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Discursive Practice

Specialization



Discursive practice addresses the processes by which cultural meanings are produced and understood. This approach offers a distinctive perspective on linguistic anthropology as well as cultural anthropology as a whole. It subsumes, but extends well beyond, the traditional field of linguistic anthropology and is central to contemporary cultural anthropology, especially its concern with ethnographic methods. The key objective of a discursive practice approach is to develop theories and techniques relevant to the analysis of meaningful behavior in actual situations. Discursively oriented anthropology emphasizes linguistic, semantic, and interactional aspects of culture as well as extralinguistic discourse modalities. It treats the full range of social forms and practices in terms of how they are discursively produced and understood.

The discursive practice approach is grounded in four insights concerning discourse. One is the affirmation that social realities are linguistically/discursively constructed. The second is the appreciation of the context-bound nature of discourse. The third is the idea of discourse as social action. The fourth is the understanding that meaning is negotiated in interaction, rather than being present once-and-for-all in our utterances.

The basis of a discursive practice approach is the insistence that discourse is action and not merely representation. The analyst must attend constantly to what is being accomplished through the discourse. So, for example, proverbs are treated not as general bits of cultural wisdom, but as resources available for use in certain situations. The object of study, then, is the proverb-as-uttered-in-context. The question is not merely "What do proverbs say?" but "How are proverbs used?", although there is a recognition that what they say is part of how they are used. As with proverbs, so with culture generally--culture is viewed as a resource that society's members have available to them, a way of creating meaning and accomplishing activities, not as a cause of members' actions or a good-for-all-purposes representation of the world. Cultural knowledge tends to be ambiguous, flexible, and negotiable.

A signature move in a discursive practice approach is to "bracket" such matters as mind, truth, reality, morality, and common sense (both the native's and our own), including common sense about culture itself.

Instead of focusing on how things "really" are or should be, we attend to how truth and morality are established, negotiated, maintained, and challenged in discourse. So, for example, the question of whether morality is absolute or culturally relative is put aside in favor of an analysis of how morality is invoked and negotiated in discourse.

In general, a discursively oriented anthropologist studies as topics of inquiry whatever participants use as resources, seeking to discover how social activities are organized and brought off.

The DP approach is consistent with standard anthropological practice in several ways:



1. Methodologically, it depends on observation (and, when possible, mechanical recording), rather than surveys, questionnaires, or experiments. It also reconsiders the usual ethnographic reliance on interviews of informants, concentrating on events in naturally occurring contexts. Conversations with informants remain a source of possible insight, but are not treated as a definitive source of knowledge concerning the topics discussed. Just as we can speak without knowing how to describe our grammar, so can someone be a competent member of a culture without knowing precisely how its social life is organized.

2. It treats common sense as a topic for analysis rather than a taken-for-granted analyst's resource. For the ethnographer, this is something of a necessity, since the native's common sense may not accord with the ethnographer's. The difference in a discursive practice approach, if any, is that the suspension of the ethnographer's common sense and the investigation of the native's is more conscious and thoroughgoing.

3. The discursive practice approach can be seen as a further development of "emic" anthropology, that is, ethnographic description in terms of native categories. The extension consists in the move from abstract and fixed cultural categories to actual, situated activity. The concern in both cases is with cultural members' categories and

concerns, rather than with the analyst's theoretical or ideological preoccupations. The attempt is to understand the member's world in its own terms. Rather than creating categories (which can then be entered into a quantitative analysis), the analyst of discursive practices observes what categories natives employ, how those categories are used, and how it is decided which items are members of which categories on specific occasions. Anthropology has focused on describing the system of categories that a culture uses to organize the world, but has largely neglected to show how those categories are actually used in social action and how items are assigned to categories.

The discursive practice approach, as we conceive it, includes the study of both code (culture) and use. Since discourse is constructive of social action and reality, the study of the social and linguistic constraints on discourse itself is central.

Anthropology has a tradition of interest in linguistic constraints on discourse and understanding at least since Boas and, more especially, Whorf. Other constraints on discourse are of a more structural and historical nature. These include asymmetrical access to cultural capital, the limits of technological resources within particular societies, as well as stylistic and conceptual conventions that limit the acceptability and apparent veracity of cultural practices.