

Foucauldian Discourse Analysis and Vietnamese Society Research

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ABSTRACT

Foucault is a famous philosopher with influential writings in many fields. One of his outstanding achievements should be mentioned is his discourse approach to research many issues in social sciences. In the scope of this article, we will briefly introduce the discourse concept, Foucauldian discourse analysis method (FDA) and make some suggestions to research Vietnamese society from the perspective of this approach.

Keywords: Foucauldian discourse analysis; Vietnamese social research; Foucault's approach; Foucault's method

1 Introduction

In the last few decades, discourse and discourse analysis have attracted the attention of many scholars around the world and there have been many large-scale research works. Up to the present time, the concept of discourse is still not uniformly understood in the research world. Hundreds of concepts of “discourse” have been proposed by many experts from many different fields. And of course, discourse analysis is also carried out in a variety of ways. However, the common point of all discourse analysis works is that the objects of analysis have potential meaning. These objects are usually expressed in three forms: text, talk and sign (semiotic). Discourse analysis is conducted by experts in the fields of humanities and social sciences such as linguistics, psychology, and a number of other social sciences. This is not to say that the natural sciences do not study discourse, as there have been works on discourse analysis in computer science (Watterson, 2019).

Discourse focuses mainly on text and talk, which are the main objects of study of linguistics. From the perspective of linguistics, discourse analysts mainly analyze the functioning of language. In the process of discourse analysis, linguists describe the language in use and determine the methods of making meaning of the text. At the same time, they also study the effects of discourse in the process of functioning on people's social life. Currently, there are quite many directions of discourse analysis that exist at the same time (中西, 2018). Each direction of discourse analysis in terms of linguistics poses different questions and different research purposes. The prominent directions of discourse analysis must be mentioned such as: discourse analysis (linguistics), critical discourse analysis, mediated discourse analysis, and multimodal discourse analysis.

Besides linguistics, other fields of humanities and social sciences also study discourse from different perspectives. In the fields of humanities and social sciences, psychology and sociology are prominently two branches with many well-known works in discourse analysis. Discourse research has produced many famous experts in the social sciences. Michel Foucault is a philosopher and psychologist known for his work on discourse his research has been applied in many different fields of social science. Many discourse researchers followed his theory and developed a theoretical system of discourse analysis, called Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (hereinafter referred to as FDA).



The social sciences and humanities have also made remarkable progress in Vietnam in recent decades. Along with the development of the world in discourse research and discourse analysis, Vietnamese social scientists have also begun to study discourse. However, up to now, there have been no large-scale studies on discourse and discourse analysis in the social sciences and humanities, excluding the linguistics field. Using FDA in humanities and social science research has also made outstanding contributions around the world. However, in Vietnam, it is still a relatively new field in the study of cultural, political, social and psychological issues relating to Vietnamese studies.

Because of such novelties in Vietnam, through this article, we would like to outline some basic features of FDA, as well as introduce some aspects of FDA approach which are often applied in a few areas of the social sciences. Specifically, psychology and sociology have proposed steps to conduct FDA. We are not ambitious to dissect the deep issues of FDA, but we hope that FDA will be more attractive and applied to do more research related to Vietnamese studies in Vietnamese social sciences through this simple article. Accordingly, this article will answer some of the following research questions:

- i. How does FDA define the concept of discourse?
- ii. What are the key concepts of FDA?
- iii. How many steps are there to do discourse analysis from a psychological perspective?
- iv. How many steps are there to practice discourse analysis from a sociological perspective which is usually used in many other social sciences?
- v. Brief illustration of discourse analysis relevant to the New Countryside Building Campaign in contemporary Vietnam.

After exploring the content related to the research questions, we also make a few small notices when conducting discourse analysis from a sociological perspective. These proposals are expected to be a recommendation to access to the FDA for researchers in social sciences, except for linguistics.

2 The Concept “Discourse”

2.1 Discourse in Foucault’s Elaboration

As mentioned above, the concept of discourse is significantly diverse. Foucault, in his research works, also did not write an official concept of discourse. Instead, his discourse concept is understood through “fragments”, which appear scattered in his studies.

In the first chapters of his book “The Archaeology of Knowledge”, the meaning of his usage of the term “discourse” is defined as follows: “discourse is constituted by a group of sequences of signs, in so far as they are statements, that is, in so far as they can be assigned particular modalities of existence” (Foucault, 1972, p. 107).

He then introduced another concept of discourse: “We shall call discourse a group of statements in so far as they belong to the same discursive formation” (Foucault, 1972, p.117).

From these two concepts of discourse, a number of features of discourse can be drawn from Foucault's point of view: (i) discourse is a set of statements expressed in written or spoken form; (ii) and the statements constituting the discourse have the same discursive formation. Thus, it is easy to see that the discourse according to Foucault has a rather broad content, made up of statements belonging to the same discursive formation.

And discursive formation means that: “Whenever one can describe, between a number of statements, such a system of dispersion, whenever, between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functioning, transformations), we will say, for the sake of convenience, that we are dealing with a discursive formation” (Foucault, 1972, p. 38). From this quoted paragraph, we can find out that the discourse is a set of statements which has the following four

common characteristics: refer to the same object; the same way of enunciation; a system of conceptualization is shared; subject or theories are similar (Jansen, 2008, p. 109).

In summary, discourse in Foucault's view is statements with the same discursive formation. From the assembled statements, we can conduct analysis and derive features of the discourse and be able to answer the research question. Hence, discourse analysis will be quite diverse in terms of methods of doing FDA because the research question may be different among researchers (Cheng, 2018, p. 26).

2.2 Archeology

In his studies related to discourse, Foucault gave a few important concepts to propose the research. These key concepts are considered powerful tools that can shape discourse studies in respect to FDA. Three four concepts written by Foucault are: archeology, genealogy, knowledge and power. The concepts of genealogy, knowledge and power are core concepts for Foucault to establish his research on power and discourse (Mills, 2006). These concepts were developed by later critical analysts such as Fairclough in critical discourse analysis. In the direction of sociological discourse analysis, we only introduce the concept of “archeology” to have an overview of Foucault's discursive approach.

In his research works, Foucault has attempted to distinguish between archeology and history. The reason for this attempt is that archeology is a historical study (Kendall & Wickham, 1998, p. 24). In the Archeology of Knowledge, he wrote a lot regarding this concept. He says that the analysis of the statement as it occurs in the archive is his main concern (1972, p.79). In addition, he shows that archaeology “describes discourses as practices specified in the element of the archive” (1972, p. 131), and the concept of the archive is understood as “the general system of the formation and transformation of statements” (1972, p. 130).

And archeological research is historical when he writes “the archaeological description of discourses is deployed in the dimension of a general history” (1972: 164). By approaching archeology, researchers could find out the networks of what is said, and what can be seen in a set of social arrangements.

2.3 No-inside & No-outside Define Foucault’s Discourse

In a study entitled “Using Foucault's Methods”, Kendall & Wickham (1998) discussed thoroughly Hunter's view of Foucault that: “Hunter develops this point by exploring Foucault's metaphor that discourse has no inside (in thought) and no outside (in things)” (p. 35). And it is easily inferred from that, discourse is not in people's thinking (thoughts), nor is it in the material world (things).

According to Foucault, there cannot be a thinking process before we use words or symbols to express our thinking. In other words, we cannot think without the language which is expressed in words or symbols. Therefore, discourse is not in people's thoughts, but it is expressions of human thoughts that are expressed outside the material world by language (wide meaning). This does not mean he asserts that discourse is a universalized thought. He just seeks the fragment of what we usually understand as “thinking”.

Similarly, discourse is not the physical world that exists around people. Discourse is not things. Things are not the references of discourse, but domain of reference of discourse. Foucault is attempting to break up reference into domains of reference, domains established by the operation of particular forms of calculation and types of statement that organize the diverse spaces in which particular types of objects can appear (Kendall & Wickham, 1998, p. 38)

2.4 Non-discursive

As mentioned above, discourse is a set of statements. That means there will be the existence of something in the material world that is not discourse, and is called “non-discursive”. Non-discursive is a philosophical and rather abstract concept. For example, when studying sex and sexuality, sex existed before discourse,

but when discourse was emerged, sexuality appeared. With regard to sex and sexuality, bodies are considered as non-discursive. Through this description we can see that the concept of non-discursive is used to refer to the existences in the material world that cannot be used to be discursive. This does not negate that non-discursive has no role in relation to discourse. According to Foucault, bodies do not exist and operate in a non-discursive vacuum. The word “body” is itself a discursive production, but more than this, the entity that is the body is under the sovereignty of discourse (Kendall & Wickham, 1998, p. 39).

3 Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

3.1 What is FDA?

Discourse analysis using Foucault's theoretical framework is not a rigid theoretical framework with clear criteria. Although many works on discourse analysis use his theories to do discourse analysis, even he himself has never declared to be a discourse analyst. Many scholars in various fields of the social sciences have developed his views for conducting discourse analysis. Some typical ways of applying his theory are: psychological direction (Willig, 2013; Dempsey, 2018), sociological (sociolinguistics) direction (typically Kendall & Wickham), critical discourse analysis (Van Dijk, Fairclough has followed Foucault), and the sociology of knowledge direction (Keller, 2006).

The sociology of knowledge approach to discourse (Wissenssoziologische Diskursanalyse) “addresses sociological interests, the analyzes of social relations and politics of knowledge as well as the discursive construction of reality as an empirical (“material”) process” (Keller, 2006). The critical approach studies discourse to seek power, thereby explaining social realities such as feminism, inequality, abuse of power, etc. Scholars in psychology use discourse analysis to try to explain the psychological phenomena of people or a community of people. In the sociological direction, discourse analysts argue that the FDA “is concerned with the way in which texts themselves have been constructed, ordered, and shaped in terms of their social and historical situatedness” (Cheek, 2008, p. 3, quoted from Cheng, 2018).

In the narrow scope of this article, we have only briefly introduced two discourse analysis methods: FDA in psychology by Willig, FDA in sociolinguistics by Kendall & Wickham. We would like only to introduce but not go into deeper research or comment regarding these two directions.

3.2 Doing FDA in Psychology

In his scientific work named “Introducing qualitative research in psychology”, Willig introduced the FDA, the basic concepts of FDA, and suggested steps for conducting FDA analysis in respect of psychology. As mentioned above about the diversity of the FDA, there are also many ways suggested on how to conduct discourse analysis in psychology. But Willig's suggestion is well known and broadly applied.

According to Willig, in order to proceed with FDA in the field of psychology, the following six steps need to be followed:

Stage 1: Discursive constructions. How to construct discursive objects is the first point of FDA. Our research question will request discursive objects. This first step is to answer the questions on how to identify the different ways to construct the discursive object in the text.

Stage 2: Discourses. By which sections of text discursive objects are constructed is the question that must be investigated. This step helps us to locate the various discursive constructions of the objects within many discourses.

Stage 3: Action orientation. The next step is examination of the discursive contexts. The doing of these steps helps us find out the contexts within which the different constructions of the object are being deployed.

Stage 4: Positionings. Subject positions are concerned in this step. A subject position within a discourse identifies 'a location for persons within the structure of rights and duties for those who use that repertoire' (Davies and Harré, 1999, p.35, quoted from Willig, 2013).

Stage 5: Practice. Investigate the practice to seek the relationship with the discourse. It helps us to explore the ways discursive constructions and the subject positions open up or close down opportunities for action.

Stage 6: Subjectivity. The relationship between discourse and subjectivity will be explored in this final stage. Also, the consequences of taking up various subject positions for the participants' subjective experience will be found out in this stage.

3.3 Doing FDA in Sociolinguistic (from Perspective of Sociology)

In the field of sociology and sociolinguistics, there are also many scholars who study discourse and discourse analysis, such as Hajer (2006). He also provides steps for conducting discourse analysis. But using Foucault's theory in discourse analysis, it is necessary to mention two authors Kendall & Wickham (1998) with an outstanding work entitled "Using Foucault's Methods". In this study, Kendall & Wickham proposed five steps to conduct discourse analysis, including:

Step 1: The recognition of a discourse as a corpus of 'statements' whose organization is regular and systematic. Identifying statements is a prerequisite in terms of FDA. And these statements must satisfy the condition that it is regular and systematic. In short, these statements involve "things" as well as "words". "Words" and "things" are the result of the operation of discourse.

Step 2: The identification of rules of the production of statements. Foucault urges us not to focus on studying what happens in the human mind. Instead, we should focus on the more practical issues, which are the principles that govern the birth of the statements that make up discourse, and the principles that produce statements which are reality of reference from thinking. This process is subject less which means that there is no human being's intervention or action on these rules.

Step 3: The identification of rules that delimit the sayable (which of course are never rules of closure). From the analysis of the aggregated statements, the analyst needs to determine the rules that limit the sayable. This means, it is vital to look for the rules that mark the boundary of what can be said. In other words, it is the elements that draw the border in which people can speak.

Step 4: The identification of rules that create the spaces in which new statements can be made. It is necessary to draw a rule that restricts what can be said in step 3, and then in step 4, the analyst must focus on principles to determine the broad space that opens up for new statements. In short, step 3 focuses on the production of statements whereas step 4 focuses on the innovation and novelty of statements. In this step, the analyst will have to determine how open the discourse is to produce new statements.

Step 5: The identification of rules that ensure that a practice is material and discursive at the same time. The non-discursive concept presented above will help explain this step. On doing discourse analysis, the analyst must identify the principles that ensure the objects of analysis are practical and discursive. This step helps us stop ourselves from searching for "deeper" reality behind or beneath discourses.

We can see that discourse analysis helps us to look for answers to a particular problem related to social phenomena by examining the object of analysis - text, talk, or symbol. But from the FDA's point of view, it's abstract to find responses the research questions. According to Van Dijk, discourse analysis is a scientific discipline, although it is only a qualitative research method from the point of view of many experts in many different branches. Due to a research method, some steps are required to follow when doing analysis. It is also significant to note that FDA application will vary widely inasmuch as the original research question is diverse.

4 Suggestions on Application of FDA to Research Vietnamese Society

4.1 An Illustration of the Application of FDA to Vietnam's New Countryside Building

As mentioned above, we would like just to introduce discourse and discourse analysis in some disciplines of social science so that researchers of Vietnamese study can access and apply it to their research. Therefore, we think that it is necessary to do a brief of FDA in investigating some issues of Vietnamese society. The object we shall use for analysis is “New Countryside Building” of Vietnam in recent years. And of course, we'll use the steps Kendall & Wickham suggested so that some suggestions related to applying FDA in sociology will be made. The discourse used as the corpus is the National Criteria for New Countryside Building for the 2016-2020 periods, issued together with Decision No. 1980/QĐ-TTg of the Prime Minister of Vietnam. Investigating the discourse, we hope to solve the question of how this set of national criteria (hereinafter referred to as Criteria) has affected on Vietnamese rural in the period of 2016-2020.

This set of criteria was issued in 2016, used to guide local communes in the process of building new rural areas. First of all, it must be asserted that the Criteria are a set of regular and systematic statements (Step 1). Statements are produced from the “thinking” process of members of the Government and it is closely related to “things” and “words”. The Criteria has proposed 19 separate criteria with exact numbers in the process of building new rural areas in the locality. Statements are produced by decisions of public authorities (Step 2). The Criteria has limited the sayable, which are the Criteria for building new countryside in Vietnam (Step 3). The discourse is limited to the sayable by 19 criteria of building a new countryside but still creates an open space for the “newness” of building a new countryside beyond the criteria established in the discourse. At the same time, space for innovation is not limited to these 19 criteria, but localities can build content outside of the criteria (Step 4). The statements in the Criteria are the foundation of legality and knowledge for building new countryside in Vietnam. This discourse has made the practice of building new countryside in Vietnam material and discursive (Step 5). And of course, when analyzing more specifically, it is necessary to have specific proofs and data for each Step. But because of the limitation of the article, we simply list the steps in approaching the discourse from the perspective of FDA.

4.2 Some Hints for Vietnamese Social Research

Discourse is included in text, talk, and sign. They are considered as social actions that exist in our material world. Discourse is also an object for the research and discourse analysis can yield qualitative scientific results in the social sciences. We have introduced two methods of conducting discourse analysis according to Foucault and also illustrated discourse analysis related to new rural construction in Vietnam. On that basis, we would like to give some hints to be able to do discourse analysis in terms of FDA. It is possible that these hints are subjective, even inaccurate, but we still hope that these will help the new people access the FDA for their future research related to Vietnamese study.

Discourse analysis is diverse in the social sciences. There are many different approaches to discourse analysis at the present stage. Choosing a way to conduct discourse analysis is not an easy task. Because, depending on the purpose and research question, we will decide to choose the relevant research direction. Therefore, the researcher first needs to determine the object and purpose of her research and then proceed to select the relevant discourse analysis directions. For example, if we want to investigate how the Vietnamese people's attitude towards anti-epidemic behavior is, we can choose a psychological approach to do. Doing FDA in psychology would clearly draw more consistent and effective results.

Discourse analysis whether FDA or other research direction, is still only a qualitative method. Research results drawn from discourse analysis need to be reflected in the practice of social action. We cannot expect

that it will have high effectiveness or accuracy. For that reason, investigation in some other perspectives will be needed to make a good conclusion on particular issues.

After all, discourse analysis is the method that we are dealing with language, whether through text, conversation or meaningful symbols. Therefore, having knowledge of language is essential in analyzing discourse. At the same time, discourse analysis is also an interdisciplinary research activity. Hence, it is significantly helpful for analyzing discourse with a specialized knowledge related to the research object. Thus, the accumulation of linguistics and specialized knowledge is vital for analysts as well as those who want to start with discourse analysis.

5 Conclusion

Discourse is not a new research issue. However, there are still many gaps that need to be filled in the field of social sciences in Vietnam. FDA is a discourse analysis approach used by many experts in the fields of social sciences around the world. Accordingly, a discourse is considered a collection of statements about a particular object in the same discursive formation. There are different ways to do FDA. Among them, the most prominent and widely used methods are the FDA in psychology and the FDA in the sociolinguistics accessing social issues. Willig proposed six FDA conducting steps, while Kendal & Wickham suggested only five steps. As FDA is a qualitative method, the accuracy of the results of the study needs to be scrutinized. However, in order to be able to approach the knowledge of social sciences, it is not an easy task with just quantitative methods. Thus, FDA is still a method that should be observed and applied more on social issues in Vietnam.

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