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The linguistic turn and social psychology

Summary

This article investigates some of the implications of the linguistic turn in modern philosophy for the development of social psychology. The linguistic turn, according to which language does not primarily mirror reality or our experience but is co-constructive thereof, gave rise to productive developments in social psychology. Wittgenstein's insight that the meaning of words depends on their use value in specific language games made it possible to see social cognition as an interactive and social achievement, rather than as a self-enclosed mental process merely directed at the social environment. Post-structuralist developments like those of Derrida and Foucault, based on the structuralist linguistics of De Saussure, make the psychological subject, experience, social institutions and knowledge products of more fundamental textual processes. Despite contradictions these approaches underlie the development of what may be called a discursive social psychology: a discipline focusing on the different discursive aspects of social psychological life, which refuses to restrict that life to individual levels of analysis.

Die taalwending en die sosiale sielkunde

Hierdie artikel ondersoek sommige van die implikasies van die taalwending in die moderne filosofie vir die ontwikkeling van die sosiale sielkunde. Die taalwending, waarvolgens taal nie primêr die werklikheid of ons ervaring weerspieël nie maar medebepalend is daarvan, het aanleiding gegee tot produktiewe ontwikkelinge in die sosiale sielkunde. Wittgenstein se insig dat die betekenis van woorde saamhang met hulle gebruikswaarde in bepaalde taalspele het dit moontlik gemaak om sosiale kognisie te sien as 'n interaktiewe en sosiale prestasie eerder as 'n self-geslote mentale proses wat slegs gerig is op die sosiale omgewing. Poststrukturalistiese ontwikkelinge soos dié van Derrida en Foucault, geskoei op insigte van die strukturalistiese linguistiek van De Saussure, maak die sielkundige subjek, ervaring, sosiale institusies en kennis self die produkte van meer fundamentele tekstuele prosesse. Ten spyte van kontradiksies onderlê hierdie benaderings die ontwikkeling van wat genoem kan word 'n diskursiewe sosiale sielkunde: 'n dissipline gefokus op die verskillende diskursiewe aspekte van die sosiaal-sielkundige lewe en daartoe verbind om die sosiaal-sielkundige lewe nie tot individuele vlakke van analise te beperk nie.

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The past few decades have seen discussions about the nature of language in the philosophy and methodology of the social sciences become increasingly important. The insights yielded challenge the social sciences on epistemological, ontological and methodological levels, thus affecting the core regions of social scientific self-understanding as well as disciplinary formations or identities. Of primary concern here is the shift from a conception of language as a purely referential or representational system to one in which language is considered to mediate our thoughts and experiences of reality. When followed through, this understanding of language threatens to implode the traditional scientific resorts of ontological essentialism and epistemological foundationalism, and to erode the appeal of the research methods that attempt to ensure them.

Such notions may seem threatening and destabilising. They have nevertheless been adopted with great enthusiasm by critical social scientists. The linguistic turn in philosophy as a whole (Van der Merwe 1994: 92) can now be traced to various new forms of practice in the social sciences. These reveal a pervasive concern with language as primarily a non-referential, constructive system that displaces the burden of meaning from either transcendental subjectivity or a pre-existing reality to the structure or implementation of language itself. Precisely how language implements and manages meaning — whether it is a structural or a rhetorical accomplishment — is still, and will in all likelihood remain, a site of debate. For the moment it suffices to note that it is precisely the destabilising and apparently threatening effect of such new conceptions of language that induces excitement about their extension to the social sciences as models for understanding social processes and the participation of individuals in social life.

This paper describes the role of language in the critique and the reconstruction of a specific area of social scientific work, namely social psychology. Important contributions have been made in this regard, especially during the last fifteen years. There is a strong impetus in South Africa too, primarily under the auspices of Discourse Analysis. However, the development of Discourse Analysis entails more than the addition of yet another (qualitative) research method to social psychology. At stake is a much deeper conceptual reworking

of the field, as well as the gradual demarcation of metatheoretical accounts that challenge traditional models, especially those associated with information-processing approaches to social cognition. To distinguish this metatheoretical shift from more practical issues of methodology, we will refer in this paper to discursive social psychology rather than to discourse analysis.

There are, however, different approaches to language operating in the broad area of discursive social psychology. What is shared is the idea that language is not primarily a referential system. Language is addressed as discourse; as an active and constructive medium, not a mere mirror of the world. The general implication of this for social psychology is that talk and text do not give the researcher access to underlying cognitive processes or psychological states. Rather, psychological phenomena are seen to emerge from interactive and communal processes within which language plays an indispensable role — even though that role is understood and theorised differently across the various traditions.

In the light of the above the central argument of this paper is that discursive social psychology challenges the received view of meaningful social action as being determined by purely individual processes of information processing. This challenge proceeds by way of both epistemological and political critiques of cognitive individualism in social psychology. It will be argued that despite the differences and contradictions among the various forms of discursive social psychology they still provide a coherent foundation for the development of a more socially responsive and responsible social psychology.

1. The language turn in twentieth-century thought

Twentieth-century philosophy displays a pervasive concern with language. References to a "linguistic turn" are now commonplace in philosophy, referring to the way in which the various intellectual traditions, in largely independent fashion, have come to the conclusion that language is not the transparent vehicle of thought and experience which it was traditionally understood to be. Rather, language has increasingly revealed itself as an obstacle that should be accounted for in terms of its mediating and even constitutive role in thought

and experience (Van der Merwe 1994: 93). This gradual realisation surpassed the internal transformation of philosophy and also caused a "changing of the guard" in both the philosophy and the practice of the social sciences. It would in fact be justified to say that the preoccupation with language and its constructive nature is one of the most important features of the contemporary state of academic debate in the social sciences and the humanities.

The linguistic turn in philosophy depends on certain general assumptions. First, language does not passively represent thought and experience, but plays a constitutive role in our thought and our experience of reality. In some recent approaches, as will become clear, language is in fact credited with the construction of reality. Secondly, and in association with this, language is not simply a collection of names. This implies that the meanings of words are not entirely external to language — they are based neither in an objectively known reality, nor in the conceptual projections of a self-present and self-reflexive mind. The meanings of words are to a large extent either a product of relationships internal to the linguistic system, or a function of their contextual use. Thirdly, with language no longer seen as primarily referential, and the self-evident nature of thought and experience discarded in favour of a constructionist logic, our epistemological relation to reality has become dependent upon interpretation (Van der Merwe 1994: 92-4).

To relate these general comments to the discussion of social psychology we will briefly introduce two specific traditions of philosophical reflection on language. The first is the tradition of analytic philosophy and its concern with ordinary language, spearheaded and represented here by the influential work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. The second is that of post-structuralism, or more broadly, all approaches proceeding from the linguistic work of Ferdinand de Saussure. This model of language will be discussed here along with its post-structuralist deconstruction by Jacques Derrida. While these traditions and their representatives are adequate exemplars of the process under discussion, namely the shift from referential to non-referential understandings of language, they are also more than this. Discursive social psychologists actively engage with these ideas in

theoretical discussion, making them important and explicit reference points for recent developments in this discipline.

1.1 Language as use: Wittgenstein and beyond

Wittgenstein's early work was still guided by the assumption that meaning has a universal, logical structure, and that its relation to language is thus transcendental (Pears 1985: 46-68; Wittgenstein 1961). Hence it had to be possible to determine the limits of meaningful language by means of a purely philosophical reflection on logic. This focus on the transcendental, logical preconditions of the constitution of meaning reveals a very traditional understanding of language as transparent: language merely carries a pre-existing structure. Wittgenstein's early philosophy was in fact an attempt to articulate a radically positivist conception of scientific discourse. As formulated by Van der Merwe & Voestermans (1995: 30),

> Wittgenstein attempts to justify these traditional assumptions by reducing language, through a rigorous logical analysis, to the essential structure or "logical grammar" which makes the constitution of meaning — and therefore the reference of language to experience — possible.

For this, Wittgenstein reduced language to propositions consisting of elements providing logical pictures of facts or possible facts in the world. In other words, there was (or should be) an exact pictorial correspondence between the elements of a meaningful sentence or proposition and that which it depicts. It was this correspondence that made any linguistic product meaningful. The consequence of this is that many language acts we encounter in our everyday lives (as well as in science) aren't really meaningful, and thus fall outside the domain of scientific knowledge — since "the only experiences expressible or describable by means of language are actual or possible perceptions of actual or possible empirical facts" (Van der Merwe & Voestermans 1995: 31).

Wittgenstein later realised that this theory of language was clearly self-defeating. Describing meaningful language as consisting of propositions that picture objects or facts in the world is itself a linguistic statement or language act — one that cannot itself make claim to being meaningful. Since it is impossible to verify such a

view of language with reference to any sort of (possible) fact in the world, it must be dismissed as an unverifiable metaphysical speculation, and always beyond the threshold of scientific knowledge. In short, in terms of his own understanding of meaning, a theory of language such as his own is impossible. The implications of this insight were immense in the subsequent development of Wittgenstein's thought and Western philosophy at large. As Van der Merwe & Voestermans (1995: 32) state:

> By default the book on a whole history of naïvety with regard to the functions of language in our experience of the world was finally and effectively closed by showing that the function of language cannot and should not be reduced to that of representation.

Wittgenstein's "mistake" indeed created a huge philosophical shift, and he spent the rest of his life working out its implications for philosophy as well as for other disciplines, such as mathematics and psychology. In the critical commentary on his work this gave rise to the common distinction between early and later Wittgenstein (Pears 1985: 11). Just as the early philosophy resonates with the logical positivism that fed into behaviourism in psychology, the later philosophy is closely related to subsequent developments in psychology and social psychology. It is used explicitly to give form to a discursive social psychology on at least two levels. First, Wittgenstein's analytical turn to the ordinary use of language, rather than studying a supposedly transcendental and logical grammar, coupled with the consequent notion of language games, paved the way for a more socially and interactively embedded conception of cognitive processes and meaning-giving in general. Secondly, Wittgenstein was not unaware of the debates in psychology in the first half of the twentieth century, and in fact wrote extensively on the philosophy of psychology (Wittgenstein 1980a, 1980b). In these he developed clear and coherent critiques of cognitive mentalism and notions of mind and consciousness as individual and abstracted from socio-cultural processes.

Before these aspects of his thought are explicitly translated to the development of discursive social psychology (in the following sections) Wittgenstein's later understanding of language must briefly be explained. Although the later philosophy is often depicted as radically different from the earlier work, it was in fact guided by the same

concern: namely, to understand and account for the burden of meaning that rests on language. How is it achieved, and what are its limits? The difference between the earlier and the later philosophy is that Wittgenstein chose a new point of departure, one that did not assume language to be transparent or meaning to be determined by fixed essences or transcendental identities. Because ordinary language is clearly meaningful, at least in the sense of successfully facilitating communication between people, philosophy should abstain from imposing the transcendental question upon it. Philosophy should rather investigate the constitution and negotiation of meaning in various communicative contexts, and restrict itself to the task of clarifying misunderstandings.

Wittgenstein studied many *de facto* instances of language use, showing that meaning is governed by relatively stable, coherent patterns of use that can be referred to as language games. Religious language, for example, with all its concepts, statements, metaphors and symbols, constitutes a language game that differs in terms of its requirements for meaningfulness from the language game of science. One language game cannot be judged from the perspective of another, for each carries its own criteria for meaning and truth (Pears 1985: 101). Therefore, meaningful communication is not achieved in terms of a universal grammatical logic, but according to a "depth grammar" that is unique to the particular language game. This "depth grammar" can be described as "a set of publicly accepted rules or culturally determined conventions which govern the use of language within that language game" (Van der Merwe & Voestermans 1995: 33). Furthermore, these conventions are not present in the language game as fixed conceptual identities or abstract common factors. Rather, as the members of a family resemble one another without there being one exact and essential feature that links them, so the uses of words in a language game resemble one another.

The idea that the meanings of words, utterances or other speech acts are to be found in the analysis of their use, and that use is governed by rules that are conventional rather than transcendental, had a huge impact on social psychologists disillusioned with traditional social psychology. This disillusionment almost invariably related to social psychology's individualism: because social processes were redu-

ced to individual cognitive ones the discipline became progressively silent on issues of greater social concern, such as racism and gender (Parker 1989a). While some social psychologists attempted to remedy this neglect of the social by means of technical innovations (for example, arguing for natural rather than laboratory research settings), others sought a solution at the level of social psychology's philosophical assumptions about its subject matter. This was facilitated by the linguistic turn in philosophy.

The influence of analytic philosophy here, as will become clear in subsequent sections, is not confined to Wittgenstein. Partly due to his influence, analytic philosophy developed an enduring focus on ordinary language and the non-referential functions of language. Examples include the work done by J L Austin on performatives (Austin 1962), as well as other functions of language such as metaphor, rhetoric and narrative that are now studied in many contexts, among other things for the part they play in the language games of science and philosophy (Taylor 1996). Insofar as these developments are part of the legacy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, we owe them to his concern for the action orientation of language: its ability to constitute and construct, not only to represent things and facts in the world.

1.2 De Saussure and post-structuralism

Although post-structuralism also takes a non-referential approach to language, its accounts and uses of language differ in important ways from those of the tradition discussed above. These differences are accentuated by the fact that the two approaches developed independently, both in geographical terms and with regard to their intellectual precursors. The term post-structuralism is used here to refer to all developments in (especially French) philosophy and social science which draw on the linguistic work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1974), but are critical of the "positivist" programme of structuralism which became its immediate application in the social sciences. Even though the critics who are referred to as post-structuralists differ markedly from one another, it would be difficult to understand figures such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan and Roland Barthes without reference to the influence of the structuralist linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure (Kearney 1995: 1-10).

As a tradition of thinking about language and the social world, post-structuralism contributed in important ways to contemporary developments in social psychology. In some circles, for example, Foucault's definition of discourse provides the paradigmatic understanding of the unit of analysis in social psychology (Parker 1992: 5). More generally, post-structuralism's view of language does not limit its constructive capacity to ordinary use, but extends it to frameworks of meaning that precede and determine our seemingly individual and voluntary use of words. This emphasis, which in fact implies that the realities, social relations and identities we experience as natural are in fact textual, enables a political critique of strategies of power and domination, processes that naturalise realities of oppression and marginalised identities. The meanings in which our experiences are submerged are not only conventional achievements, but ideological achievements that reproduce power relations in society.

In order to understand the implications of this for social psychology it is necessary first to address the logic of De Saussure's structuralist linguistics. De Saussure's model of language informed a view of reality as radically textualised (Culler 1976: 90-117). Starting out by saying the basic element of language is the linguistic sign, he goes on to state that the sign should be sub-divided into a signifier (a word) and a signified (a concept). In terms of the traditional conception of language as nomenclature this would simply have meant that the signifier serves as a name for a concept that has an existence outside of language. However, De Saussure immediately refutes this traditional image of language by postulating what he referred to as the arbitrary nature of the sign. On the most basic level, the sign is arbitrary in the sense that no signifier can have an intrinsic link with a signified. For example, there is no intrinsic reason why the device on which this sentence is typed should be called a "keyboard" and not a "horse"; but this, of course, we already knew about language. De Saussure's contribution was a radicalisation of this idea.

More fundamentally then, the arbitrary nature of the sign also implies that language articulates its own categories and concepts, rather than just naming a pre-existing field of concepts and categories in an arbitrary fashion (Culler 1976: 23-9). This can be illustrated quite simply with reference to the problem of translation. The

mere existence of different languages confirms the first dimension of the arbitrary nature of the sign. What is called a "keyboard" in English, for example, is called a "sleutelbord" in Afrikaans. However, translation is rarely as straightforward as in the above example. When confronted with another language, we are regularly also confronted with conceptual fields, or categorisations of the world, that differ from the concepts and categories that characterise the representation of reality in our own language.

Culler (1976: 23) provides a good summary of De Saussure's understanding of the arbitrary nature of the sign, saying that "since there are no fixed universal concepts or fixed universal signifiers, the signified itself is arbitrary, and so is the signifier". The linguistic principle of the arbitrary nature of the sign, particularly the implication that the signified is itself arbitrary, immediately confounds the idea that meaning is uncontaminated by language. It also makes it possible to understand a further dimension of De Saussure's model, namely his distinction between *parole* and *langue*. With these terms he distinguishes between individual utterances or language use and an autonomous, self-regulatory system of rules governing the meaningfulness of linguistic signs and thus of individual instances of language use. Because signs are arbitrary it does not make linguistic sense to study *parole*: if the conceptual and categorical demarcations that guide signification in a language are not anchored in an extra-linguistic realm, they must somehow be conjured up by language itself. Meaning precedes the experiential encounter of its speakers with the world and therefore necessitates an account that is restricted to the level of *langue*. For De Saussure the production principle that governs meaning is to be found in the differential nature of the linguistic system. That is, signs have meaning because they differ from other signs in the system. De Saussure (1974: 117) explains this in the following manner:

> [I]n all cases, then, we discover not ideas given in advance but values emanating from the system. When we say that these values correspond to concepts, it is understood that these concepts are purely differential, not positively defined by their content but negatively defined by their relations with other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is that they are what the others are not.

In itself this theory of language destroys at the outset the traditional conception of reality as appearing to consciousness independent of language, and ushers in a notion of reality as textually constituted. The structuralism to which De Saussure was committed was, however, still characteristically positivist (and modernist) in its intended scientific scope. Its aim was nothing less than the laying bare of the complete structure of meaning in a given system at a given time. Post-structuralism, in stark contrast, is based on the premise that meaning can never be present in a way that would make such a project possible, and that interpretation is therefore a much more complex task. This re-reading is in effect a radicalisation of the idea of difference, as can be illustrated with reference to Jacques Derrida's (1974: 27-73) reading of De Saussure's model of language.

If meaning is the product of differences within the system, and if the sign is arbitrary to the extent that signifieds are not locations outside language, then the distinction between signifiers and signifieds becomes largely artificial. Because all linguistic elements are differential values within the system, signifieds are just signifiers seen from a different angle — they lose the essential referents that would make them less textual and warrant any substantial distinction from signifiers. This also means that every signified can in turn be the signifier of another signified, a process which can continue indeterminately. In Derrida's account the signified, and thus the last resort to a reality outside of language, is deconstructed; all that remain are chains of signifiers. In post-structuralist theory the arbitrary nature of the sign is taken to its extreme, as meaning that language never signifies its own exteriority. As Derrida (1974: 158) would have it, "there is nothing outside the text".

The fact that language continuously folds back upon itself does not mean it is a closed system. While structuralism would still have supposed such closure, and therefore the possibility of assuming a fixed hermeneutic position in relation to it, Derrida's deconstruction of the relation between the signifier and the signified effectively showed not only that meaning is the product of difference, but that it is always deferred. Because a signified is always a signifier to something else, the process of signification is itself always a simultaneous arrival and departure of meaning. The retrieval or tracing of meaning

is always suspended according to a (non)logic which Derrida calls *différance* (Caputo 1987: 144-5). Any attempt to create a fixed hermeneutic position, or a final interpretation, will yield only the traces of signifiers and signifieds which are, yet again, the traces of new signifiers. Language is thus fundamentally open, and meaning is always undecided. This undecidability of meaning makes signification a site of struggle too; it always calls forth processes of both construction and deconstruction.

It is not necessary to dwell on the further complexities of Derrida's reading or on other post-structuralist developments at this stage. For the purposes of this paper the important principles arising from structuralism and post-structuralism in terms of the concept of language as a non-referential system can be summarised as follows. First, meaning is a structural and not an individual affair. Paul Ricoeur (1979: 261) formulates this structuralist dimension very well when he says it implies a shift from seeing social reality as the referent of language to seeing it

> as a system of codified signs; if the various orders — economic, family, political and religious — can be held to be systems of communication governed by structured laws like that of language, then it is no longer possible to say that signs are of sociological origin; one must say, rather, that society is of semiological origin.

Post-structuralist developments would agree on the semiological or textual origin of social institutions and social life (including individual identity and experience), but would contest an attempt to see the textual realm as entirely codified. The second principle derived from these developments is therefore that, because it is the product of an open system of differences, meaning is also indeterminate. Together these principles had important and interesting ramifications in the social sciences, and found fertile ground in disciplines such as sociology and anthropology, in particular, from as early as the 1950s. Yet (social) psychologists have only recently seriously begun to incorporate post-structuralist ideas into their discipline. One reason for this reluctance has been the metatheoretical, cultural and political currency of individualism in traditional social psychology. Language as theorised from a post-structuralist perspective decentres the human subject: individual experience and the notion of the person must

themselves be seen as textual effects. In other words, semiotic analyses are not performed on an individual level of analysis, but inevitably on a broad social or cultural level. This is directly at odds with traditional social psychology's individual-centred approach to social life.

In recent years, however, individualism has come to be seen as the source of the majority of the conceptual and political impasses experienced by social psychology (Parker 1989b: 56-69). Conceptually, individualism is based on an understanding of mental life and cognitive processes as centralised and existing prior to social life. In the next two sections, based on Wittgenstein's insights, it will be argued that such an understanding rests on epistemological fallacies. However, post-structuralist critiques provide different explanations for the currency of individualism in social psychology, as well as explaining its effects. This will be discussed in more detail in a later section, but it is important to clarify at least some of these critiques here. Individualism is an important cultural value in modern Western societies, having come into prominence partly in response to the social requirements created by such developments as industrialisation, free market capitalism and democracy. Social psychology not only mirrors this cultural value in its own individualism, but helped give Western individualism its peculiar form by providing many of the theoretical and practical artefacts (such as the measurement of attitude and opinion polling) used to regulate the "society of individuals" (Elias 1991). For this reason traditional social psychology can be critiqued as socially conservative. For example: explaining racism on the level of cognitive processes neglects the social genesis of discrimination and the institutionalised nature of power differences in a society. Racism becomes a natural phenomenon to be attributed to our limited cognitive capacities. For this reason Edward Sampson (1981: 730) went so far as to say that cognitive social psychology is an ideology.

While there are major differences between the various non-referential approaches to language discussed thus far, they do provide the theoretical resources necessary to move beyond individualism in social psychology. In the remaining sections the focus will be on strategies for producing a socially responsive social psychology derived from both ordinary language and post-structuralist ideas.

2. Discourse as doing: a new approach to social cognition

This section returns to the ordinary language approach established by Wittgenstein, and reflects on its incorporation into social psychology. Accounts of language and meaning-giving that focus on performance and usage facilitate an understanding of the individual as an active agent of meaning without falling into the trap of reducing social processes to individual cognitive ones. The reason for this is that when the focus is placed on what people do with language it becomes clear that meaning-giving is an interactional, contextual and even contradictory (and thus argumentative) process.

It has already been stated that traditional forms of social psychology, with its cognitive and especially its information processing metaphors, rarely escapes individualistic reductionism. The dominant cognitive approaches to social psychology have been cognitive dissonance theory, attribution theory, and lately social cognition. All these approaches focus on purely individual mental processes and states like achieving cognitive balance, decision-making, attitudes and attitude change, stereotypes and social schemas. The individual is set up as a solitary perceptual subject, and cognitive processes are therefore theorised as ontologically separated from social interaction. Human cognition is an isolated, private and natural process, functionally involved with the processing of information and not itself dependent on social processes. Social behaviour, it follows, can be reduced to the complex architecture and processes of an intra-psychic realm. By means of this treatment of its subject matter, cognitive social psychology perpetuates an ontological distinction between cognition and society.

Given these limitations, it is necessary to find better conceptions of what is at stake psychologically when people engage in actions such as remembering, categorising, attributing, judging and disclaiming (Edwards & Potter 1992: 1-11). An important step forward is the acknowledgement that traditional information-processing accounts of cognition depend on language's being treated as a transparent medium of thought. A different understanding of social cognition and of meaning-making in general therefore emerges when lan-

guage is encountered as non-referential and performative in the sense established by Wittgenstein and his heirs.

That traditional cognitive social psychology bases its theory of meaning on the assumption that language is transparent and referential is forcefully revealed in the methodological form that most of its inquiries take. Social psychology is traditionally described as the discipline that studies social thought and thinking. Although this can only be revealed in language, it is not language itself that is addressed; the unit of analysis is an internal process, namely cognition or information processing. Language is thus informative for social psychology, but since the methodological task of the cognitive social psychologist is to move through language to the underlying cognitive processes and structures, language should be made transparent. Consider the technology of the questionnaire as an example. It is constructed by de-contextualising and generalising individual propositions, so that they can be presented to a respondent as a circumscribed set of statements to which s/he can respond in an equally determined manner: a set of items that from the outset encloses its own universe of possible psychological meanings.

Discursive social psychology attempts to undermine these traditional assumptions and still provide an adequate account of meaning-making processes. It does this by saying that social psychology cannot assume language to be transparent without allowing for serious theoretical, empirical and methodological reductions. As Edwards & Potter (1992: 12) make clear, "the understanding of everyday practices has been deformed by a combination of methodological prescription and a failure to theorize language as the primary mode of social activity". Or, as Potter & Wetherell (1987: 1) write, "the failure to accommodate to discourse damages their [traditional social psychologists'] theoretical and empirical adequacy". To rectify these reductions the focus in social psychology should shift from assumed mental processes to the study of discourse, which here means language as it is used, or language as social action. Focussing on the use of language in this way enables the discipline still to address traditional constructs such as attribution and categorisation, while now conceptualising them as discursive processes, and therefore as contex-

tual and rhetorical achievements (Billig 1991: 1-5). In the words of Edwards & Potter (1992: 2-3):

> [R]ather than seeing such discursive constructions as expressions of speakers' underlying cognitive states, they are examined in the context of their occurrence as situated and occasioned constructions whose precise nature makes sense, to participants and analysts alike, in terms of the social actions those descriptions accomplish.

Categorisation, or social categorisation as it is often referred to in order to locate it as a concern of social psychology, provides a useful example of this dimension of the discursive approach. The categorisation of the social world, and reacting to other people as members of various social categories, is traditionally theorised as an intrapsychic cognitive process that only becomes social when it is directed towards a stimulus domain constituted of other people. Discursive social psychology, on the level discussed here, challenges such an application of cognitive levels of explanation to social thinking. It argues that it is possible to disconnect social psychology from general (cognitive) psychology by maintaining that categorisation can be addressed more thoroughly as a feature of social thinking when it is seen as a discursive rather than an information-processing phenomenon. In other words, when categorisation is seen as something that people do with language in communicative contexts rather than a hidden mental operation merely reflected in language.

The work of Michael Billig provides a good example of this general tendency and of categorisation in particular. Billig (1985: 79-103) discusses categorisation in the context of the study of prejudice, an important traditional focus of social psychological research and theorising. The cognitive (information-processing) revolution in psychology had an interesting effect on the study of prejudice. While earlier approaches, such as the work on the authoritarian personality (Adorno *et al* 1950), saw prejudice as a cognitive style that should be distinguished from tolerant thinking on account of its rigidity and inability to accept ambivalence and difference, information-processing accounts made prejudice a natural and general characteristic of all thinking. We all simplify and distort the social world because of our limited information-processing capacity. This concept remained part of social psychology and infiltrated social cognition

and inter-group theories as well, causing Billig (1985: 80) to lament that the concept of tolerance all but "slips from the social psychological agenda".

Billig (1985) indicates that categorisation as conceptualised in cognitive social psychology plays a crucial part in the above-mentioned shift. Four themes are relevant here. First, categorisation is seen as a basic element or building-block of all thinking. In other words, nobody concerned with the bestowal of meaning on the social environment can afford to overlook categorisation. Billig (1985: 81) quotes Henri Tajfel (1981) as saying "social categorization lies at the heart of commonsense, everyday knowledge and understanding [...] it is central in social life". Secondly, the process of categorisation involves the simplification and the subsequent distortion of the stimulus field. Since it is a function of a general cognitive economy driven by limited information-processing capacity, the social perceiver is always prone to do injustice to what s/he perceives. Thirdly, and in relation to the above, categorisation leads inevitably to stereotypical thinking about other people. Finally, if stereotypical perception is a natural response, prejudice is also to a certain extent inevitable. That is, in terms of this particular model of human thinking, there is no conceptual room for any other type of thought than that which is prejudiced.

The issue of debate here is not whether people are normally prejudiced or tolerant and open towards other people. The problem is that prejudice is seen as inevitable, natural, and an entirely individual constraint on social perception. This completely ignores the fact that antagonism between social groups has its base in historical and ideological phenomena, and that social groups themselves are not natural but constructed categories. In reality people do not arrive at their derogatory stereotypes in isolation from other people, but through sharing with other people a discursive space and interests in particular meanings and social outcomes. Moreover, and Billig makes this very clear in his subsequent writings, even when people do engage in prejudiced thinking, this thinking is not as rigid or as consistent as it is made out to be. In order for statements to be meaningful and compelling, they have to be continuously negotiated as such. They have to argue for particular versions of events and skilfully close

down alternative positions. The construction of a prejudiced account of other people, an out-group, will therefore reveal many contradictions and depend on the sophisticated use of disclaimers and other rhetorical devices (Billig 1991: 49). Standard questionnaires, premised as they are on the consistency and often the rigidity of thought, miss something very important about how individuals really make sense of their experiences and social life.

Billig (1985: 82) proposes an interesting theoretical advance in the study of categorisation (and prejudice) which overcomes what he calls the traditional bureaucratic model of thought: categorisation always has a dialectical counterpart, namely particularisation. He explains this notion in the following manner:

> If categorization refers to the process by which a particular stimulus is placed in a general category, or grouped with other stimuli, then particularization refers to the process by which a particular stimulus is distinguished from a general category or from other stimuli. The term 'particularization' would cover the process by which an individual stimulus might be extracted from a category or by which it is distinguished from the category in the first place; above all it covers the processes by which a particular stimulus is treated as a particular or 'special case'.

Because traditional perceptual accounts cannot explain such flexibilities in thinking, and must see categorisation as a natural process divorced from the particular demands made by the communicative context, it is necessary to find a better conception of this process. Billig suggests that language might be useful in this regard. Language forms an integral part of the process of social thinking, and it is not bound by the perceptual and functional constraints imposed by the traditional cognitive models. In Billig's (1985: 85) own words,

> although perceptual schemes may simplify information, it is not clear that linguistic categories must do so. Thus language can be used both to simplify and to enrich; similarly, language can be used to categorize or 'lump together' particulars, but it can also be used to particularize and to argue for special cases.

Since it is in and through language that social thinking occurs, Billig argues that language itself provides a better model for understanding what is traditionally studied as social cognition. Empirically speaking this means that it would be more productive for social psycholo-

gy to focus "on the actual categories of language, rather than the inferred categories of perception" (Billig 1987: 135). How do people manage to bestow meaning on the world by carving it up into parts, and what is it that they achieve when they do this? This opens social psychology up immensely, because the actual categories of language are negotiated among people, have a historical genesis, and resonate with ideological themes that naturalise aspects such as the particular configurations of inter-group relations, status and power in a society. Potter & Wetherell (1987: 116), in their important introduction to discursive social psychology, provide a good evaluation of Billig's contribution to the study of social categorisation:

> Instead of seeing categorization as a natural phenomenon — something which just happens, automatically — it is regarded as a complex and subtle social accomplishment. [T]his work emphasizes the action orientation of categorization in discourse. It asks how categories are flexibly articulated in the course of certain sorts of talk and writing to accomplish particular goods, such as blamings and justifications.

It has been argued here that the incorporation of performative accounts of language into social psychology redirects the focus of the discipline to the "action orientation of talking and writing" (Edwards & Potter 1992: 2). This recognition of the rhetorical and performative aspects of language, and thus of the situated and emergent nature of social psychological phenomena, therefore disentangles social psychology from cognitive psychology, both theoretically and empirically. As Potter & Wetherell (1987: 35) state, "the point is that analysis and explanation can be carried out at a social psychological level which is coherently separable from the cognitive". The importance of this, of course, is that social psychology becomes more responsive to social and historical dynamics.

3. Language, mind, and society

The above delineation of discursive social psychology does not mean that it merely disentangles itself from the traditional cognitive metatheory, leaving the assumptions of traditional cognitive psychology unquestioned. While it is true that discursive social psychologists at times refrain from taking on cognitive psychology on a conceptual

level, this is often a pragmatic bracketing rather than a philosophical agreement with the dominant paradigm. Certain general problems are acknowledged with regard to cognitive metatheory, but set aside in order to focus on the practical and methodological aspects of discursive analysis itself. As Edwards & Potter (1992: 19) make clear, they "bracket, or set aside, the issue of reductionism and origins in favour of an orientation to method and analysis". But not all discursive social psychologists choose to remain at this level of critique — in fact, even the authors mentioned in other contexts have provided strong foundational critiques of cognitive psychology and the ideal of a purely individual psychology. Discursive social psychology will now be described from the perspective of the philosophy of language providing the impetus for foundational critiques of cognitivism, mentalism and the individualism they entail.

In this regard the focus will remain on Wittgenstein and the application of his work to psychology. A shift from a referential to a non-referential model of language denies psychology any fantasy of retreating into a notion of mind and meaning-making (cognition) that is centralised and functional, or operates according to formal laws and symbolic or propositional representations. Such a notion of mind, which is highly characteristic of cognitive psychology and underlies the description of cognition as information processing, is only possible when language is assumed to be transparent. Even though cognitive processes are not directly observable, they can then be treated as if they exist within individual minds independent of language.

Once the referential model of language is challenged it becomes difficult to maintain that the concepts of psychological language really refer to discrete mental entities or processes. According to Wittgenstein's later understanding of linguistic meaning as socially and conventionally bound up in language games, as discussed above, we discover the meaning of words by learning their currency within a specific speech community. As Billig (1997: 39) puts it: "We learn how to use words such as 'table' and 'chair' by observing how these words are used: in this way, we learn the appropriate language games, in which such words are used". Linguistic meaning is regulated, in other words, by public criteria. Chairs and tables, of course, are physical phenomena and it is easy to argue for a referential understand-

ing of language based on them. This is not the case with words invested with psychological meaning, such as "remembering" or "understanding". They also owe their meaning to the accomplishment of socially produced criteria, and it is wrong to assume that they refer to discrete mental states or process. What counts as an instance of "understanding," for example, cannot be related to inner mental acts or representations. Wittgenstein (1988: para. 332) exposes this traditional fallacy by means of the following seductive little "exercise": "Say a sentence and think it; say it with understanding. — And now do not say it, just do what you accompanied it with when you said it."

It should immediately be clear that this is impossible. It is impossible to engage in mental activity without engaging in language. And language (like meaning) is a public or social phenomenon. In these terms, Wittgenstein challenges the mentalistic theory of meaning and thus locates mind (and cognitive events) in the public or social domain. He shows compellingly that when we think, inevitably in language, "there aren't 'meanings' going through my mind in addition to the verbal expressions: the language is itself the vehicle of thought" (Wittgenstein 1988: par 329). Cognitive psychology buys into mentalism because it neglects a basic feature of language, namely that it is not primarily referential. In terms of seeing the individual agent of meaning as an information-processing system, the lesson to be drawn from Wittgenstein's critique is that "we don't first process information (in our heads), and then act according to the forthcoming instructions"; in other words, there is no "dual processing of information" (Durrheim 1997: 179).

It should now be clear that meaningful conduct cannot be abstracted from a social interactional context. Cognition is always located and the achievement of meaning takes place "outside", not "within" us. The full implication of these ideas for psychology in general has translated into what many now refer to as social constructionism (Danziger 1997: 399-416; Gergen 1985: 255-265; Shotter 1993a: 1). Because there is no corresponding reality merely mirrored by our statements, constructionism in psychology entails that mind and cognition are de-centred from the individual to the conversational

sphere of interpersonal and cultural life. Psychology should therefore not concern itself with imposing its own language games but rather:

> provide an account of psychological 'objects' (mind, intentions, reasoning, etc), human action, and social practice by showing the 'conditions of possibility' within which they are imbedded (Durrheim 1997: 181).

These conditions of possibility are primarily linguistic: they are the language games and depth grammars which Wittgenstein (1988) describes. In other words (making the link with the previous section clear) they are meaningful frameworks that function as sources from which particular individual speech acts and identities are made possible. Psychology itself, since it traditionally assumed its own language games to be simple truths, adds to this background against which people negotiate meaning. Such a focus can thus encompass a critical reflection on the way in which Western psychology found its language, as well as refurnishing psychology as a science that studies multiple constructions of persons and meaningful actions in various contexts.

In other words, according to social constructionism, insofar as there can be an ontological base for psychology as a science of persons, this should be sought in language. As Harré & Gillet (1994: 27) state, "discursive phenomena, for example, acts of remembering, are not manifestations of hidden subjective, psychological phenomena. They are the psychological phenomena". John Shotter (1993b: 73), another important social constructionist psychologist, agrees that reality is conversationally constituted and maintained, and follows this up by saying that "an understanding of anything psychological is an understanding of the role of language in human affairs". The developments in language discussed in this section thus underlie a discursive model in which the significance of discourse transcends the study of performance to an ontology

> in which utterances, interpreted as speech acts, become the primary entities in which minds become personalized, as privatized discourses. In this ontology, people are locations for discourses, both public and private (Harré & Gillet 1994: 36).

The above remarks should make it clear that the relation between general and social psychology has undergone a radical shift. It is no

longer possible to see social psychology as a derivative of a general psychology located within an isolated individual mind. Rather, the non-referential nature of language de-centres psychology, making it to be social primarily, and only secondarily individual. Psychological phenomena are emergent properties, and discursive processes can be used to explain the social construction of individual persons as positioned vantage-points of experience.

In combination, the last two sections have traced the implications of analytic or ordinary language philosophy (with the focus on Wittgenstein) for social psychology. The discussion in the present section has specifically made it clear that the introduction of language to social psychology adds philosophically to the empirical and theoretical shifts described in the previous section. It becomes possible to address social psychology as a completely separate disciplinary formation.

4. Discourse and power

The developments discussed thus far have focused on language in its rhetorical or performative sense. However, the analysis does not end with individual speech acts: because meanings do not emerge without a prior background that guides, constrains and enables what can be said, there has been a further focus on what David Bloor (1983: 6) calls "the contribution that society makes to our knowledge". This aspect of meaning was well provided for by Wittgenstein's notion of language games, which implies treating language not only as located performance, but as constrained by a history of use. However, while it focuses on the prior resources on which people draw, Wittgenstein's work nevertheless gives a limited account of power: language games are consensual domains, and there is no questioning of who is favoured by particular patterns of signification, or who is rendered silent. The organisation of social psychology around the conceptions of language discussed thus far can therefore lead to another form of neglect of the political nature of social life (Parker 1996: 363-84). This feeds into the concerns of some critical social psychologists that social constructionist approaches may treat discursive processes as

purely linguistic, thus neglecting the material aspects of social practices (Parker 1998).

It is precisely this dimension, the relation between discourse, power and material practices, that is added by post-structuralist approaches to language in social psychology (Henriques *et al* 1984: 1-9; Parker 1992: 1). As has been made clear, post-structuralist theories see language as a larger, more abstract signifying system that makes individual usage derivative of the internal logic of the system. It is therefore not concerned with what individuals can achieve with language, but with how language itself constructs subjectivity, experience and possible patterns of social interaction. While we have discussed Derrida's work as a general introduction to a post-structuralist account of language and meaning, it is Michel Foucault's understanding of discourse, power and social life that has exerted the strongest influence on social psychology from a broadly post-structuralist orientation. More specifically, his work provides a valuable example of the impact of a post-structuralist approach to meaning and discourse on the relationship between social scientific knowledge, individual subjectivity and the reproduction of power relations in society.

It is outside the scope of this article to provide a detailed introduction to Foucault's work. However, some brief comments will suffice to show how post-structuralist conceptions of discourse differ from what has been discussed up to this point, informing a social psychology not so much interested in how individuals construct social reality through language as in how discourses and discursive practices position individuals and pattern their experience. Late in his career, Foucault (1982: 777) saw his own intellectual project as being "to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects". The creation of such a history does not comprise a succession of discrete events, but the uncovering of the structuring principles that underlie and make possible ways of talking and doing, and understanding ourselves, that are dominant in particular eras.

This approach can be illustrated in terms of the development of the human sciences and Foucault indeed focuses on these. Since language is not transparent, but rather constructs the world as a textual domain (in this his De Saussurian roots are clear), the birth and

growth of the human sciences in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries contributed something very significant: it ushered in the individual human being as itself an object of human understanding and knowledge in ways that it had not been before (Foucault 1972). The human sciences (and psychology in particular) therefore did not discover the hidden depths of the modern individual and the psychological subject. They constructed the individual being as a psychological subject. Knowledge is thus socially constructed in that it belongs to particular historical periods and has no fixed referent outside of the discursive practices that produce it. The human sciences are therefore seen to construct the objects of their knowledge claims, and in this way prepare them for social regulation.

While the role of language or discourse shifted in his work, Foucault maintained an account of the subject as an effect rather than an agent of social processes. The appearance of discovery and truth that emanate from the human sciences depends on generative epistemological configurations that precede and make possible particular disciplinary formations. These configurations — Foucault (1972) called them *épistèmes* — function like Saussure's notion of *langue*: they are not to be equated with actual scientific statements but rather exist as abstract conditions of possibility for a range of possible statements and practices regarding their own textually demarcated objects. What is more, these epistemological frameworks and related discursive practices also determine and delineate the places from which it is possible to speak and act, to be referred to here as subject positions. More radical than Kuhn's (1970) notion of paradigm, *épistèmes* not only determine the discursive space and regulative activities of the (human) sciences; they reveal themselves in and structure all discursive activities and social practices, giving rise to pervasive textual matrices from which particular forms of subjectivity emerge.

In his later writings (especially 1977 and 1981) Foucault became more concerned with the role of power in discursive practices. The construction of the person that emerged from the discourses of the modern era, and specifically from the human sciences, medicine and various new forms of social control, produced a subjectivity that is regulated and subjected to societal scrutiny in a unique way: the modern subject is self-regulatory. In order to understand this it is im-

portant to grasp the unique way in which Foucault conceived of power and its relation to knowledge (and thus specifically to the human sciences). In this regard Ian Parker (1989b: 61-2), who played an important role in introducing Foucault's ideas to social psychology, provides a good description:

> Power is usually thought of as the exercise of the will of one social actor over others. This model of power is most appropriate, according to Foucault, to the period up to the end of the eighteenth century. After that date the growth in population, and the concentration of economic production, had reached the point where 'disciplinary' power became dominant. This is a type of power that operates independent of the intentions of individuals. The first model of power can be thought of as 'sovereign' power. The second is relational — 'disciplinary'. The character of disciplinary power is masked by the invitation that modern discourse makes to us to assume full responsibility for our acts and intentions.

The invitation to which Parker refers is present in many different discursive practices in contemporary society: practices such as certain forms of therapy, advice columns in newspapers and magazines, and television talk shows; practices that also involve material aspects alongside their linguistic dimension. What they all have in common, and for Foucault (1981) this was one of the keys to understanding modern subjectivities, is a confessional structure. The implication of this approach to discourse for a discipline wanting to study individual lives and identities in social worlds is that it should always look for the configurations of power/knowledge or discourses that predetermine and structure human experience in all contexts where individual subjectivity is at stake. The focus should be on how identities and forms of relationships are institutionally structured and maintained. Along with this it should analyse the effect of the continuation of these discourses on the maintenance of relations of power in a society. Consider the following explanation of the relevance of Foucault's approach to discourse studies for discursive social psychology:

> Foucauldian discourse analytic approaches allow us to connect directly with issues of power and subjectification. These approaches

> help us address how we are made into selves that speak, how we experience the self as if it were an individual enclosed thing, and the way in which modes of disciplinary apparatus govern us. They are also particularly useful for examining the circulation of psychological talk through culture (Burman *et al* 1997: 2).

5. Conclusion

The many differences between these approaches to discourse are clear. The post-structuralist approach focuses not on the rhetorical use of language, but on discourses as abstract frameworks of meaning that are generative of individual instances of language use. Discourses are institutionalised ways of making sense of and experiencing the world. The notion of institutionalisation here is very important, because discourses are not seen as consensual domains but as mechanisms which, through the way they engage individuals, ensure the maintenance of power relations. As this notion of discourse plays itself out in social psychology, activity, agency and experience retain less currency. Post-structuralist approaches also show less concern for attempts to establish "better" conceptions of mind or cognition. They are more concerned with how notions of agency as a location of meaning are socially constructed and what purposes they serve.

These differences often inform continuing philosophical and metatheoretical debates, the most important of which to this discussion is the well known agency-structure debate. While this debate demands attention, it may also detract from the unified contribution made by all these approaches to the creation of new possibilities for social psychology. Clearly, discursive approaches all share a critique of individualism in social psychology, a basic constructionist understanding of knowledge and experience, and the attribution of great importance to language as a constitutive aspect in social life. It is, however, true that ordinary language approaches may overstate the rhetorical ability of people to create meaning and construct positions and identities in talk (the agency side of the debate). This may lead to a blindness to the insidious nature of power in social life. On the other hand, post-structural approaches often pay too much attention to power (the structure side), underplaying the obvious abilities of

social actors to resist and to act in different ways. Unfortunately, on the philosophical level this debate is probably limitless.

However, there are now enough examples of work in discursive social psychology that draw on both ordinary language and post-structuralist ideas, and pay attention to both creativity of agency and the constraining aspects of structure — and it is precisely the attempt to work with different approaches to language in social life, as described here, that makes this possible. Empirical studies show that individuals are incredibly sophisticated in their rhetorical and discursive activities, but that meanings are always related to broader social themes, often with ideological effects. In fact, the tension between structure and agency, society and the individual, should be exploited rather than explained away. In this regard social psychology mirrors the real social tensions, characteristic of modernisation and social change, be-tween individual lives and social processes, and between personal identity projects and group ties. Social psychology should be the discipline that thematises these tensions, and for this purpose the broad area of discursive social psychology provides a valuable metatheoretical framework.

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