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# Discourse Analysis — A Critical or Relativistic Perspective in Music Education?

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the problems I have encountered under the development of the theoretical perspective of my thesis. First, discourse analysis is founded in social constructionism and post-structuralistic theory. Second, discourse analysis is a concept including different perspectives, where both more critical approaches with focus on discourses as determining and more relativistic approaches with focus on the actor and language appear. With the critical approach there is an epistemological possibility, a claim of knowledge. That would be unacceptable in relativistic discourse analysis where pluralism is a keyword and every stake is equal. Does a relativistic study add anything of value or is a critical approach most fruitful? I find it interesting to discuss consequences for a study from both a critical and a relativistic perspective. Furthermore, it is challenging to try to merge the two approaches.

## Critical and relativistic discourse analysis

Discourse analysis is not one single perspective but a collection of many variants. Burr (1995) has made an interesting decomposition of the field into *analysis of discourses* and *discourse analysis*. *Analysis of discourses* refers to macro-discourses that determine the agency of the subject, therefore giving consequences for the social interaction. Discourses are in focus and are regarded as determining. Conversely, *discourse analysis* is considering micro-discourses and how these are used as an activity and flexible resource in social interaction. Here is studied the spoken interaction where the subject only is constrained rhetorically by other subjects. The decomposition of the field into macro and micro discourses (Silverman, 1985; Burr, 1995; Ericsson, 2006; Lindgren, 2006) captures the polarization between, on the one hand, the structures and patterns, and on the other hand, the actor and the human interaction (Börjesson, 2003).

Also Wooffitt (2005) makes a similar dividing of the field and also shows an interesting connection between *analysis of discourses* and a critical perspective. The critical is, according to Wooffitt, the common purpose to uncover social inequalities. But also a deconstruction with only purpose to show alternative possibilities may be seen as critical (Lindgren, 2006). Because by deconstruction, both dominating and alternative discourses are displayed, showing power relation. In other words, the possibility to a critical perspective exists both when discourses are displayed in a field of discursivity and when the main purpose is to study social injustice. The variants of critical perspective discussed in this paper includes discourse analysis as: (i)

struggling between discourses (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), (ii) questioning dominant ways of categorizing the world, either by showing alternatives or by displaying power (Foucault, 1974/2003) and (iii) study of how social injustice is manifested and reproduced by discourse (Fairclough, 1995; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999).

The kind of approach adopted in *discourse analysis* considers instead peoples identity and knowledge about the world to be constituted and constructed in discourse (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996; Wood & Kroger, 2000; Te Molder & Potter, 2005). The agency of the subject is not seen as constrained by macro-discourses, instead the subject is regarded as an active agent selecting from variable resources. This more relativistic variant of discourse analysis has emerged from social psychology. This is shown by the influences from both ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, characterized by primarily two impacts. Firstly, what is considered as fact for the researcher is what participants count as fact. No predetermined categories or *external* knowledge are brought into the context. In stead, text and speech are considered as completely fact- and category-generating. Secondly, text and speech are regarded as an activity analyzed as social interaction. In discourse analysis, the subject is considered as de-centered and the same subject may use many discursive resources in one and the same speech. The purpose is to emphasize that the subject uses various discourses without letting the analysis relate to other perspectives. Neither criticism nor epistemology are hereby possible.

## A synthesis

Edley & Wetherell (1999) are using a combination of two perspectives similar to *analysis of discourses* and *discourse analysis*. But contrary to the relativistic discourse analysis Edley and Wetherell are not seeing the social world as constituted *ab initio*. They argue that society supplies us with a set of resources about how to think and act. Those resources make up our *common sense* of which we are more guided than determined. Here is, in other words, a difference according to critical discourse analysis where society is more seen as ruled by discourses. The discourse theory by Edley and Wetherell is described as a theory positioned in between critical and relativistic discourse analysis. The critical approach is softened by talking about a guiding common sense rather than ruling discourses. The relativistic approach is softened by common sense constraining the agency in social interaction. Their two-sided method treats the relationship between discourse and the speaking subject.

It allows us to embrace the fact that people are both the products and the producers of discourse; the master and the slaves of languages (Edley & Wetherell, 1999, pp. 182).

Edley and Wetherell claim that the two perspectives describe two sides of the same thing. As a consequence, they also see the combination of the perspectives more productive than using the one or the other by itself.

Also Lindgren (2006) creates a synthesis between the interactional and the more post-structural variant of discourse analysis. This is done from a more pragmatic point of view, focusing on whose context is being studied and it is questioned whether a cultural or collective level can be created. In other words, the discourse analytical perspective can be chosen based on the purpose of the study and its questions.

## The relation to music education

The discourse analysis relation to music education is restricted, in this paper, to my own study. This is a study of the Swedish culture school and teachers talk about the field. The study is based on group interviews with teachers from eight culture schools. The interviews are guided by discussions around themes, such as the culture school's role in society, teachers' teaching strategies and education contents. But the teachers are also free to discuss other important themes. Further themes may also be included depending on the discourse analysis perspective chosen.

If a macro perspective is chosen, the analysis will treat discourses as structures which more or less constitute teachers' action. The discourses may be constructions of teaching traditions or education philosophies found in teachers' talk. It may also concern discourses that connect to culture school traditions and local goals. Within SMOK (Sveriges Musik- och Kulturskolor), which is an organization for directors of Swedish music- and culture schools, and within Lärarförbundet (teacher union), questions concerning future and development are discussed. Recently, it is debated benefits and drawbacks by making the school form obligatory for all communes. Also, a national curriculum is discussed and its consequences. These questions are, of course, interesting to put in a macro-oriented critical analysis. For music and culture school, historically being seen as a free-time activity, a curriculum and a drift towards *education (Swedish: bildning) and knowledge* may be an interesting foundation for analysis. (But a more critical analysis also means moral and ethical aspects for a researcher to consider. The culture school is not yet obligatory for communes in Sweden. The question is whether culture school can use criticism as a resource or criticism is used as argument by the governmental part for cutting a criticized activity.)

If a micro perspective is chosen, language is seen as an active resource and discourses considered taking a relativistic relation to each other. No coupling is made to social science or history. The analysis stays in micro sociology. Teachers are regarded as part of the culture school as well as creators of its activity. In such a perspective, it becomes interesting to study how teachers construct the culture school activity, themselves and the education. Here, the focus is on teachers' roles and constructions. The result of the study can be brought back to the schools as examples for further discussions and development. No discourse is considered more valuable, better or more correct than any other, which gives potential for a creative and unconditional discussion with teachers and directors.

If the synthesis of Edley & Wetherell (1999) is chosen two main impacts are considered. First, the agency of the subject is regarded through varied language resources and second, constrained through the *common sense*. Here it is possible to analyze the teacher role from a perspective of different expectations, or as Edley and Wetherell puts it, *cultural knowledge*. What a *good teacher*, for example, ought to be varies depending on the cultural knowledge of the subject. Here, cultural knowledge concerning the teacher role could be compared to: the national curriculum, opinions among esthetic teachers, parents, culture institutions, teacher education, and so on. Through an analysis it is possible to study how cultural knowledge constructs teachers' work in music- and culture schools.

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