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Social Cognition and Discourse

TEUN A. VAN DIJK

Department of General Literary Studies, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

The social psychology of discourse is a new field of study that partly overlaps with the social psychology of language, dealt with in the other chapters of this handbook. This means that this single chapter deals with topics that have received less attention in the social psychology of language, such as specific structures and strategies of discourse (excluding grammatical or other properties of sentences) and those issues in social psychology that can most fruitfully be studied from a discourse analytical perspective.

Despite having its roots in some 2000 years of rhetoric, discourse analysis as an independent cross-discipline in the humanities and the social sciences has emerged only since the mid-1960s. Developing at the same time as, and sometimes in close relation to, other new disciplines, such as semiotics, pragmatics and sociolinguistics, its primary parent-disciplines were ethnography, linguistics, microsociology and poetics. In the 1970s, cognitive psychology and Artificial Intelligence joined the disciplines in which increasing interest in discourse constituted one of the major new developments of the last decade (for details, see van Dijk, 1985b).

The extension to the social psychology of discourse only took place in the 1980s (for recent discussions, see, e.g., Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Robinson, 1985). There are virtually no books in social psychology that feature concepts such as 'discourse' or 'text' in their subject index, and there are very few journal articles in the field that explicitly deal with discourse structures. This means that this chapter will not be able to review a large body of social psychological research that explicitly deals with discourse structures, although I take the liberty to reinterpret several

studies in a discourse analytical framework. To compensate for a solid research tradition, part of this chapter will therefore be theoretical and programmatic, in order to chart and stimulate future directions and work in this new field.

Despite this lack of explicit interest in discourse, social psychology has many subdomains that allow or require a discourse analytical approach. After all, there are few fundamental sociopsychological notions that do not have obvious links with language use in communicative contexts, that is, with different forms of text or talk. Social perception, impression management, attitude change and persuasion, attribution, categorization, intergroup relations, stereotypes, social representations (SRs) and interaction are only some of the labels for the major areas of current social psychology in which discourse plays an important, but as yet rather disguised, role. True, language and especially communication have played a prominent part in the history of social psychology (see especially Brown, 1965), as is abundantly made clear in the other chapters of this handbook, but the essentially discursive nature of language use has been mostly reduced to a more or less intuitive study of 'messages', and at present social psychology mainly focuses on properties of 'speech'. In other words, after linguistics and its sister-disciplines of psycho- and sociolinguistics, discourse analysis has something to offer to most social psychologists. The reverse is equally true: social psychological insights are of primary importance for the development of discourse analysis.

While a 'definition' of the notion of discourse cannot of course be given (the whole discipline, or at least a whole theory, provides such a definition), I understand 'discourse' in this chapter both as a specific form of language use, and as a specific form of social interaction, interpreted as a complete communicative event in a social situation. What distinguishes discourse analysis from sentence grammars is that discourse analysis in practice focuses specifically on phenomena beyond the sentence. Obviously, uttered words or sentences are integral parts of discourse. Since, empirically speaking, the 'meaning' of discourse is a cognitive structure, it makes sense to include in the concept of discourse not only 'observable' verbal or non-verbal features, or social interaction and speech acts, but also the cognitive representations and strategies involved during the production or comprehension of discourse. I here ignore multiple problems related to the precise delimitation of discourse with respect to others (forms of) interaction, with respect to non-verbal communication, or with respect to other cognitive structures and strategies. The notion of 'text', sometimes used as the purely verbal aspect of discourse, sometimes as the abstract linguistic form underlying discourse as a form of language use, is here used mostly in its everyday sense of 'written discourse'.

SOCIAL COGNITION AND INTERACTION

To restrict the discussion about the potentially vast field of the social psychology of discourse, I focus on a number of basic concepts that in my opinion may be fruitful in establishing a solid theoretical framework. First, I pay special attention to the interplay between discourse and social cognition (Fiske and Taylor, 1984; Wyer and Srull, 1985; see Chapter 1, by McCann and Higgins). Social cognition is here

discussed mainly in terms of shared SRs of group members (Farr and Moscovici, 1984); that is, I shall neglect the more individual domains of social psychology. Social cognition research dovetails with schema-theoretic orientations in cognitive and Artificial Intelligence research into text processing and the role of knowledge scripts (Schank and Abelson, 1977; van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983). Thus, I hope to show that SRs such as stereotypes or ethnic prejudices, just like socially shared knowledge, are essentially reproduced in society through discourse (see also Kraut and Higgins, 1984; Roloff and Berger, 1982; Rommetveit, 1984). This notion of 'reproduction' will play a prominent role in the framework presented in this chapter.

Second, the discursive reproduction of social cognitions also requires a proper social (sociological) dimension, which, however, has often been neglected in social psychology (Forgas, 1983). The basic notions here are those of interaction and social situation (Argyle, Furnham, and Graham, 1981; Forgas, 1979). Processes of social perception, communication, attribution, attraction, impression management and intergroup contact, among many others, are also to be defined in such a conceptual framework.

My main thesis will be that these socially situated cognitive representations and processes at the same time have an important discourse dimension. Social representations are largely acquired, used and changed, through text and talk. Therefore, discourse analysis may be used as a powerful instrument to reveal the underlying contents, structures and strategies of SRs.

My major criticism of both traditional work in social psychology and the more recent approaches is that on the one hand they are not cognitive enough, neglecting to specify mental representations and strategies, and on the other hand they are not social enough, neglecting social context and functions. Thus, whereas I share the recognition of the fundamental role of discourse in social psychology with the authors of the only book on the subject (Potter and Wetherell, 1987), I differ from these authors in my approach to cognitive SRs or attitudes, which they tend to 'explain away' by reducing them essentially to properties of social discourse. In my opinion, no sound theoretical or explanatory framework can be set up for any phenomenon dealt with in social psychology without an explicit account of socially shared cognitive representations. Whereas discourse is of course of primary importance in the expression, communication and reproduction of SRs (which is also the main thesis of this paper), this does not mean that discourse or its strategies are identical with such representations.

Thus, for this chapter, I define the role of discourse in social psychology essentially in terms of the interplay between social cognition and situated interaction in processes of societal reproduction. Thus, cognitively monitored interactions are linked to other important social dimensions, such as those of group dominance and social structure. This link is necessary in an adequate explanation of the functions of group prejudices and ideologies, as well as of their discursive reproduction in society. Obviously, the study of these relationships overlaps with research in both micro- and macrosociology, which have both neglected the important cognitive dimensions of social interaction (however, see Cicourel, 1973).

I must be brief about the first step of the theoretical framework, that is, about the structures of SRs. Actually. very little is known about the precise organization of such representations, despite some interesting early attempts to model them after the structure of knowledge in terms of scripts (Abelson, 1976).

Recall that social cognition is here defined as a socially shared system of SRs, a system which, however, also includes a set of strategies for their effective manipulation in social interpretation, interaction and discourse. Located in 'semantic' (or, rather, social) memory, SRs may be conceptualized as hierarchical networks, organized by a limited set of relevant node-categories. Social representations of groups, for instance, may feature nodes such as Appearance, Origin, Socio-economic goals, Cultural dimensions and Personality. These categories organize the propositional contents of SRs, which not only embody shared social knowledge, but also evaluative information, such as general opinions about other people as group members. The traditional social psychological notion of 'attitude' thus is here redefined in terms of these generalized SRs. The social dimension of SRs not only resides in the fact that these cognitions are about social groups, classes, structures or social issues. SRs are also social because they are acquired, changed and used in social situations; that is, they are cognitions that are shared by all or most members of a group (Brown and Turner, 1981; Moscovici, 1982). This implies that they are abstracted from purely personal knowledge and experiences, from personal or context-bound opinions, as well as from unique situations, and have undergone a process of generalization, adaptation and normalization. Finally, it should be noted that the notion of 'social representation' has been developed mainly by Serge Moscovici and his associates (see, e.g., Moscovici, 1984, and other papers in the edited volume by Farr and Moscovici, 1984), in order, for example, to conceptualize common-sense notions of complex sociocultural or scientific phenomena (such as 'psychoanalysis'). My use of the notion is somewhat different, and includes any socially shared cognitive representation about social phenomena, including social groups, social relationships, or social issues or problems (e.(,. nuclear energy, disarmament).

Besides these general, group-based SRs, I introduce the important notion of '(situation) models' (Johnson-Laird, 1983; van Dijk, 1987c; van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983). These mental models have recently played a vital role in psycholinguistics and the psychology of text processing. Whereas socially shared SRs are located in social memory, models are cognitive representations of personal experiences and interpretations, including personal knowledge and opinions, and are located in episodic memory. Models represent the interpretations individuals make of other persons, of specific events and actions, and essentially are the cognitive counterpart of situations. When people witness a scene or an action, or read or hear about such events, they construct a unique model of that situation or update an old model. Models, thus, are also the referential basis of text understanding. They are organized by a fixed schema, featuring such well-known categories as Setting (Time, Location), Circumstances, Participants and Event/Action, each possibly accompanied by an evaluative modifier (Argyle et al., 1981; Brown and Fraser, 1979). Not surprisingly, these

categories also show up in the semantics of sentences and discourse, simply because such expressions routinely describe situations. We see that cognitive model theory provides the essential missing link between cognitive structures, situational structures and discourse structures.

Models are crucial for the theoretical framework of this chapter. They form the interface between generalized SRs, on the one hand, and the individual uses of these SRs in social perception, interaction and discourse, on the other hand. The interpretation of social scenes, but also the planning of discourse or interaction, is based on models. Personal models explain individual variation in the application of general knowledge and attitudes. People may have personal opinions that may be at variance with the general opinions of their group, for example because of their own personal experiences. On the other hand, models are also the basis of general knowledge and other SRs. Through processes of generalization and decontextualization (sets of) models may be transformed into scripts or attitudes. For my discussion, it is especially relevant to note that models play a central role, at the interpersonal communicative level, in the group-based reproduction of SRs through discourse. For social psychology in general, the introduction of the notion of models solves many classical problems of the interface between individual and social dimensions of cognition and interaction, such as those of the famous 'attitude-behavior' link (Cushman and McPhee, 198L).

A special type of situation model is the episodic representation which speech participants make of the current communicative situation. This 'context model' features knowledge and opinions about (the actual) self, the other speech participant, about goals of interaction and about important social dimensions of the current situation (e.g. 'classroom instruction', 'talk with boss' or 'consulting the doctor'). Hence, context models monitor talk, guide strategies of impression formation and generally translate general social norms and rules into specific constraints of discourse. Again, we see how social cognitions may be linked to discourse structures through models.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

We have earlier observed that social psychology does not pay much attention to the important discursive nature of the phenomena it studies. A closer look at the history of social psychology in our century does not seem to change this picture of the benevolent neglect of discourse. In the three books published in 1980 that look back at the making of the discipline, the notion of discourse hardly comes up as a relevant concept (Evans, 1980; Festinger, 1980; Gilmour and Duck, 1980). In Jones and Gerard's well-known book of the 1960s, the concepts of discourse, text and message do not appear in the index, and language is treated only as a factor of socialization (Jones and Gerard, 1967). Communication, however, receives more attention in that book, mostly in relation to persuasion, attitude change and processes of social comparison. Since a detailed analysis of the history of discourse in social psychology cannot be given here, I briefly summarize some of the highlights of that history that are of interest for a discourse approach.

The early work by Bartlett (1932) may be recognized as a milestone, not only for schema theory and the psychology of text processing, but also for the social psychology of discourse. His method of serial reproduction, applied to stories and rumors, is the first important contribution to the theory of discursively based reproduction of social cognitions. Bartlett shows that recall of discourse is not purely personal, but that its contents and forms may also depend on sociocultural constraints, viz. as to whether to provide a brief summary of an event or a long and detailed report. Allport and Postman's (1947) later book on the reproduction of rumors in society, finding similar processes of 'sharpening' and 'levelling' in such discourses, remains an important later application of the framework developed by Bartlett (see also Shibutani, 1966).

The founding fathers (as in all academic disciplines, women were hardly allowed to play such a role) of social psychology have little explicit to say about discourse, even when it does play an implicit role in their work. Heider (1958) recognizes the relevance of stories in the analysis of social action and attribution, but in the rest of his book he focuses more generally on the structures of action (ideas which are, however, relevant for a theory of pragmatics or a semantics of narrative). Festinger's early work on social communication and influence also deals with the analysis and explanation of rumors. He concludes that rumors may be reproduced in such a way that they contribute to the future actions of individuals as well as to the reduction of their cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1950, 1957). For the perspective of our discussion, it is important to note that Festinger also found that persuasive discourse is especially effective when its opinions are assumed to be generally supported by others. Apparently, group sharing is a fundamental condition of the acquisition and reproduction of social cognitions. It was further found that face-to-face conversations in this case may be more effective than monologue or text (Festinger, Schachter, and Back, 1950; Lewin, 1947). Indeed, it appears that informal talk with age, status or gender peers may have an important function in the acquisition of knowledge and opinions (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). In these various studies, we find some of the roots for a modern theory of consensus formation and social reproduction through discourse. Important for us is the early recognition of the social dimensions in the cognitive structures, acquisition and reproduction of SRs. Unfortunately, the analysis of the role of discourse in this process has generally remained intuitive in this early work.

PREJUDICE AND DISCOURSE: AN EXAMPLE
FROM CURRENT RESEARCH

In order to make the general framework sketched above more concrete, and to develop further the ideas formulated in early social psychology on the relations between discourse, communication and social cognitions, I summarize some research findings from my own work on the reproduction of racism in discourse and communication. This research analyzes how ethnic prejudice is represented and manipulated in cognition, and expressed in discourse and communication, by white group members of Western multi-ethnic societies. Data for this research were

gathered from different sources, viz. informal conversation, information interviews conducted in Amsterdam and San Diego (van Dijk, 1984, 1987a), news reports in the press (van Dijk, 1988a) and school textbooks (van Dijk, 1987b).

The Structures and Strategies of Prejudice

Ethnic prejudice, while superficially defined in terms of 'negative attitudes' of group members about other groups (see also Allport, 1954), is primarily analyzed in terms of organized SRs, shared by many or most members of dominant groups, about dominated groups. These specific SRs feature contents, structures and strategies that optimally organize concrete models and actions in such a way that (for instance ethnic or racial) dominance may be effectively reproduced.

The categories of prejudiced attitude schemata include Origin, Appearance, Socio-economic goals, Socio-cultural norms and values, and Personality; that is, in experiences with minority group members or 'ethnic events' in society, majority group members establish, or draw upon, general knowledge or opinions about where the outgroup members come from, what they look like, why they are 'here', what cultural norms and values they have (e.g. what language they speak, what habits they have) and what kind of personality 'those people' have (e.g. are they aggressive, criminal, etc.?). Social position, and hence group membership of social members, may further influence specific variations, contents or strategic uses of such prejudices. Thus, blue-collar workers, also in their everyday stories, may emphasize the belief that immigrants or minorities 'take away our houses and jobs', because it is this belief that is most relevant to the protection of their own interests and the interpretation of their social frustrations (Miles, 1982; Miles and Phizacklea, 1979; Wellman, 1977). People with more education and better jobs may focus on stereotypes or prejudices about 'deficient' culture, education or language knowledge, a form of prejudice often labeled 'modern' or' symbolic' racism (Dovidio and Gaertner, 1986).

Depending on the representation of the context, these general, prejudiced attitude schemata influence the concrete models of the ethnic situation that dominant group members build and express in talk or interaction. For instance, in such models, causes of their own negative experiences or social problems may be attributed to minority groups or their members (and not, for instance, to the economy or urban decay); that is, there are 'biased' transformations of the causality relations or agency roles in the model. Also, dominant group members, especially those of lower socio-economic position, may reverse the victim role in such models. They will tend to say that they themselves rather than the minority groups are being discriminated against. Such biased attributions are related both to the familiar 'fundamental attribution error' (Pettigrew, 1979; Stephan, 1977), and to the illusory correlations established between the observed presence of minorities and the experience of their own poverty (Hamilton, Dugan, and Trolier, 1985). Biased models not only instantiate prejudice schemata (e.g. as prototypes, see Cantor and Mischel, 1977, 1979), but also are strategically devised in such a way that they seem to conform such general SRs (Snyder, 1981a,b). Thus, models, and their expression in text and talk, show how group members interpret and represent ethnic events as a function of both social context and general group schemata.

Discourse and Prejudice

Structures and processes of prejudiced SRs also appear in talk and text (for details, see Potter and Wetherell, 1987; van Dijk, 1984, 1987a; van Dijk and Wodak, 1988; Windisch, 1978). The social functions of such prejudiced communications are to share and normalize social knowledge and opinions with other ingroup members, to exhibit and confirm ingroup membership and allegiance or to exchange practical information that shows 'how to deal with them'. At the same time, such talk must contextually obey the usual rules of conversation and interaction, and respect general social norms and goals, including those that prohibit discrimination (Billig, 1988). These general norms are also translated into the context model for the current conversation: a good impression must be made on the hearer or interviewer, or, rather, a bad one must be avoided (Arkin, 1981). This means that prejudiced people cannot simply express negative opinions about 'foreigners', because in that case they might be seen as racists. Thus, they resort to strategic tactics in which negative 'other-presentation' is combined with tactics of impression management, such as positive self-presentation or face-keeping. Hence, discourse about minorities is full of disclaimers, such as denials ('I am not a racist, but . . .'), apparent concessions ('There are good ones among them, but . . .') and other moves (see also Hewitt and Stokes, 1975).

These analyses show that specific properties of everyday discourse and interaction are systematically related to the structures of situation models, context models and general SRs. At the same time, they show how specific SRs are reproduced in the ingroup. These links become manifest not only in the semantic moves of disclaiming, but also in story structure, argumentation and dominant topics of talk. Similarly, conversational phenomena, such as hesitations, false starts and correction, may be related to the cognitive strategies of production, as monitored by the context models of a conversation (viz. by the goal of positive impression formation). Structures of stories about minorities sometimes rather closely reflect the organization of underlying models of the ethnic situation (van Dijk, 1985b). Thus, the normally obligatory Resolution category of the story schema may be left out because storytellers see ethnic situations as essentially problematic and unresolved. Also, as we saw earlier, dominant group members may represent themselves as 'victims' in both stories and models. Conversational topics, on the other hand, rather seem to reflect the contents of the general prejudices about ethnic difference, group threat and intergroup competition, and of the general feelings of ingroup superiority.

Other Research on Prejudice, Stereotypes and Discourse

Although most other research on intergroup relations, stereotypes and prejudices has not been particularly interested in discourse and communication, results from some of this other work may well be interpreted in our framework. A few examples may illustrate this assumption (see e.g. Brewer and Kramer, 1985, for a review).

Bodenhausen and Wyer (1985) studied the effects of ethnic stereotypes on decision-making and information-processing strategies. Among other things, they found that, when (white?) subjects read imaginary case files of personnel managers

who had to make a decision about a job-related transgression by people with an Anglo or an Arab name, the recall protocols of the subjects tended to focus on stereotype-confirming information about the target persons. Although this study, like the other research we discussed, nicely shows that SRs condition social information processing, it unfortunately does not offer a detailed theoretical framework that explains the link between the structures and contents of the case files, the interpretation strategies of the readers, their models of the situation (and hence of the target persons), the general ethnic representations and the resulting recall processes and protocols. Better reproduction of stereotypical information may and must be explained in terms of the detailed interaction between these structures and strategies, for instance the role of ethnic SRs in the formation of model structures during text comprehension as well as text production. Thus, people will tend to rely on general SR information as soon as more detailed (possibly relevant) information of concrete models is no longer accessible. Once dominant group members have acquired prejudiced SRs, cognitive processes will generally favor the relatively easy application and hence the confirmation of such SRs during later reproduction or other tasks, instead of the search for possibly disconfirming information in situation models.

The important finding in the study by Bodenhausen and Wyer (1985), as well as in several other studies of the last decade, is that prejudices and stereotypes influence information processing, including reading, understanding and memorizing discourse, such as case files, stories or conversations (Hamilton, 1981). One of the cognitive strategies involved in this process is that information that is construed as an instantiation of, or that is consistent with, or inferable from, a 'biased' group schema may get specific focus and be better organized in 'ethnic' situation models. This is also because situation models are easier to build from prefabricated (instantiated) copies from stereotypes than from scratch, that is, on the basis of new, external information. On future occasions, information from such well-organized models will in turn be more easily recalled and applied in communication and interaction, thus further confirming both the cognitive and the social relevance and prominence of the stereotypical or prejudiced SRs (Duncan, 1976; Rothbart, Fulero, Jensen, Howard, and Birrell, 1978). In fact, in an early paper, Cooper and Jahoda (1947) show that information that aims at combating anti-semitism but that is inconsistent with prevalent stereotypes may not only be ignored or made irrelevant by the reader, but even be strategically misunderstood in the first place. Similarly, stereotypical schemata are used in hypothesis testing about other people, although social norms may also influence actual decisions made by subjects about stereotypical information they receive (Lord, Ross, and Lepper, 1979). It is assumed that less extensive knowledge about outgroups will probably lead to more polarized structures (Us versus Them) in model representations (Linville and Jones, 1980), a phenomenon which also finds confirmation in the contrastive rhetoric of the interviews I analyzed ('WE have to work hard, while THEY can throw parties every week').

While these tendencies found in the experimental literature agree with the basic principles of social information processing, there are some interesting complications; for example, the prominence of information during processing may be defined not only in terms of its relevance or agreement with existing belief schemata, but also by

its deviance from such schemata. As is generally the case in story-telling, people also tend to recall interesting exceptions, that is, events that are remarkable (Hastie and Kumar, 1979) or people who play a 'solo' role in a group (Taylor, 1982; Taylor, Fiske, Etcoff, and Ruderman, 1978). While this is undoubtedly correct, it is also clear that deviance presupposes the application of knowledge about routine events or 'normal' people (Black, Galambos, and Read, 1984). We may conclude that mental models and their retrieval are also shaped by strategies of distinction: the more unique the event, the more unique its model, and the less such a model will tend to be confused with others. It is likely that processing such specific information takes more time, and this longer or 'deeper' processing will also result in more elaborated models (see also Brewer, Dull, and Lui, 1981). Remarkable episodes that are not sustained by general schemata are essentially model-based, however, and we may assume that such information will be easily forgotten after longer delays. Similarly, as soon as information is very complex, people will tend to rely on ready-made schemata, rather than on the many details of the actual situation (Rothbart, Evans, and Fulero, 1979). In other words, a more sophisticated theory of the interplay between SRs, models and discourse may explain several earlier results that have sometimes been seen as conflicting (van Dijk, 1985a).

We suggested that, unlike traditional prejudices about minorities (or women for that matter), current prejudices, especially among liberals, may seem more subtle, indirect, modern and 'symbolic' (Barker, 1981; Dovidio and Gaertner, 1986; Essed, 1987). They may focus on bussing, positive action or other forms of 'advantaging' the outgroup. Also, as I found in the interviews I conducted, many of the classical prejudices are not expressed. Sophisticated discourse analysis, as well as analyses of non-verbal or other less controllable features of talk and interaction, such as intonation or pitch, may therefore become necessary to establish underlying SRs (Crosby, Bromley, and Saxe, 1983; Weitz, 1972; Word, Zanna, and Cooper, 1974). Whites may have internalized the norm of non-discrimination (Billig, 1988), but not yet a set of unprejudiced feelings (see Kelman, 1961). Or rather, they may not yet have developed an anti-racist SR that enables them to recognize, represent or talk about (discriminatory) situations as such, or to view them from the perspective of minority group members.

Concluding this section, we find that although most other work on stereotypes and prejudice does not establish a link with discourse, their implications for a theory of the formation and reproduction of SRs are important. The results predict, for instance, that both prejudiced speakers and listeners of talk about minorities will tend to focus on those semantic topics or even microstructural details that are consistent with their SRs. Similarly, since such group attitudes emphasize differences between groups and similarities within groups, prejudiced language users will especially focus on those properties and actions of outgroups that will confirm their difference if not their 'deviance'. These and many other properties of prejudiced talk are largely to be explained in terms of the very specific models such people use or build during communication. Specification of these model structures and of the strategies applied in their expression in communication is, however, lacking in most work on ethnic stereotypes.

Another basic problem of this research, especially of the research done in the

USA, is that the cognitive processes studied are often isolated from their essential social functions in the reproduction of racism and the maintenance of white group power (van Dijk, 1988b). Indeed, prejudice and stereotypes are not universals of the social mind, or inherent properties of complex information processes. They are specifically developed, learned and reproduced in specific sociohistorical contexts, and among specific (dominant) groups. In other words, these social cognitions and processes always need to be related to actual group relationships, as is especially shown in much European research on intergroup relations (Tajfel, 1981; Turner and Giles, 1981). How exactly a social condition like group membership interfaces with detailed SRs and strategies is still largely unknown.

OTHER DOMAINS: PERSUASION, IMPRESSION FORMATION, ATTRIBUTION

Persuasion

A similar account may be given of the role of discourse and social cognitions in both classical and current research in other domains of social psychology, such as persuasion, impression formation and attribution. For example, classical research on persuasion and attitude change by Hovland and his associates (e.g. Hovland, Lumsdaine, and Sheffield, 1949) did give some attention to discourse characteristics, such as the nature and the order of arguments and their effects on persuasion (for review, see e.g., Eagly and Himmelfarb, 1978; Himmelfarb and Eagly, 1974; McGuire, 1969; Petty and Cacioppo, 1981; see Chapter 3, by Burgoon). The same is true for the study of the effect of fear appeals in propaganda (Janis and Feshbach, 1953), repetition or rhetorical questions (Cacioppo and Petty, 1979) in persuasive discourse and their relations with general credibility of the speakers. While some of this work is relevant in a modern theory of the reproduction of SRs, its major shortcomings, at least from our present discourse analytical point of view, are its neglect of a systematic theory of persuasive discourse that goes beyond the somewhat haphazardly chosen discourse properties just mentioned, as well as the lack of a detailed cognitive processing theory that would relate such discourse structures with model structures, and these again with 'attitudes'. In much of this research, personal opinions of models have usually been confused with the more general, socially shared opinions of SRs, which are much more difficult to change, both by definition and also because their change mostly requires extensive social interaction and communication (Jaspars and Fraser, 1984). Attitude-change theory has hardly paid attention to the detailed representation of attitudes themselves, so it is not surprising that much of this early research yields conflicting evidence about the role of specific discourse structures in such attitudes.

Recent persuasion and attitude-change research correctly emphasizes the lack of a direct link between persuasive discourse and opinion change (see Eagly and Chaiken, 1984, for a recent review). Within the perspective of a renewed emphasis on cognitive 'mediation' or cognitive 'responses' (a notion, however, that still betrays traces of behaviorism), it is argued that 'intervening thoughts', such as pro or

con arguments, are essential in opinion change (Petty, Ostrom, and Brock, 1981). While this is undoubtedly true, we find that the problem of description and explanation is not solved by a rather vague reference to 'thoughts' or cognitive arguments. We need to know what exactly these thoughts are, how and where they are represented, what cognitive strategies operate on them and how resulting opinions are formed and represented. The problem also remains of how relevant thoughts are engendered by persuasive discourse in the first place. For instance, repetition in (or of) discourse may affect text processing and model formation in different ways. It may provide the reader with more time to search for relevant models or SRs, to build more extensive models (including more or more detailed opinions) or to instantiate relevant opinions from SRs in models; at the same time. repetition may signal importance or relevance, which will affect the hierarchical structuring of models: macrostructural or topical information, high in the model, is often signalled by repeated information in discourse. These various processes will need to be made explicit if we want to explain whether and why repeated persuasive discourse has more, or less, effect on opinion formation in models (Cacioppo and Petty, 1979). The processes involved are too complex to be simply captured by the application of recall of argumentation schemata alone (Schmidt and Sherman, 1984): while these schemata are by definition of a general nature, and therefore shared and easily available, the contents of each argumentation are unique, or at least largely variable.

Impression Management

Some impression-management research, which has a more social orientation than most persuasion research (Tedeschi, 1981), also deals with the discursive ante-cedents of model transformations, such as the presence of positive self-description, or the performance of 'kind' verbal acts, such as greetings or self-disclosure (Schneider, 1981). As is also shown in some of the persuasion literature, moderation, reticence, avoidance or withdrawal in attitude expression may be conducive to positive evaluations, on the intuitive ground that aggression or radical positions may lead to more negative evaluations by the recipient (Arkin, 1981; Hass, 1981). This phenomenon is also encountered in interviews about minorities: people often express moderate views, for example by using strategic moves of mitigation, or else avoid delicate issues, for instance by withdrawing or changing the topic. A negative evaluation of the speaker does not always lead to less persuasion, however. This also depends on social characteristics of the speaker: people who are more credible or powerful, for example because of knowledge or status, may be more aggressive in defending their points of view than less impressive speakers (Burgoon and Miller, 1985).

   The important conclusion of this and similar findings is that discourse structures alone do not fully predict what will happen cognitively, as is well-known in the psychology of text processing (van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983). Structures, contents and availability of context models, of the current speaker, as well as of the recipient, and SRs about the group the speaker belongs to, will almost always strongly determine the actual processing of what the speaker says. There is practically no research that

consistently demonstrates opinion-formation or impression-formation effects of specific language or discourse structures independent of topic or issue, or independent of the communicative context and independent of speakers and recipients (Berger and Bradac, 1982; Petty and Cacioppo, 1985; see Chapter 19, by Bradac).

Attribution

Although little attribution research is explicitly interested in the structures of discourse and their relations with the process of attribution, many experiments are based on 'information' about action and actors that is presented to experimental subjects in the form of discourse, for example stories (Hewstone, 1983a). Recall that stories, which are essentially about interesting human action, express prominent situation models in episodic memory (of course with many transformations, due to constraints of the context model, for example pragmatic or conversational relevance). Hence, attribution processes are basically strategies of 'making sense', that is, strategies of coherent model building. Relations of cause and reason are fundamental in the establishment of coherence (van Dijk, 1977). More generally, therefore, attribution might best be analyzed as a special case of understanding, viz. of human action as well as of (action) discourse, especially of causes, reasons or motivations of human action (see also Kelley, 1983). Understanding and explanation of action in terms of attributes of the actor or on the basis of context characteristics, which form the core phenomena studied by attribution theory, thus are only one of the many strategies of (action) understanding (see the contribution in the edited volume by Jaspars, Fincham, and Hewstone, 1983, for details).

Because the very notion of action presupposes actor control, and since models feature prominent actor categories, there will be a general tendency to explain actions in terms of actor characteristics rather than in terms of context (Jones and Nisbett, 1972). In speech acts such as defenses, excuses, accusations or justifications of action, this focus may be diverted to the usually less prominent context, for instance in explaining (and therefore excusing) our own negative actions or failures. This 'self-serving' aspect of attribution bias not only holds for individuals, but more generally also for group members, when they explain negative actions or failures of other ingroup members in a situation of intergroup conflict. On the other hand, negative actions of outgroup members tend to be explained in terms of their group characteristics and therefore blamed on them rather than explained or excused in terms of contextual conditions (Pettigrew, 1979; Stephan, 1977). Attribution as a form of excuse is also part of strategies of positive self-presentation, as we also saw in the analysis of conversation about minorities (see also Tedeschi and Reiss, 1981). Note, however, that these differences in the explanation of actions by/of in- and outgroup members are not simply cognitive 'errors'. On the contrary, they are (of course mostly unconscious) highly effective strategies, which ultimately have crucial social functions in the reproduction of group dominance (or resistance against such dominance).

Discourse analysis may be expected to show more explicitly the differences and the functions of the perspectives involved in the understanding, description or explanation of action (Farr and Anderson, 1983). It may show how people actually go about

explaining their own actions or those of others (Antaki, 1981). Explanations of actions are not isolated cognitive activities, but part of the more complex process of understanding, that is, model building. These models in turn are often expressed in (personal) stories or accounts, which also have their proper interaction constraints. Therefore, these accounts may be taken as important data for the analysis of the attribution or explanation process, but should also be seen as an autonomous social practice (Harre and Secord, 1972). Social actors use attributions strategically, depending on relevance and context, and may apply effective procedures to express or understand explanations in line with their actual goals or interests. This implies that common-sense explanations of action, as well as the understanding of action discourse, are based on complex SRs, shared by social actors or language users as group members, and featuring vast sets of knowledge, attitudes, sociocultural norms and values, and ideologies, as well as the rules and strategies to handle this information (Hewstone, 1983b; Moscovici and Hewstone, 1983).

Unfortunately, we know very little of the detailed structures and strategies of language use and discourse that may express or influence attributional processes (Hewstone, 1983a). Work in critical linguistics shows how the syntactic structures of sentences, for instance in newspaper headlines, may reflect the ideologically based attribution of agency (Fowler, Hodge, Kress, and Trew, 1979; van Dijk, 1988c; see also Pryor and Kriss, 1977). The same is true for the use of action verbs, which may signal different attributions depending on whether they describe accomplishments, actions, opinions or emotions (McArthur, 1972). For instance, action descriptions referring to 'anger' of the actor will typically favor situational attributions, whereas descriptions of accomplishments will tend to focus on attributes of the persons themselves. Similarly, a whole range of stylistic phenomena, such as pronunciation, lexical choice and grammatical style, provides indicators about speakers/actors, or rather about group(s) they belong to, which will not only determine opinion formation but also guide the attribution process, for instance in interethnic communication (Giles and Hewstone, 1982; Giles and Powesland, 1975; Giles, Scherer, and Taylor, 1979). Lind and O'Barr (1979), among others, showed that the attribution of power in the courtroom may be influenced by the use of specific stylistic features, such as the presence or absence of hesitation markers or hedging. Here we touch upon one of the crucial tasks of social cognition research, viz. to establish a link between a social relation, namely power, on the one hand, and its representation in social cognition, and communication through discourse, on the other hand. In most of the research just mentioned, however, it is precisely the cognitive interface between social relationships and discourse style that is discussed in rather vague terms, if at all (van Dijk, 1988b).

Ideology

There are many concepts and areas of research of a sociocognitive nature that are neglected in mainstream social psychology but which have a vital role in the explanation of the processes of social cognition and its societal reproduction through discourse. One of these concepts is ideology, which is usually left to sociology and political science (but see Billig, 1982). However, from the early days of attitude

research and the analysis of belief consistency, it has often been observed that social beliefs and attitudes seem to have some kind of consistency. Although social cognitions are not consistent in the proper logical sense, I nevertheless assume that they show various forms of coherence or psychological consistency. Attitudes about different social issues may feature the same basic opinions, similar explanations and, especially, the instantiation of the same general norms or values. Despite variations and contradictions, people have the intuitive ability to recognize such coherence and label it accordingly (for instance as 'conservative').

Against this background, I propose that an ideology is the group-based, shared framework that underlies this coherence. Ideology provides the basic building blocks, the selection principles of relevant norms and values, as well as the structural organization of SRs. In line with the analysis of ideologies in the social sciences, I also assume that ideologies are in part self-serving, and developed and applied in such a way that group members' social cognitions and practices are geared towards the maintenance of overall group interests (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1978; Kinloch, 1981). Thus, ideologies of dominant groups monitor the development of SRs, the formation of models, and the production of action and discourse of group members in such a way that the group will maintain power and reproduce its hegemony with respect to dominated groups, as has been most obvious in classism, sexism and racism. Such dominance may also be exercised by the control of the means of ideological production, such as the media or education, and therefore indirectly by the control of public discourse that expresses those models that instantiate attitudes that are consistent with the dominant ideology. Ideological frameworks explain why attitudes are not formed or changed in an arbitrary way. Basic strategies of social information processing are not simply defined in terms of universals of cognition. Similarly, the formation of norms and values, and their application in opinion formation, must also be monitored by an underlying, ideological framework. Discourse plays a central role in the formation and change of ideologies. Through discourse, ideologies may be made partly explicit, and thus conveyed and normalized or legitimated. One of the major common tasks of social psychology and discourse analysis in the next decade is to analyze in detail these structures, processes and social practices of the ideological framework.

CONCLUSIONS

This survey of some of the literature in social psychology shows that discourse appears to be relevant in many ways in the study of social cognition, viz. as experimental materials, data and subject responses, as well as a direct object of study. We have also seen, however, that social psychologists have largely ignored this role of discourse, although some (and more recently many) of them have been interested in the role of language and communication. Discourse structures, for example of persuasive messages, of impression-formation strategies or of explanatory accounts of attribution, are seldom made explicit, nor are their relations with structures of social cognition analyzed in detail.

Despite this marginal role of an explicit theory of discourse in social psychology,

we also found that existing research may partially be reinterpreted in such a way that insights may be obtained about the systematic relationships between the structures and strategies of discourse and those of social cognition. From my own work on the discursive expression and communication of ethnic prejudice in society, I have concluded that socially shared cognitions also systematically appear in text and talk, and that such discourse forms a necessary link in the group reproduction of ethnic beliefs. Other research on stereotypes shows how SRs induce 'biased' information processing about minority group members generally, and ingroup-favoring discourse use or recall about outgroups in particular. I have stressed, though, that the actual contents and strategies involved are not simply universals of the cognitive dynamics of group perception and interaction, as may be the case for processes of categorization or polarization. Rather, group power and interests, dominance and other social relations are involved for which SRs and their strategies play a very specific function. It is therefore imperative to specify how a social relation like power may be mapped into the structures and strategies of SRs, for instance by means of fundamental ideological frameworks of the interpretation of social reality.

The role of discourse, in the form of 'messages' or 'communication', is more prominent in both classical and recent attitude-change and persuasion research. Besides properties of communicators, message characteristics have often been taken as independent variables in experimental work on the antecedents of attitude change. In my critical evaluation of this research, I first reformulated the notions of attitude and attitude change in terms of a more explicit framework of social cognitions, representations and strategies. It was emphasized that the notion of attitude change', implied by all persuasion research, should be analyzed in terms of transformations of evaluative beliefs (opinions) in situation models, and that attitudes are complex schemata consisting of generalized opinions, inferred from models. Future work in this area thus should pay closer attention to the precise contents and structures of SRs, their relations with models, and the relations of models with persuasive discourse structures as well as social dimensions of persuasive interactions and situations. Similar remarks hold for impression management and attribution theory, and the presentation, interpretation and understanding of human action. Beyond a more explicit application of cognitive model theory in the analysis of explanations, justifications or excuses as forms of action understanding, I emphasized the need to analyze everyday explanatory discourse, for instance stories or argumentation, both as a source of information about underlying attribution processes, as well as the actual, socially situated practice of action explanations.

This chapter is limited to a brief discussion of some work in only a few major domains of social psychology. It is obvious, however, that there is virtually no domain in this discipline that does not involve discourse in some way, either as part of the domain or object of research, as is the case in persuasion, or as experimental materials, response formats (e.g. recall protocols) or other data (see also Ericsson and Simon, 1984). All fields of social psychology deal with how people make sense of the social world and each other, not only by thinking about each other, looking at each other or interacting, but also and primarily by talking to and about each other. In addition to the general sociocognitive processes discussed above, research should also focus on specific communicative events or

discourse genres, such as cognition-interaction pairs in the courtroom, the classroom or the newsroom. In such situated interactions, various sociocognitive processes take place at the same time. In such discourse, persuasion, attribution, self-presentation or stereotyping may be integrated. Sophisticated analysis of the many properties of text and talk may yield insight both into the detailed structures of underlying situation or context models, SRs or ideologies, and into the social functions of such discourse and interaction.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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