Psychology

7. One of the major intellectual inputs for the present exercise is Discursive Psychology (e.g. Billig 1987; Potter & Wetherell 1987; Antaki 1988, 1994; Edwards & Potter 1992; Parker 1989, 1992; Harré & Gillett 1994; Shotter 1993). Because it is impossible to do justice to individual writers in a reference like this, I shall only mention a few characteristics of this general and complex trend.
8. Within DP there seem to be at least two broad kinds of social constructionist orientation. One type basically rejects the representationalist view of language and takes as its object(ive) of research the language in which mind is discursively constructed and used in the social context, deferring a prior theory of mind. Dissatisfied with the de-contextualised approach in mainstream psychology, DP advocates study of 'psychological' discourse in context, drawing on insights from ethnomethodology, conversation analysis and pragmatics. In this discourse-oriented alternative, detailed attention is paid to the ways that mental experience is constructed in ordinary discourse and to the social functions that such constructions fulfil. This approach, as opposed to orthodox psychology, represents not just a major progress in methodology because of its sensitivity to context, but also, more significantly, a re-orientation in analysis. That is, it breaks away from the traditional preoccupation with the mental world and embraces mind-in-discursive-action as the object(ive) of research such as may be found in conversation, speech acts, on so on. This also identifies an important area (viz. the discourse of and about thoughts and feelings), so far as language studies is concerned, because hardly any systematic account has been offered as yet.

9. The other kind of social constructionist orientation starts with an anti-Cartesian, semiotic theory of mind, i.e. mind envisaged as symbol use and discourse (e.g. cf. Vygotsky 1978, 1986; Bakhtin 1981; Vološinov 1986: Ch 3, 1987; Billig 1987; Harré & Gillett 1994; Wertsch 1991; Gergen 1994). In recent anthropology, similarly, mind is seen as existing in intentional objects (say abacus) and discursive practice (Gumperz & Levinson 1996; see also 'Cultural Psychology' below). There is nothing 'in our mind' other than symbolic discourse, i.e. discursive structures (e.g. concepts) and processes (e.g. argumentation) all of which are derived from social discourse. The mind(-discourse) can be both public and private and is accessible (e.g. as conduct) when required. Because no provisions are made for a distinction between the two in the theory, 'observable' public discourse becomes a suitable focus for analysis (see Billig 1987).

Cultural Psychology

10. Another different kind of major challenge to mainstream psychology has been the (re)turn to Cultural Psychology. This is a resurgence of the cultural understanding of psychology, which dates at least back to Humboldt, Boas, Sapir and Whorf. It is most forcefully formulated by such scholars as Shweder (1990), Wertsch (1991), Jahoda (1992), Cole (1996), Gumperz & Levinson (1991, 1996). The central argument is that on the one hand psychology does not exist in a cultural vacuum but is fashioned or penetrated by cultural elements and on the other the cultural world is itself an intentional one and infiltrated by human desires and designs. It has been claimed that the connection between culture and psychology is 'seamless' (Shweder 1990) and similarly that there is an externalized cognition partaking of physical objects, social interaction and language use (Gumperz & Levinson 1991: 614-5).

Social Constructionist-Linguistics: A theoretical preamble

Social Constructionism

11. SCL is 'social constructionist' in at least two senses: It contains as an important rationale a social constructionist critique of modern western linguistics on the one hand and offers an alternative social constructionist framework of language on the other. So here what is needed is to clarify the terms of 'social constructionism'.
12. Like many forms of social constructionism (SC), the present perspective can be traced to Berger and Luckmann's sociology of knowledge, i.e. our world is constructed out of social practices and arrangements. However, unlike other kinds of social constructionism each with its specific objects, the present framework is concerned with the social human world, as opposed to the material natural world (though the boundary is not clear-cut and may be subject to rhetorical maintenance, Gieryn 1995). It is a world of *being-meaningful and meaning-giving and meaning-making*. The rule governing this world is not 'the ultimate truth' but norms for speaking and writing or more generally action. This social human world is equivalent to what Sismondo (1993: 547) terms 'social projects, whereby such things as cities, economies, legislation and knowledge are constructed by many people interacting, possibly with differing or conflicting goals'. This world would also belong to what Parker (1992) categorizes as 'epistemological sphere'—things we give meaning to and talk about (cf. Burr 1995: 86). Thus the present form of social constructionism will have no quarrel with what Potter (1996) calls 'furniture/death argument' because it deals with arguments concerning other subject matter. With particular reference to the present concern, it may be added that emotion, cognition, self, consciousness, or indeed, the reality of mind, are constructed. (Shortly I shall argue that they are constructed out of discursive means.) From this perspective, thus, the ontology of psychology does not have a separate, independent mode of existence outside

discourse. When we deal with the discourse of mind, we are not studying merely 'rhetoric', shunning the issue of the reality of mind.

Social Constructionist Linguistics

13. To understand the theoretical rationale behind the present work and its implications for further research, it will be necessary to make explicit the general theoretical framework animating the current undertaking. This is what I call Social Constructionist Linguistics (SCL), an on-going research programme on human language which is being constructed for the particular purposes of studying sociological and psychological phenomena (cf. Shi-xu 1997: Chs 1 & 2). It deserves mention at this juncture that making explicit the present discourse theory will be necessary because DM would logically rest on a more general theory of discourse. The present work is also intended to contribute to a common frame of reference for scholarly work in this area more generally. This frame is inspired by many critical insights in the social and human sciences (e.g. Fairclough 1989, 1995; Van Dijk 1993; Tyler 1995; Harris 1981; Grace 1987; Gergen 1994: Ch 2; Shweder 1990; Cole 1996; Wertsch 1991; Gumperz & Levinson, 1991, 1996; Harré & Stearns 1995; Billig 1987; Parker 1992; Potter & Wetherell 1987; Edwards & Potter 1992; Antaki 1994, to name but a few). For lack of space, I shall only very briefly define and describe the concept of discourse.

14. In this framework of language, it is reasoned that the object of research should be (defined as) *primarily linguistic-symbolic activity in real-life context*, 'discourse' for short ('primarily' because there may be other simultaneous semiotic means like gesture and posture).

15. Discourse is viewed as having three major, inter-connected characteristics. Firstly, it is not a mirror or representation of reality. Rather, discourse is dynamic and creative with respect to 'reality': Discourse offers version(s) of reality, thereby imposing particular structures on it. The recent international news media, for instance, have portrayed the 'same' past history of Hong Kong in variable ways, e.g. as glorious

transformation from a fishing village into an international economic power and as infamous colonial oppression and exploitation and so on. Secondly, discourse is a product of the interplay between individual/group agency on the one hand and (a) linguistic, (b) social-interactional and (c) cultural elements and rules. Such interaction is manifested in three dimensions of discourse. Namely, (a) discourse is constituted out of linguistic resources--structures (e.g. words), processes (e.g. metaphor) and rules (e.g. grammar); (b) it is oriented towards the social Other, be it the second, third or generalised person (i.e. 'you', 's/he/they' or a potential interactant); and (c) it also reflects cultural ways of thinking and acting. It is important to emphasise here that all these linguistic, social-interactional and cultural structures and processes are emergent in nature in the sense that they are being drawn upon, maintained and re-created by individuals and groups in current situation and interaction. Thirdly, discourse is co-constitutive of our social-human reality, constitutive, that is, through concepts, categories and other meaning-making processes of our discourse. Discourse is not a form of linguistic activity that is merely ('descriptive') about the social and private worlds. Rather, discourse partakes or makes up the social-cultural experience (actions and events 'around' us) and the individual experience (thoughts and feelings 'inside' us). When greetings are uttered or pleasantries exchanged, for example, a certain social bond is established or maintained thereby; what specific content or form the discourse takes is only trivial if not irrelevant.

16. A number of characteristics of SCL may be noted here. It is based on a social constructionist, empirical de-construction of modern western linguistics (Shi-xu ftc.a). It emphasizes, not grammatical or other kinds of binary explanation (i.e. potential vs. actual or competence vs. performance), but *emergent interplay* of the individual with linguistic, social-interactional and cultural structures and processes. Hence meaning is not reducible to universals or systems of choices but created, maintained and transformed *jointly and step by step*. As a broad constitutive theory of language (i.e. a theory that is constitutive of both our social world *and* our individual world), SCL is designed for acting upon social and psychological life.

Discursive Co-Constitution of Mind

17. So far I have focused on the notion of discourse and only alluded to a discursive notion of mind. The central task that remains is to argue, in some empirical detail, why mind is discursive or why mind is co-constituted by discourse; 'co' is used here to indicate that discourse and mind make each other up. I find my arguments mainly in five loci: viz. mind as (A) cultural meanings of discourse; (B) maintained through discourse; (C) mediated by discourse; (D) modelled upon discourse and (E) originated in discourse. None of these individual arguments would be new. In particular, it should be mentioned that insights from Discursive Psychology and Cultural Psychology as well as other disciplines play a penetrating role in the deliberation to follow, as hinted at above. But my hope is to align the arguments in one place and to organise them in a way that reflects a distinct discourse-oriented, SCL tack and paves the way for discursive study of psychology (see last section). Some (elements) of the arguments below are interrelated and therefore may have to be repetitive for the sake of logic.

(A) Cultural meanings of discourse

18. A first reason why mind is discursive has to do with the fact that the very idea that there is a thing called mind and that it has certain properties is a meaning of discourse that differs from culture to culture. In many cultures people have a way to talk about mind. However, in the various cultural and historical contexts, the categories and concepts of mind in the particular relevant languages are different. This cultural diversity in discourse meanings about what constitutes mind attests to the discursive embedding or grounding of mind.

19. Western psychological theory does not have an equivalent in some eastern cultures. For instance, Danzinger (1997) reports that western 'motivation' would not constitute a coherent concept or topic in Indonesian psychological studies.

The emotion of 'anger' in a Philipino tribal culture is necessary for the conception of life (Rosaldo 1980). Modern western psychological notion 'cognition' can only be given an artificial translation like 'Ren-zhi', it does not have a counterpart in Chinese professional discourse or it would have different significance. The Chinese concepts 'Qin-Cao' or 'Xin-Suan' can only be awkwardly translated into say English. The Chinese classic thinker, Meng Zi ('Mencius'), also has very different notions of 'mind', 'will', 'propensities' and 'feelings' from western ones (cf. Richards 1932). This leads to my next point.

(B) Maintained through discourse

20. Mind is not just a meaningful concept and category of discourse that is culturally variable, but it is chiefly in and through the medium of discourse as our most characteristic and principal semiotic means that mind is presumed, practised and so preserved. This occurs in both public and private discourse, in both professional and popular discourse, in most known cultures.

21. Since its inception of more than two centuries ago, western scientific psychology for example has been inscribed in a Cartesian two-world discourse (as summarised in § 6). Vološinov's (1987) critical analysis reveals that the Freudian conscious and unconscious are both alike: They are nothing but discourse. Soyland (1994) argues that western psychology has often resorted to metaphors and presuppositions to retain its object of research. Everyday language, too, contains a good deal of taken-for-granted knowledge about the presence and function of mind, as in the discourse of novelists, politicians, lovers, players of games (Ryle 1949: 319-30; cf. Wittgenstein 1968; Heider 1958; see Edwards & Potter 1992 and Edwards 1997 for recent descriptions). Think of soliloquies, monologues or other uses of inner voice. We even *talk about* talk about mind: 'He/His speech sounds very emotional'.

(C) Mediated by discourse

22. . On account of the context and the way in which mind is formed and formulated, it should also be seen as discursive. There is nothing intrinsic to or inherent in mind that requires our discourse about it. It is our discourse that makes it present, significant and consequential for our lives. In this sense mind exists only in the mode of discourse. Because discourse has its own properties, however, it will impose them upon the mind that is the object of its 'description'. For this reason it may be asserted that mind is defined, shaped, infiltrated--mediated--by the characteristics of discourse. Consequently there is no to distinguish 'mind' from discourse (cf. Wertsch 1991: 12-3, following Vygotsky and Bakhtin; Vološinov 1986: Ch 3). A different expression but essentially the same idea is provided by Grace (1987: 10) when he describes the relationship between language and thinking, 'That it is impossible to draw a clear line between thinking, i.e. bringing a thought into being, and encoding the thought, i.e. putting it into words.'

23. Feelings and thoughts, be it in the scientific-psychological world or commonsensical context, are oriented and fashioned by the mediational means of discourse in a variety of ways. To live our social and individual life, for instance, we need to talk and write about our inner experience, e.g. to share emotions, to formulate causal understandings, to reproduce memory. As we share with others our inner experiences we are also concerned with our own image and our relation with others. Consequently expression of self is related to the social-Other. Furthermore, activities of socially representing our inner self are pragmatically motivated to persuade and influence others. These discursive requirements manifest themselves as integral characteristics of text and talk about mind (Shi-xu 1995).

(D) Modelled upon discourse

24. So far we have been looking at public discourse. But from the point of view of private discourse, we can arrive at the same conclusion. In the private mode of thinking and feeling, our mind is structured on the model of public discourse. It relies on semiotic, in particular linguistic, textual and discursive, material for their mode of

existence and functioning. It is the thesis of Vološinov (1986: Ch. 3) that the inner world is a symbol-using, semiotic, one and that the difference between outer and inner speech is merely quantitative (cf. Vygotsky 1987 and Bakhtin 1981). Similarly, it has been amply demonstrated that our thinking is organised to a certain extent around textual-discursive conventions, such as dialogue (Vološinov 1986: 38; Bakhtin 1981), argumentation (Billig 1987), explanation (Antaki 1988) and narrative (Bruner 1992).

25. Our private thoughts and feelings are formed, changed, planned, etc. in and through concepts, categories, metaphors and other meaning-making resources of discourse. For example, notions of time, as cultural products, often linguistically defined, guide our ways of thinking. 'At two o'clock I have an appointment with John; at two thirty I have another with Alison, followed by a fifteen minute interview with students.' Without the linguistic and sequential-textual frames of time, our thinking about such things would be blurred and our plans will be screwed up.

(E) Originated in discourse

26. Finally, from the perspective of the genesis of self, Other, consciousness, and other 'mental' objects and processes, we can also see that our inner psyche is discursive in nature. This can be argued from two planes. First, inner life is *social* in origin: The recent change of intellectual climate has already declared the impasse of individual knowledge. Second, thinking begins with and is derived from social *discourse* (Bakhtin 1981; Vygotsky 1978; Harré & Gillett 1994: 27) and our thinking is *for* speaking (Harré & Gillett 1994 following later Wettgeinstein; cf. Edwards 1997 for the notion of category).
27. I would like to use a personal experiment to illustrate this point. I often questioned my son, Sander, around two years old, when he picked up a non-toy object to play with, by saying, 'Is this a toy?' He'd reply, 'No'. (So I'd say, 'Then you don't play with it.

Give it to me.' And he'd comply without a problem.) So I assumed that he had formed the category such as 'toys'--until one day, it occurred to me to ask,

28. I: (Pointing to a toy car): Is this a toy?

29. Sander: No.

30. I: (Pointing to a doll) Is this a toy?

31. Sander: No.

32. This experiment shows that what Sander has accomplished is not so much of a mental category like 'toy' as opposed to 'non-toys' as a pattern of *discourse*: As soon as such a situation (question) arises, he'd respond that way in speech.

33. So finally, we are on a safer ground to define a discursive view of mind. (Incidentally, this step will not just be useful for guiding empirical psychological analysis, but it will be interesting to linguistics and discourse studies as well. For, in these disciplines 'mind' has usually been treated as a separate, often explanatory, category other than as a constituent part (for exceptions see Lemke 1997; cf. Gumperz & Levinson 1996). Thus, SCL defines mind in the following way: *that dimension of discourse through which the human private individual and collective interior---cognition, emotion, self, consciousness and the like--is co-constituted, i.e. formed and fashioned, hence DM*. I use the prefix 'co-' in the definition to imply the dialectic relation of mind to discourse, i.e. mind and discourse make up each other, and the indeterminate boundary between mind and discourse, though our emphasis is on discourse. It should be stressed here that DM is not merely talk and text *about* mind, but a constructive and constructed process *of* mind as well. It is understood as a particular meaning-making and meaningful process and dimension of discourse (cf. Mead 1977: esp. 153, 161, 195; Goffman 1959). So the present conception is not simply a shift of focus or interest (say from 'mind' to 'discourse'), but rather a re-constituting of mind--in terms of discourse theory, i.e. SCL. Thus, I agree with Harré and Stearns when they say (1995: 2), 'The psychological universe is a continuously modulating public and private discourse'. In this view, analytically, discourse,

specifically DM, rather than the 'internal', 'central information processing mechanism' 'behind' observable behaviour, is a legitimate object for psychological research. (Needless to say, discourse will therefore not be used as a means, as in experiments, to gain understanding of or access to 'mind' as 'true psychological reality' à la scientific psychology, in either its behaviourist or its cognitivist variation).

Goals for the study of the discourse of mind

34. The present argument has been put together with a view to being able to contribute to a socially relevant and helpful study of real human mind and life. So in conclusion let me say a few words to indicate how such an unabashed ambitious project might proceed. To begin with, we need to delimit and distinguish DM from the rest of discourse, at least in principle. In this connection, we need also to classify DM into different domains, for instance, professional vs. popular, perceptual vs. emotive. In this way analysts can identify an object of attention precisely. Next, we need to develop a theoretical understanding of the general nature and functioning of DM. This may concern, for example, how DM is organized in specific linguistic and textual forms (i.e. in specific languages), how it is interconnected with other forms of discourse (say the discourse of social relations), and how it affects individuals and social others. In this way, analysts can engage their object productively. Empirically, this means that we should study how 'mind' functions in social, cultural and, by extension, individual/private life. This will include where, how and why mind is constructed, for example (cf. Shi-xu ftc.b).

35. The more challenging part of the project is of course the question of how in practice it can contribute to good society and good life. As yet, we may claim that we have effectively identified discourse as the legitimate, proper site or object for psychological (and socio-cultural) studies. Because of the understanding of discourse as joint constructive process, analysts may become more sensitive to and

try to act positively upon the psychological experience that is the object of research. Because of the conception of DM as a dialectic and dynamic relationship between the 'discursive' and 'psychological', we can imagine that it will be possible to create, develop and transform individual and collective thinking and feeling through discourse. For example, we can try to identify and make transparent those instances of mind-constructive production and consumption that negatively affect people's lives and to come up with counter or alternative versions of individual and social experience.

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