Discursive Psychology

theory, method and applications

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DISCURSIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Chapter contents

Discursive psychology (DP) is one of the most vibrant and exciting approaches to emerge within the social sciences in the past thirty years. It provides a lens through which we can examine the social world, to render visible the social practices through which people and their practices are made accountable and factual. It enables us to make sense of talk and text, of the activities that we are engaged in whenever we are interacting with other people. It captures the moments in which psychology is produced and made consequential in the social world. As such, not only does it offer a radical re-working of psychological concepts, it also holds enormous potential for applied research (indeed, it has been argued that it is, by its nature, already applied; see Chapter 10). This chapter will introduce you to the basic underlying principles of DP: what it is, what it isn't, what inspired it, how it developed, and how it contrasts with cognitivist approaches within psychology. It will distil the core arguments of DP to provide you with a clear, practical way to get to grips with DP whether you are completely new to this field or building your analytical skills.

There are, however, two things that you need to know before you proceed. First, the theoretical arguments and principles that underpin DP are intellectually challenging; they require us to think and reflect on what we are studying, and why we are studying it. There will be ideas that challenge what we know about talk, about cognition, and indeed about reality. So yes, you will need to work hard. And yes, it might change you. You

might never consider talk and interaction in the same way again. Second, there will be arguments, critiques and political rhetoric. This is a feisty and dynamic area of research to be in. Like any approach that challenges the mainstream, there are vehement critics of DP, and this is before you even consider the academic wrangling that goes on within the field of discourse analysis. As my Dad always says, it would be a dull world if we were all the same. So all this debate makes for a rather exciting and interesting place to be.

What is discursive psychology?

Let us begin, then, with the basics, and start with a definition:

> Discursive psychology is a theoretical and analytical approach to discourse which treats talk and text as an object of study in itself, and psychological concepts as socially managed and consequential in interaction.

The version of DP that is the focus of this book was developed by Derek Edwards and Jonathan Potter, at Loughborough University in the UK, following from earlier work developed with Margaret Wetherell. It treats talk and text as, first and foremost, part of social practices rather than as a reflection of inner cognitive processes. It treats discourse as *doing things* in interaction and examines the ways in which psychological concepts are produced and made consequential in interaction.

DP is a form of discourse analysis, and as such is part of a much broader framework of approaches for understanding discourse (see Chapter 2). It is interdisciplinary, cutting across disciplinary boundaries (such as between psychology and linguistics) and within subject boundaries (such as between the topics of memory and attributions in psychological research). As such, it is predominantly a qualitative approach, in that it analyses words, but is not against quantification. It does, however, challenge the notion that psychological practices can be reduced to numbers. In this sense, it is more akin to a methodology than a method: a programme of work (Edwards, 2012) or a meta-theory (Edwards & Potter, 1992; see also Potter, 2003). There are a set of core principles that underpin the approach DP takes to research and analysis, and when we use DP we need to embrace both the theoretical assumptions and the methods of doing research. This means that it cannot be taken 'off the shelf' as just another way of analysing discursive data, but it also means that it is a coherent, theoretically grounded, and rigorous approach to research.

DP is concerned with psychological issues, but psychology *as it is lived* by people in everyday life – for example, how people make the minds, identities or emotions of others relevant in interaction – by their practices and social interactions rather than their individual thoughts or experiences. It therefore starts with social practices rather than psychological states. Psychological concepts become the object of study, not the

framework that determines theory and analysis. So a psychological concept such as 'attitudes' or 'food preference' is not treated a priori as a fact; instead, the focus is on how this concept is described, invoked and consequential for social interaction. DP does not try to 'get inside' people's minds or attempt to understand their motivations or attitudes. This is a subtle but important difference. Like other psychological concepts, the issue of cognition is treated as an analytical object (something we study without first making assumptions about what it is) rather than an analytical framework (something we make assumptions about and which then directs what we study).

Let us consider an example to illustrate what DP is and why we might use it. The short extract below represents a brief section of conversation between a boy (Joseph) and his Mum at the family dinner table. Some of the family members have finished eating, but Joseph still has quite a lot of food on his plate. The transcript here is presented in turn-by-turn order (as you will see later in the book) but is simplified to make it easier to read:

Mum: could you eat a bit more Joseph please, instead of staring into space

Joseph: no, I don't like it

Mum: a little bit more if you don't mind

Joseph: no *((shakes head))*

There are many ways in which we might approach this piece of interaction, to understand what is going on between the mother and her son. We might try to figure out why Mum is asking her son to eat more; perhaps she is concerned that he is not eating enough or she may be trying to avoid wasting food. We might also approach it from Joseph's point of view: why does he not like it? Is there another reason that he does not feel like eating it? Alternatively, we might look more broadly at the cultural conventions that determine how food is eaten in a particular way, with family members sitting round a dinner table, and with it being normative that a mother (or parent) is in part responsible for how much, and what, a child eats.

In each of these possible interpretations, we would be making assumptions about what people are thinking or feeling, or about the existence of cultural norms that shape how we eat. These interpretations are potentially limitless, and hard to evidence from the basis of a single piece of conversation. In contrast, DP focuses attention on the social interaction at just this point in time: on what actions are being performed (requests to eat more food, refusals) as well as the psychological business that is being managed (Joseph's appetite and his food preferences, as well as Mum's authority to ask him to eat more food). For example, what is being accomplished when Joseph says 'I don't like it', as an addition to the 'no'? We do not have to look 'behind' the words to find out what is going on here. We can examine the interaction *as a piece of interaction*, in a specific context, and as consequential for the people therein. In this case, it is what gets eaten, and who is held accountable for not eating food. As we will see later, there are problems

in treating words as simply a reflection of people's thoughts and experiences. Instead, we can examine how realities are produced through the ways in which people live their lives and through the discursive practices that make up these lives.

Box 1.1: A comment about names

As we will see in Chapter 2 (see also Box 1.5) there is more than one version of discursive psychology, just as there are many forms of discourse analysis. One of the ways in which we can distinguish between these forms is through reference to the names of researchers who have developed, or who use, those approaches. For example, we might refer to the form of DP advocated in this book as 'Edwards and Potter DP'. When reading discourse analytic research, it can be helpful to check which names are referred to, to help you identify which form of DA they are using, if this is not specified. The problem with this, however, is that it risks promoting some researchers at the expense of others, and associating an approach with individuals rather than as a collective body of work. Yet DP was the culmination of a number of different inter-disciplinary ideas and research findings. It is not owned by anyone; it is not a 'thing'. Instead, it is a theoretical and analytical approach, a way of examining the world in a particular way; a type of camera lens through which we can investigate life. So use names to help familiarise yourself with DP, but remember that researchers can move between approaches, and approaches themselves will grow and evolve.

What discursive psychology is *not*

While discursive psychology provides a unique and powerful means of understanding discourse, interaction and psychology, as with any approach there are limits to what it can do. Being aware of these limitations – as well as the possible misconceptions of DP that have emerged over the years (see also the FAQ section) – will better equip you to develop your own competence in this area.

Discursive psychology is *not:*

A critique of psychology. DP does challenge a body of psychological research – and particularly, that which relies on a cognitivist interpretation of language in social settings – but psychology as a discipline is much broader than this. DP is not a threat to psychology, and should instead be regarded as a different way of doing psychology.

The application of discourse analysis to psychology. Psychology is a very broad discipline, and there are numerous theoretical and analytical approaches within the

discipline; so there is no single notion of 'psychology' for discourse analysis to be applied to. Instead, we can understand DP as a re-working of the very objects of psychology itself, of the concepts used by psychologists to define individuals and their behaviours. So it begins with people's practices in everyday life, and in how psychological concepts (e.g., attitude) or processes (e.g., appetite) are enacted and contested in social interaction.

A causal account. DP does not provide evidence for *why things occur* in terms of underlying causal factors. This is because it is argued that discourse constructs rather than reflects reality, so what people say is not a reflection of what has happened or what their intentions are (see 'core principles' section). What it can do, instead, is to identify patterns, norms and regular features of interaction that might be produced in different settings. In that way, it can account for what happens (i.e., provide an explanation for) but not predict or determine what *will* happen (i.e., suggest a causal relationship).

A research method. DP is a methodology, not a method, in that it provides a theoretical framework for understanding discourse and interaction, and that in turn provides for a particular way of doing research. But it is not a research method that can be combined simply with other methods or theories. It requires an understanding and application of specific theoretical principles. In the same way, other research methodologies also make assumptions about the world and what we can know about it, but they may not make these explicit. DP does; it is very clear about how we can understand discourse and how this plays out in practice.

A psychology of language. Many textbooks on psychological research on language focus on issues such as how we develop language (as babies and infants), how we mentally process and understand meaning, language and communication, and how we produce speech. There is often very little content about how we use language in everyday social settings; much of psycholinguistic work is based on laboratory studies or situations that are set up to limit variables and prescribe what can be said or understood. The use of the term 'discourse', by contrast, highlights the focus on *language in use*, and to capture both talk (spoken) and text (written) language, in its many forms.

Behaviourism. DP focuses on talk and text as social practices, and examines interaction between people rather than individual 'behaviours' as separate events. Unlike behaviourism, DP does not reduce discourse and interaction to an individualistic level and it works with participants' own categories and sense-making practices (not with analysts' categories about inputs and outputs). Unlike behaviourism, DP does not treat psychological concerns as analytically unavailable. Quite the contrary; these are analysed in terms of how they are invoked, constructed and made consequential in social interaction.

Impression management. Goffman's theories of the presentation of self and impression management assumed a 'real' self behind the mask and performance in social settings,

and that our behaviours are motivated by maintaining a particular role or 'face'. By contrast, DP argues that there is no single real self that is being maintained (it is a relativist approach; see 'core principles') and that our identities are multiple and produced in interaction. It also argues that there is no way of getting 'behind' the discourse; that motivations are analysable in interaction, not hidden somewhere internally.

Linguistic relativity. This is the argument that language shapes thought. It is sometimes referred to as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. By contrast, DP is concerned with discourse in social interaction and how it is constructed to accomplish particular actions in specific contexts. It makes no claims about 'thought' as an internal object, and there are theoretical issues around assuming that thought can be shaped in particular ways. It treats talk-in-interaction as a flexible resource, not one variable that can be tracked for its impact on another.

Core principles of discursive psychology

This section outlines the core principles that make up the meta-theory of DP, and from which all other features of DP follow. So take your time working through these, and ensure that you are clear about what they mean and their implications for examining discourse before you move on to the other sections. In Chapter 6, you will be able to see how these principles work in practice in the analysis of data, but for now we will use the following piece of interaction to help work through some of these issues. This interaction takes place between three women (Kate, Lucy and Martha) – all friends since school – now in their early 20s and spending the evening at Kate's house. They have just finished drinking one bottle of wine, and Kate offers to go to the local shop to buy another bottle. The transcript has been simplified here for ease of reading, but overlapping talk (noted here by square brackets [ ]) and pauses of one second (1.0) or less than one second (.) are indicated here. Question marks (?) indicate a slight rising, questioning intonation. We will refer to Extract 1 at various points throughout the discussion below.

Extract 1

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1. Kate:     what do you want (.) white or red
2. Martha:   either
3.           (1.0)
5. Martha:   whatever's [cheapest (.) hehh
6. Lucy:                [red?
7.           (1.0)
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 8. Kate:    heh heh [heh that's-
 9. Lucy:            [I prefer red (.)
10.           I like white [but I prefer red
11. Kate:                  [that alright?
12. Lucy:    [yeah
13. Martha:  [mmm
14. Kate:    okay
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The three core principles of DP are:

Discourse is both constructed and constructive

Discourse is situated within a social context

Discourse is action-orientated

1. Discourse is both constructed and constructive

The first principle of DP requires some philosophical considerations about how we understand the relationship between things in the world and our knowledge of those things. In many disciplines, research assumes that things (e.g., gravity, oxygen, attitudes) are real and exist, and that by applying the correct methods (e.g., experiments, observation, questionnaires) we can accurately examine these things. That is, that we can represent these objects and report on them – through writing, thoughts, illustrations, and so on – and that our representations are independent of the things we are investigating. This is what is known as a realist stance. An alternative argument is that the things in the world (our objects of study) cannot be separated from our representations of them. That is, that we cannot identify an independent (and single) reality. This is what is known as relativism, and this is the argument that DP embraces. Relativism, then, is agnostic about the existence of a single reality; even if one exists, we would not be able to determine which was the correct version of reality.

These two arguments (realism and relativism) are part of a broader set of approaches that are often referred to as *social constructionism*. Collectively, they treat our knowledge about the world as created by social practices, as being historically and culturally situated, and which questions the taken-for-granted knowledge that we have about the world (see Burr, 2015 for an excellent book on social constructionism). In other words, the things we take to be common sense or 'normal' are challenged and examined for *how* they become common sense. Discursive practices – how we talk and write about the world – are then argued to be one of the main ways in which the world is socially constructed. So a relativist stance is always questioning what and how we know about

things in the world. What counts as knowledge (or 'truth' or 'reality') is then argued to be the product of social and cultural practices – such as the ways we talk and behave, and how these differ in different cultural contexts, and across time – and that knowledge has different consequences for different people. For example, depression is currently defined as a mental illness in western cultures, as being associated with particular individual, behavioural, hormonal and experiential symptoms. It may be diagnosed by a medical professional, and treated via anti-depressant drugs and talking therapies. Yet this particular truth about depression – and who can diagnose it – is only recent and limited to western cultures. It relies on theorising the separation of mind and body, and of the identification of neuro-biological causes of depression that then make relevant medical intervention. Relativism argues that there are many different truths about the world, and so we need to be clear about our role in the construction of a particular truth.

Social constructionism, then, is a powerful way of addressing some big questions in research: what is knowledge, how does knowledge change, and who has ownership of this knowledge? While social constructionism as a broad set of approaches offers a radical critique of mainstream psychology, it is a feisty area of discussion in itself. There is much debate, for instance, between those who argue for a realist or critical realist stance and those, like DP researchers, who argue for a relativist stance (see Edwards et al., 1995). The philosophical debates around social constructionism, realism and relativism are complex and exciting areas, and what is presented here is a simplification of the issues. It should be enough, however, to give you a foothold into DP and begin to grasp why we do not take discourse at face value.

Returning to our first principle of DP, then, taking a relativist stance, discourse is argued to be both construct*ed* and construct*ive* of the world. It is construct*ed* through a range of cultural resources: words, intonation, gesture, and culturally available phrases and expressions. These are the building blocks, as it were, of talk and text. DP can then examine how different discursive practices are constructed: like a mechanic, taking apart the machine of interaction and finding out what the component parts are and how they fit together. Discourse is also construct*ive* of different versions of the world, through the way in which we talk about people, events, actions and organisations. It brings particular versions of reality, particular 'truths', into being. DP can then examine how these different versions have implications for the context within which the discourse is produced. If we apply this principle to our example in Extract 1, we can examine how the discussion about the choice of wine is constructed out of particular words (*white*, *red*, *prefer*, *cheapest*) that are themselves culturally situated. Other terms might have referred to the region where the wine was produced, or the variety of grape from which it was produced; cost may or may not be relevant, nor what someone 'prefers'. So these terms are also constructive of the world in a particular way: they create a version of reality in which people have preferences (for what wine they consume), and that choices might be dependent on other people's preferences (see line 11: 'that alright?') and that wine can be distinguished in terms of two broad categories (red or white).

Box 1.2: Gender and age as socially constructed

Social constructionism claims that the social world, and our knowledge of it, is constructed through social practices, and that these are built up over time, to the point at which they become common sense. For example, in many western cultures, it is normative to categorise people in terms of their gender (male or female) and age (young/old, child/adult, and so on). These categories often overlap, so we can get age- and gender-specific labels such as girl, boy, man and woman. These labels have become so normative that we tend not to question them on a daily basis. With age categories, we have more labels to distinguish between finer gradings of ages of children (e.g., baby, infant, toddler, child, adolescent, teenager) than we do of adults, where categories often refer to much broader age-range periods, such as 'middle aged' and 'elderly'. But even the categories of 'male' and 'female' are socially constructed: while there may be physical or physiological differences between people (e.g., genitals, reproductive systems, breast tissue, hair growth), these might be considered more of a continuum than an either/or, mutually exclusive category. Some people have larger or smaller breasts, finer or thicker hair growth, or have had reproductive systems removed or altered in some way (e.g., hysterectomies, vasectomies), and yet many people would still claim to be *either* male *or* female. We might also take into consideration other features, such as hormonal levels (and changes in these over time), which are not so easily seen. It is only when someone tries to move between categories, such as through gender reassignment, or identifies as transgender that we begin to question what it means to be that category. So even something as apparently 'obvious' as gender can be questioned for how our social practices have made it appear obvious. If you want to explore this area a little further, start out with Speer and Stokoe (2011) then move onto Butler's *Gender trouble* (1990).

Box 1.3: Activity

To help you become more familiar with the idea of social constructionism, consider one food that you eat (or drink) on a regular basis. This might be something you eat as part of a 'main meal', such as potatoes or rice, or eat as a snack on its own, such as fruit or chocolate, or hot drinks such as tea or coffee. Think about how and when you eat this

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food (or drink), and whether you would eat it if you were on holiday or away from home: Do you take supplies with you? Do you miss it if you don't eat/drink it? Do other people eat this food, and in the same form that you do? When we start to consider the foods and drinks that we consume *from a different perspective*, we can become more aware of what we treat as 'normal' and how there are other versions of 'normal'. We can take this even further. Consider, for example, what you think constitutes a typical meal at particular times of the day (e.g., breakfast). What kinds of foods does it include? When would you eat it? Or consider what foods you think are inedible or disgusting. What kinds of plants or animals are classified as 'food' and which are not? Before long you should see how much of what we take for granted about the foods that we eat is dependent to a large extent on our social context.

2. Discourse is situated

The second core principle of DP is that discourse is situated in a particular context. While it is constructed/ive of the world, it also does so in a specific place and time, and as such we need to analyse it within this context. Discourse is situated in three ways:

- Within a specific *interactional context*: for example, chatting with friends, talking to a doctor in hospital, discussing issues in a classroom or online forum.

- Within a *rhetorical* framework: there are always alternative versions of reality that discourse counters, even if these are usually not made explicit.

- Within the *turn-taking sequence* of interaction: it is situated in relation to what precedes and what follows the talk or text.

Let us refer back to Extract 1 to show how each of these aspects of 'situatedness' apply to a specific example. The interactional context is of friends talking together in Kate's home, so we might treat it as informal talk in that there are no official 'roles' of any of the people present; they are talking as friends, not as, say, a fire-fighter, a postgraduate student and a project manager. So when we analyse this piece of interaction we need to analyse it *in situ*, and as part of the social practices that are being undertaken within that setting (in this case, making a choice about what kind of wine to buy). It is important to note that DP understands context from an 'emic' perspective (this is an anthropological term broadly meaning 'insider' or participants' perspective; the opposite term is 'etic', meaning the outsider/analyst's perspective). While I might gloss this interaction as informal and 'friends talking together', for example, it is only that: an analyst's gloss.

To identify the interactional context of the talk, we need to examine how the speakers *themselves* orientate to it; in other words, how the context is *shaped* by the talk. This is what DP researchers refer to as the context-shaping or context-dependent nature of discourse: that when we talk (or write) something, what we say shapes the context as much as it is dependent on, or produced by, the context. We can examine this in the way that all three speakers have the same opportunities to talk (and ask questions or make suggestions), and that apart from a one-second pause (line 6), the conversation is not stilted and there are many overlapping turns. Both Martha and Lucy make tentative statements about the choice of wine and the decision to choose red wine is apparently achieved through mutual agreement. In that sense, the interaction at this point is defined on the basis of fairly equal status of each speaker.

The second aspect of situatedness is the rhetorical framework: how the discourse constructs one version of events and how this undermines alternative versions. This understanding of situatedness follows most closely from the first core principle of DP, that discourse constructs reality. So there will always be different constructions, different versions of reality, that might have been used. We can use the analogy of news reporting – whether in newspapers or on national news programmes on television or radio – to show this more clearly. Each news report might cover the same content (such as a crisis situation, where people are fleeing their homes as a result of war or natural disaster) but construct different versions of events. For instance, they might refer to the people as 'refugees' or 'migrants', but even that single word can create a different set of assumptions and solutions for the crisis situation (including whether other countries offer aid or allow those people to seek refuge and new homes). In Extract 1 above – while seemingly mundane and trivial in comparison – we can still examine the rhetorical context for this interaction. For instance, in line 1, Kate's 'what do you want, white or red' constructs the choice as between one kind of wine over another, rather than wine in contrast to beer, fruit juice or water. That Lucy or Martha might like a different beverage is not enabled by this construction, so the rhetorical framework of this piece of interaction produces a version of events in which drinking more wine is normative and individual choice or preference is an expected way in which to make a decision about which colour of wine should be purchased.

Finally, we can examine the situatedness of the talk in terms of the turn-by-turn interaction. This is sometimes referred to as the indexicality of utterances (what is said): that in order to understand how an utterance should be interpreted, we should always examine *what comes before* and *what comes after* the utterance. Take line 11 in Extract 1, where Kate says 'that alright?'. How are we to make sense of this? First, we can note how Martha first states 'either' (line 2), then 'whatever's cheapest' (line 4) in response to Kate's initial question. This doesn't directly answer the 'red or white' issue, but instead leaves open the possibility for Lucy to make the decision. Rather than do this directly, however, Lucy suggests 'red' (line 6, with a questioning intonation), then supports this further by contrasting her preference (red) with what she also likes (white) on lines

9 and 10. So Kate's 'that alright?' (line 11) is then placed in overlap with Lucy's turn and seems to suggest a request for a confirmation that *red wine* be the wine of choice. We can then examine the turns immediately following this – both Lucy (line 12) and Martha (line 13) make affirmations – and this is receipted by Kate on line 14 by 'okay'. In summary, then, Kate opens up the decision to Lucy and Martha, Martha is non-committal while Lucy makes a suggestion, Kate then seeks confirmation of this suggestion and finally confirms her own acknowledgement of this confirmation. During the course of this brief discussion, the speakers have also made relevant taste preferences as not only individual qualities (e.g. 'I prefer red', 'I like white') and therefore unique to them, but also as having an obligation to take other people's taste preferences into account. Psychological issues (taste preferences, attending to the needs of others) are as much a part of this interaction as making a decision about wine.

To summarise this second principle, then, discourse is understood not as a passive means by which we tell people what we are thinking and feeling, or report on events, but a social action and always contextually-bound. When we talk or write, we always do so within a specific context. Therefore, to make sense of discourse we need to under-stand it *in context*: where, when and how it is produced and organised. DP therefore shifts the focus of discourse from individual cognition to social practices. It is from this principle (and in relation to the first, based on a relativist, social constructionist position) that the anti-cognitivist stance of DP becomes clear. If discourse is situated within a specific context, it is as much socially produced as cognitively produced. That is, while there are undoubtedly mental processes going on which enable us to talk, *what we say is not a direct route to what we think*. When we talk (or write), we do so within a particular interactional context, a specific rhetorical framework and within a temporal sequence of interaction. Our discourse will therefore vary all the time, according to contextual variation.

3. Action orientation of talk and accountability

The final core principle of DP follows almost automatically from the first two: that if discourse constructs particular versions of reality, and these constructions are situated in particular social contexts, then there will be particular functions or actions that are accomplished by the discourse. In other words, that discourse (talk and text) *acts on and in* the context in different ways. In the next section of this chapter we will see the history of this theoretical assumption about language, but for now let us focus on how this works in practice.

If we look once more at Extract 1, we can start to break down the talk into different kinds of actions, different things that are going on in the interaction. So first, Kate begins by asking a question ('what do you want (.) white or red', line 1). Even with-out having any video to accompany this (so we cannot check eye gaze, for example), we can identify from the talk alone that both Martha and Lucy treat this question as

relevant to them both. This is even though the word 'you' in English does not specify on its own a singular or a plural 'you'; compare with other languages, such as in French, Italian and Swedish. Note, however, that the term 'yous' or 'youse' is often used in North-East England, Ireland and Scotland to refer to more than one person, the equivalent of 'y'all' in the USA, but this is informal usage. Very simply, then, the first 'social action' occurring in this piece of interaction is to ask a question and to reply to a question. But note how Lucy's turn – 'red?' (line 6) – itself appears in questioning intonation. So she answers a question with another (possible) question. What this does, then, is to provide an answer to Kate while treating this answer as conditional on what Martha (or Kate) might themselves choose. We have a further social action, then: attending to the needs or wishes of others, a kind of democratic move. Similarly, Lucy's 'I prefer red, I like white but I prefer red' (lines 9–10) does something quite unique. Note how this doesn't actually answer Kate's question directly. Lucy doesn't – at that point – say what she wants, but instead states a preference and a liking for different kinds of wine. And yet this is treated by Kate as answering the question, and the decision is confirmed soon after. So we can also begin to see how, through particular situated constructions (just this word, said in this way, at this precise point), people can accomplish a whole range of social actions without having to 'signpost' or label these in a deliberate or obvious way (this is referred to as indirection, which we'll discuss in the next section).

The focus on the action orientation of discourse therefore also means that we do not just identify the types of words used in a piece of talk (such as verbs or detailed descriptions), but also where they are sequentially located in the talk, how they are responded to by other people, and what social action they are involved in. This is one of the ways in which DP differs from other forms of discourse analysis, which also examine verbs or linguistic format but without examining the organisation of the talk. If we had taken Lucy's 'I prefer red. I like white but I prefer red' turn out of context, it would appear that she was just telling us about what kind of wine she likes to drink. Seen in its specific interactional, rhetorical and turn-by-turn context, however, it works as a 'request for red wine while also accommodating any potential disagreement from the other people present' type of social action.

So, do not be fooled into thinking that DP is 'just about talk'; there is much more to it than this (and one could analyse such descriptions that minimise the role of discourse – 'just about talk' – as exactly the kind of rhetorical and consequential construction that we need to look out for, as discursive psychologists). As Edwards and Potter (1992: 2) note: 'We are concerned with the nature of knowledge, cognition and reality: with how events are described and explained, how factual reports are constructed, how cognitive states are attributed.' By now, it should also be apparent that DP is not simply a theory or method, but rather a whole approach to research. We will pick up the implications of this in the various chapters in Part 2 of the book, where the theoretical assumptions help to guide us in our choice of research question, data choices, and analytical tools.

What inspired discursive psychology? (The backstory)

Now that we have a basic understanding of DP and its core principles we can explore some of the history behind DP to provide a clearer understanding of how it has been influenced by a range of disciplines and theoretical perspectives. This should also help you to see where the core principles emerged from, and how they fit in relation to a broader theoretical context. The historical roots of DP are an exciting mix of radicalism, politics and social philosophy. Do not expect dusty old books and boring theories. Here lies passion and debate on the meaning of reality itself. Understanding something of the history of DP can also, therefore, provide us with a clearer understanding of *why DP does the things it does*, and how it differs from other approaches that study language. Like the backstory for a film's central character, delving into its history helps us to understand why DP is the way it is. If you had any need to appreciate DP's interdisciplinary potential, you only have to look at the main areas of research that influenced its development. Indeed, DP can be used to argue that discipline boundaries are themselves a rhetorical device, used to separate scholars and create university departments. For each area, we will highlight the features of that approach that are particularly relevant for DP. The influence of these areas is not as simple as ingredients for a recipe (in that by adding them together, in the right amounts, we might produce DP); but rather, they provided theories and ideas that stimulated and continue to enable cross-fertilisation of ideas into DP and back again. These can be distilled into the following six main areas (in no particular order).

Wittgenstein's philosophy

Ludwig Wittgenstein was a philosopher whose own life was as interesting and convoluted as his theories on language, mind and reality (read Monk, 1990, for instance). His work, and specifically his later book, *Philosophical investigations* (1953), deals with fundamental questions about what we can know and with the logical relationship between words and the objects they speak of. This is powerful stuff, and while many have already been inspired by Wittgenstein, there is still much here to stimulate psychological, linguistic and communication research. Like Austin's speech act theory (see below), Wittgenstein emphasised the social nature of language; that words *do* things. His work challenged much of contemporary linguistics at the time, and rather than treating language as a system of symbols to represent events and objects in the world, Wittgenstein argued that language was more like a toolkit. Like tools, words have many different functions, not just the ones they were designed to do (a knife, for example, can cut but also scrape, pick up and carve things). So it is with words and language: when we look at language *in use*, we can understand the multiple functions and uses of words more clearly. Extract 1 and the phrase 'I prefer red' is a good example of this. Similarly, Wittgenstein used the metaphor of language games to

emphasise the practical, context-bound nature of language; that there are different games we play with language, each with their own rules and aims. An important part of this work is therefore to emphasise the flexibility of words and language, and to focus on the uses of language in everyday social settings.

Another important element of Wittgenstein's work that is of particular relevance to DP is the focus on language in relation to mind, knowing and reality. In many ways, his work tackles core psychological topics, such as the nature of self and mind. Much of psychology is concerned with trying to understand people's private, inner worlds: their thoughts, opinions, feelings and sensations, for example. Yet we cannot really get inside other people's minds or bodies. Even if we use the same words (e.g., I love you), we cannot know if what the person is feeling (love) is the same as what we are feeling. As soon as they begin to describe what they are feeling, they are using language, which only works if there are public, socially-shared understandings of that language. So while this argument does not deny that we have feelings, thoughts, and so on, it argues instead that these 'inner worlds' are inaccessible through language. When we talk to each other, we are not communicating our thoughts. As soon as we utter something it is separate from what is in our heads (the thought) and uses a language (words, grammar, etc.) that does not exist in the private realms of our minds and bodies. This challenges work which assumes that language has primarily a communication function, to transfer ideas from one individual to another. The implications of this for psychology, in particular, are huge. Most psychological research is based on the premise that by talking to people we can find out what they think and feel about a topic.

In the same way, Wittgenstein argued that we cannot get outside language; that there is no distinction between 'language' and 'the world/reality'. While things exist (ontology), the form and meaning of their existence is entirely dependent on the language we use to name them and orientate to them. For instance, a wooden and metal object might be called a 'chair', and if I call it a chair I might use it to sit on; its shape and presence in my home might also then structure how often, when and how I sit. There is no way to then get around or behind language. These issues are related to Wittgenstein's private language argument and 'beetle in a box' arguments. In summary, then, Wittgenstein's influence on the development of DP was to provide the basis for some radical re-working of how we understand language, mind and reality. In summary, some of the elements of Wittgenstein's philosophy that are particularly relevant for DP are:

- A focus on language *in use*: that we should study the practicalities of language and its functions in different settings (language as a toolkit).

- The argument that we cannot get 'outside' language, and that language is not separate from reality.

- The argument that people's inner worlds (thoughts, feelings, etc.) are public events: that we can only make sense of them through public language.

Speech act theory

Another philosopher who was also concerned with the social uses of language was John Austin. While Wittgenstein provided an understanding of the various language games that can be used, and of the inseparability of language and reality, Austin (1962) provided a more global characterisation that put language *function* in centre-stage. His theory of speech acts stated that all forms of talk have a function, that they do things in social interaction. For example, whether we are describing something, making a claim or a request, our utterances have a particular 'illocutionary force' (i.e., they act on the world in a particular way) and that force is dependent on the particular circumstances and context within which the utterance is made. Austin's theory developed out of his distinction between two types of utterance: constatives (utterances that state something, e.g., 'you are married') and performatives (utterances that do something such as ask a question, e.g., 'are you married?'). While he first noted that these types of utterance might appear different, in that constatives might be considered true or false whereas performatives either worked or didn't work, he then went on to argue that they both act upon the world (and therefore it is a false dichotomy to distinguish between constatives and performatives). For performatives to work, they need to satisfy certain 'felicity conditions' or rules. These conditions include the appropriate context or persons present. For example, to be married you need to say the right words at the right time, in a setting that has been approved and performed by a legally appointed registrar. Just saying 'I do' (or 'I will') and putting a ring on someone's finger would not constitute a marriage in legal terms – probably just as well for all those children who may do something similar in the school playground.

Austin's work therefore offered a radical point of departure from much of the linguistic work at the time – much of which was inspired by Noam Chomsky – arguing against the idea that language was a referential system. He was also one of the inspirations behind the broader 'turn to language' (see Box 1.4) that sent ripples of discontent across the social sciences. His work emphasised the practical uses of language, its flexibility and functions in social interaction, rather than with grammatical correctness or cognitive understandings of language (see also Levinson, 1983; Searle, 1969). This meant that speech act theory could address the issue of how statements can do actions (something other linguistic theories cannot do). For example, by saying 'I prefer red' in Extract 1 above, Lucy makes a statement about her taste preferences but in doing so also makes a request for red wine. This is what is referred to in speech act theory as 'indirection', and it is something that conversation analysis also focuses on, albeit with real-life examples. This is where Austin's work parts company with DP: like Chomsky, he also used idealised (made-up) language examples and as such could not really account for the many different *types* of action that can be achieved by the same statement. In other words, once we begin to look at discourse in use – in everyday settings – the flexibility and variability of social actions becomes much more evident. In summary, the features of speech act theory that are particularly relevant for DP therefore are:

- A focus on language in use (as with Wittgenstein): to understand the meaning of words, we need to examine them in their social context.

- The functional approach to language: words *do things*, they act upon the world in very concrete ways.

- The argument that *all* talk has a function, and that words can be used with different 'forces' (or functions) depending on the context and the conditions within which they are uttered.

Ethnomethodology

In an entirely separate area of research – with its roots in sociology – ethnomethodology was being developed and also emphasised the importance of using empirical research. The very name of ethnomethodology gives a hint as to its main concerns: literally, the study (ology) of people's (ethno) methods. So ethnomethodology focuses on understanding how people make sense of each other in everyday settings: what methods they use, how they arrive at mutual understandings, and so on. The important thing, then, is to get close to the action: to see (and record) people living their lives. Its founders – Harold Garfinkel and Erving Goffman – both conducted research in a range of different everyday situations. Garfinkel's work (e.g., Garfinkel, 1967) often involved what he termed 'breaching experiments', where he sent students out to disrupt everyday normative practices in order to reveal the common-sense (but often unnoticed) practices that we treat as normal and unexceptional. For example, students might be told to behave in their own home as if they were lodgers or strangers or to stand in a busy public place and 'do nothing' for 10 minutes (see Stanley et al., 2015, for an example of how this can be done as part of a class assignment).

Goffman's work (e.g., Goffman, 1959) similarly challenged what we know about everyday life and institutional practices (such as his work on asylums: Goffman, 1961). He examined the ritualistic nature of social interaction, of the way in which people continually engage in 'face work': the maintenance of an individual's positive social identity or presence. Like Garfinkel's work, then, Goffman sheds light on the everyday practices that constitute cultural norms, and how these have impact at an individual level. For example, when we turn down an offer by a friend, we can 'save' their 'face' by providing a legitimate excuse rather than giving a blunt refusal. Goffman also likened interaction in social settings as being like a performance – this was his dramaturgical model – and as such we play different roles, have back-stage and front-stage behaviours, and can shift our roles according to the context. From this comes the notion of footing: the conversational shifts we make to present ourselves in relationship to the source of the account that we are providing (see Chapter 7 for more detail on footing shifts).

Another crucial argument that has arisen out of ethnomethodological research – not just that of Garfinkel and Goffman – is that context is understood as being a product

or outcome, rather than a precursor to, interaction. This means that the things that are relevant to making sense of the interaction – the contextual factors, as it were – such as who the people are, what roles or identities they have, what the purpose of the interaction is, are not predetermined. They are produced *within* the interaction. This relates to the context-shaping and context-dependent assumptions about discourse, as seen in the previous section. The features of ethnomethodological work that are particularly relevant to DP are:

- The 'emic' focus: analysis works with speaker's categories, not the researcher's preconceived categories.

- Focusing on life as it happens: much of DP research is concerned with how psychological concepts and social actions are accomplished as people are living their lives, in various mundane and institutional settings.

- Context as being produced within, not prior to, interaction: this is the context-shaping and context-dependent nature of discourse.

Conversation analysis

Conversation analysis (CA) developed from the work of Harvey Sacks, Emmanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson (see, for example, Sacks et al., 1974). Given that both Sacks and Schegloff were students of Goffman, ethnomethodology was undoubtedly an influence (as was Austin's speech act theory), and the focus for CA remains squarely on understanding everyday social interaction. One of the main tenets of CA is that talk-in-interaction is systematically organised at a detailed level. Unlike the invented examples of other work (such as speech act theory and Chomsky's linguistics), conversation analysis was perhaps the first approach to analyse talk in real-life settings empirically and systematically. As such, it has been influenced by technologies as these have developed over time (from tape-recorders, to video-recorders and, more recently, to mobile and digital devices), and this means that more recent work in the field has been able to capture more details of interaction as people are moving around in a space. Conversation analysis has two broad strands of research, both of which developed from Sacks' work, though one has received far less attention than the other (see, for example, Stokoe, 2012). One is concerned with the use of categories in talk – such as how we refer to someone as a 'refugee' or a 'migrant'. This is known as membership categorisation analysis (MCA) (see Fitzgerald & Housley, 2015). The other strand is concerned with the structure and organisation of talk, at the level of turn-taking, gesture and prosody. This is just known as conversation analysis or CA, and is the more prevalent form.

The emphasis in CA on the rigorous, turn-by-turn approach to analysis has been a particular influence on the methodological development of DP. In some sense this provided the method that early work in discourse analysis was looking for; some way of

identifying the social actions that were being performed and working with everyday examples. Combined with a focus on casual talk – what might also be termed mundane, everyday or informal talk – the attention to the detail of talk-in-interaction has allowed CA to illustrate that even the apparently messiest and most random of conversations are structured and organised. Here we see the influence of ethnomethodology: that social interaction is made normative through people's practices; the job of the analyst, then, is to make those practices visible. In summary, the features of conversation analysis that are particularly relevant to DP are:

- The importance of using empirical data – talk in mundane and institutional settings – rather than invented examples.

- The focus on the sequential organisation of talk, examining interaction turn by turn and using this to privilege participants' orientations.

- The Jefferson transcription system, to capture the details of intonation, pitch variation, pauses and overlapping speech.

Sociology of scientific knowledge

Within sociology, a series of studies emerged in the 1970s that became known as the sociology of scientific knowledge (SSK). SSK takes a fairly radical approach to science, being based on social constructionist principles and arguing that scientific knowledge is also a social enterprise, that it is not separate from the social and interactional processes through which common-sense and reality are produced. Even scientific 'facts' about objects and laws of physics, for example, are argued to be the product of human study and intervention, and as such can be analysed for how they are produced. Latour and Woolgar (1979) argued, for instance, that scientists themselves play a key role in the process through which scientific facts *become* facts, and as objectively separate from observations about the world, through a series of externalisation processes. These include laboratory reports and documents, which rely on specific measurements and the noting down of some, but not all, features of the experiments, as well as published documents (such as journal articles), which use third-person pronouns and effectively remove the scientist as agent and producer of the experiment. All of these processes – while branded as scientific method – are a way of establishing scientific knowledge as 'out there' in the world and as separate from all human subjectivity or intervention.

The arguments of SSK were understandably resisted by scientists since they might be treated as undermining the credibility of scientific research. They do not necessarily do this, of course, in that we could argue that it is impossible to be neutral in any domain, and scientists are no less socially orientated than anyone else. One of the powerful and lingering claims of SSK research, however, noted that scientists themselves orientate to the constructive nature of scientific knowledge through the use of different kinds of

repertoires. The work of Nigel Gilbert and Michael Mulkay (1984) used discourse analysis and identified two competing forms of explanation used by scientists in their verbal and written accounts (such as in interviews, as well as laboratory notes and technical reports): the empiricist repertoire and the contingent repertoire. The empiricist repertoire was a way of explaining scientific knowledge or facts through reference to data, methods, laws of nature, and so on. This is the 'objective' account, that which claims to simply report on 'what is happening', and this was seen in scientists' official reports and documents. The contingent repertoire, on the other hand, was a way of explaining scientific findings in terms of personal motives, individual biases or flaws, and rivalries between competing scientists. This repertoire was found in scientists' interview responses, their informal discussions with peers and personal reflections. What Gilbert and Mulkay argued, however, was that these two ways of understanding the production of scientific knowledge were not just their (analyst's) categories; these were also used by scientists to undermine their competitors and to drive forward their own scientific research areas. Both repertoires, while providing contrasting versions of what scientific knowledge 'is', are essential to the production of scientific knowledge as we know it.

In summary, then, the field of SSK provided not only a way of understanding science and research as *itself* constructed and analysable – that is, as not immune to the epistemological relativism seen in the last section – but also a method through which this might be achieved: the use of discourse analysis to analyse repertoires in talk. The elements of SSK that are particularly relevant to the development of DP are:

- Interpretative repertoires: coherent regularities and ways of talking about a specific issue that are culturally specific.

- The idea of a participant's resource: this is similar to the emic perspective noted within ethnomethodological studies.

- Reflexivity: a concern to examine the practices through which researchers themselves produce knowledge in scientific reports.

Semiology and post-structuralism

The final area that influenced the development of DP was post-structuralism. The background to this involves the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, who was a linguist working in semiology, or the science of signs. Part of his work argued that we can make a distinction between a concept (the signified) and its word or sound (the signifier). For example, the word 'cake' might be used to signify a particular type of baked food (concept) that includes some variations on flour, sugar, eggs and fats. There are different kinds of cake – and many cultural variations on what constitutes 'cake' – and so different ways of organising and categorising the world. Most importantly, however, is the *process of signification* that connects the word and the concept together. So here again,

we see a focus on language in use (rather than a focus on grammar or abstract notions of language), and of the means through which the signified are created through the signifiers: this is not a simple case of words reflecting what exists, but of words and sounds *creating* that which they signify.

While Saussure's work provided some interesting ideas about sign systems, it was the work that developed from this – termed post-structuralism (compared with the structuralist approach of Saussure) – that was important for DP. Post-structuralism is a movement that rejects the idea that there are absolute truths and hidden structures in the world. It emerged in around the 1960s and 1970s as a shift away from the structuralist movement. It includes a rejection of the theorisation of language as a structured system, hence its relevance for work on discourse and interaction (e.g., Barthes, 1964; Derrida, 1976; Foucault, 1970, 1972). It is also an anti-reductionist approach in that it does not reduce social practices to the mental processes of individuals, and therefore we cannot study social interaction through studying individual cognitions and behaviours.

The following aspects of poststructuralism and semiology have a particular resonance with DP research:

- The focus on the processes that give meaning to words: i.e., that words in themselves do not 'carry' meaning but become meaningful through being used in different ways.

- The importance of oppositions and absences: that what something is *not* is as important as what it *is*.

- The idea of deconstructing texts: of disrupting the authority of some discourses over others and of undermining the idea of a single truth.

From there to here: how discursive psychology emerged and developed

In this section, we will walk through the development of DP as we now know it, from the academic context that preceded the landmark books in 1987 up to the present time (mid-2010s). This is, as you might have guessed from the earlier section on social construction, just one version of this historical development; like any text, it is rhetorically organised, regardless of any efforts to be 'neutral'. But it provides *an* account that should help to illustrate how DP has developed and the arguments and debates that have shaped this development.

First, though, we need to step back in time to the 1950s and 1960s. Behaviourist research in America (e.g., John B. Watson and B. F. Skinner) and Russia (e.g., Ivan Pavlov) had become rather popular in psychology departments but was beginning to be threatened by the emergence of cognitive approaches by researchers such as Noam Chomsky, George A. Miller and Ulric Neisser. Like many times of turmoil in academic

departments, much was at stake, including the nature of psychology itself. Part of the argument was about the role played by mental processes in behaviour, and whether or not we can directly examine and theorise about such mental processes. To some extent, these sorts of debates are still going on in psychology today: we know a little more about some aspects of the mind and behaviour, but there is still disagreement about how these concepts should be theorised and researched.

Chomsky's work, in particular, played an important part in critiquing the behaviourist approach in psychology, and this turned the intellectual focus in psychology more closely onto language. Not only did Chomsky's language acquisition device (1965) offer a neat method of categorising and bracketing off the messy, ungrammatical 'performance' side of language in use from 'competence' (people's knowledge of the language), but it also provided a theoretical attack on behaviourism. Like much other experimental work in psychology, it tidied up the rather complex relationship between cognition and reality. The move to study Chomskian linguistics was itself then a political move; it marked a radical shift away from the separation of cognition from experimental study. Since then, linguistics and psycholinguistics (and the psychology of language more broadly) have developed enormously, but the pervasive focus on tying cognitive processes directly with language has remained fairly constant. The field was defined in many ways by what it was fighting against, and some have even argued (Hamlyn, 1990) that cognitivist approaches retained an element of behaviourism, with the input-output approach to understanding models of behaviour and cognition. What is still noticeably lacking in psychology of language studies, however, is a focus on the language as a social practice, and this is where discursive research fits in.

The cognitivist approach had filtered through to social psychology by the 1970s, and at this point was dominated by an experimental, individualistic paradigm. The promise of being able to measure behaviour, control variables and be like 'proper science' – in the safe confines of the laboratory – was alluring for many social psychologists. This did not go unchallenged, and indeed there was a growing area of research, including the work of Rom Harré, Ken Gergen and John Shotter, which became known as the 'crisis in social psychology'. Some of the main concerns were that social psychology was removing people from their social contexts, putting them metaphorically into boxes and categories, removing their agency and rendering social psychology a sterile and de-contextual vacuum. These were hard-hitting and feisty debates, and once again the very nature of psychology (of what it means to be human, and how we should study humans) was being questioned. This is where the work of researchers such as Austin, Foucault, Garfinkel, Goffman and Wittgenstein came in, alongside post-structuralist ideas, as we saw in the previous section. These were immensely useful in terms of challenging theory, and they provided radical and coherent arguments against cognitivist, experimental approaches in social psychology. There were, however, limitations to applying these theories in practice. What was needed was a method, a way of doing research that could put these theories to use.

Box 1.4: What is the 'turn to language'?

In your reading you may come across references to the 'turn to language'. This refers to a movement in the social sciences involving a shift from treating language as *representation* (i.e., that when we use words, they represent other concepts, objects or people and reflect what already exists in the world) to treating language as *performance or constructive* (i.e., that when we use words, these construct versions of the world or perform different functions). For example, when a judge in a baking competition says that he 'loves' the cake, this does not just make a statement about his taste experiences (if we can even assume that it does that); it also functions to validate the baker as having achieved a particular standard of baking and possibly deserving of a prize. This turn to language began around the 1950s, developed by the work of Austin, Foucault, Wittgenstein and others, but it was only picked up in psychology in the 1970s with the work of Gergen (1973), Harré and Secord (1972) and in the 1980s with the work of Henriques et al. (1984) and Potter and Wetherell (1987). It was seen as a radical, challenging move away from established under-standings at the time, and marked a turning point for many researchers. The focus of language has far-reaching consequences, for many studies that claim to examine cognitive states do so by making interpretations of language. Here we can begin to see, then, the ways in which cognitivist approaches are slowly unravelled when we start to provide a different perspective on language. So the turn to language was the accumulation of a number of studies, theories, papers and discussion on a central issue for the social sciences: how are we to interpret language? In many ways, this turn is still developing, with the growth of qualitative approaches and the various forms of discourse analysis, grounded theory, phenomenological approaches, the-matic analysis, narrative analysis, and so on.

And so we arrive in the 1980s. Despite rumbling theoretical debates and radical cri-tiques, published research in social psychology was still dominated by questionnaire studies and experiments, and most of the participants of such studies were undergraduate psychology students (and mostly white, middle-class and male, at that). Things came to a head when two particular publications helped to prepare the intellectual climate for a more critical approach within social psychology. In 1984, Henriques et al.'s *Changing the subject* was published, urging psychologists to move beyond essentialist and indi-vidualist theories of the self and to re-think the relationship between identities, bodies

and societies. This was a political as well as a theoretical move, with emancipatory goals and the need to shake-up the establishment and move forward. In the same year, Nigel Gilbert and Michael Mulkay published *Opening Pandora's box*, which shined the SSK spotlight onto researchers' own discursive practices and the fragility of knowledge production. The combination of these two books left no doubt that social psychology was itself under scrutiny and that change was needed. The tipping point came in 1987, with the publication of three important texts: Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell's *Discourse and social psychology: Beyond attitudes and behaviour*, Derek Edwards and Neil Mercer's *Common knowledge* and Michael Billig's *Arguing and thinking*. These texts brought together related ideas that not only wove together some of the earlier critical theory, but they also provided a method of analysis – discourse analysis – that could then be used in practice. In the same year, the Discourse and Rhetoric Group (DARG) also held its first meeting at Loughborough University, and so the academic journey of DP began in earnest.

Looking back, then, we can begin to see how DP emerged within a particular context, with a certain mix of academic tension and confrontation to fuel the development of new ways of working. Like teenagers rebelling against the older generation, researchers within particular disciplines develop and adapt to contemporary society. It is more complicated than that, of course, but the analogy can help us to put things into perspective. Theories, methods and research *must* change and develop; what are important are how these change and the implications of these changes. Now we can return to our account, and consider how DP itself has developed since those early years in the 1980s (see also Edwards, 2005b; Potter, 2010a; Wetherell, 2007, for more discussion on this) up to the present time.

In the late 1980s, as discourse analysis was emerging as an empirical enterprise in psychology, research in this area was heavily influenced by work on interpretative repertoires (as characterised in Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell and Potter, 1992), rhetoric and ideological dilemmas (Billig, 1987; Billig et al., 1988). One could argue that this strand of DP morphed into critical discursive psychology (CDP; see Chapter 2), as seen in the work of Reynolds and Wetherell (2003) and Edley and Wetherell (1995), for example. It is still a vibrant area of research, often focusing on topics such as gender and identities. Much of this work is based on the analysis of interview data, due to a concern with which repertoires are used, and how people discursively manage particular topics. The point of using interviews, then, is to be able to ask people directly about such issues without having to wait for them to arise 'naturally' in everyday settings. The reliance on interview data became a contentious issue, however, and remains an area of tension. While some researchers argue that it provides the means through which we can access particular discursive practices that are not available elsewhere and that there is a false dichotomy between interviews and 'natural' data (Griffin, 2007), others argue that interview data is only analysable

as an artefact of the interview context, that it tells us nothing about everyday life (Potter & Hepburn, 2007; Speer, 2008; see also discussion of this issue in Chapter 4, especially Box 4.2). Alongside concerns that repertoires were not capturing the sequential organisation of interaction, by the mid-1990s the field had already fractured: DP emerged in one direction (with publications by Edwards and Potter, 1992, Potter, 1996 and Edwards, 1997) and CDP in the other (with publications by Edley and Wetherell, 1995, 1997, 1999).

By the late 1990s and into the turn of the century, DP was evolving alongside qualitative research methodologies, and while this provided allies, it also created more opportunities for further debate. DP not only had to define itself clearly in relation to cognitivist and quantitative paradigms, it also had to mark out its distinctiveness from other discursive and phenomenological approaches. So we can see in this period the publication of papers on theoretical issues (Edwards et al., 1995; Hammersley, 2003; Potter, 1998, 2003), on establishing DP as a credible approach (Edwards, 1997; Potter, 1996; Potter & Edwards, 2001) and of collections which demarcated the range of discursive approaches (Jaworski & Coupland, 1999; Wetherell et al., 2001). This was also a period during which some classic psychological topics were examined discursively, *in situ*, and which often directly engaged with cognitivist approaches, such as attitudes and opinions (Puchta & Potter, 2002; Wiggins & Potter, 2003), racism (Augoustinos et al., 1999), identities (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998) and cognition (Antaki, 2006; te Molder & Potter, 2005). On top of that, it was also engaging more closely with conversation analytic work in epistemics, gesture, prosody and institutional talk. From around 1995 to 2005, it was a rather busy time in DP research, both theoretically and analytically.

Finally, then, we can consider the last decade, from around 2005 to 2015, of DP research. Theoretically, this period has thrown up some interesting discussions about the role of epistemology (e.g., Corcoran, 2009; Potter, 2010a, b) and the limitations or potential of DP research (Wetherell, 2007, 2015). This was also a time during which the Discourse and Rhetoric Group (DARG) at Loughborough celebrated its 25-year anniversary, so reflections and a reaffirmation of DP's core values were appropriate (see articles in the *British Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 51, 2012; Tileagă & Stokoe, 2015). Research during this period may be characterised by an increasing interest in issues of embodiment and multimodality: with the ways in which talk and body movements collaboratively produce psychological frames of reference. Technological developments in smartphones and tablets – particularly with the improvement in video capabilities in such devices – have meant that it has almost become normative to video oneself – anytime, anywhere. Combined with websites such as YouTube, this norm includes sharing videos with people around the world. What was once restricted to special occasions and seen only by a small group of people, video has now become the medium for interacting with people, at any time, in any place.

> ## Box 1.5: The politics of discourse: the case of 'discursive psychology'
>
> You might be forgiven for thinking that, while DP might be considered a radical approach to psychology, it is not necessarily political (in that it doesn't focus specifically on tackling inequality or overthrowing oppressive regimes, for example). This is not entirely true. As the section on 'core principles' noted, we can argue that any discursive construction is rhetorically organised to undermine alternative versions. So any text or talk plays some part in silencing other versions. This book is one such example, and so far I have presented a particular version of discursive psychology, referring to certain publications and authors, and using the label 'DP' to reify one understanding of what this approach might be. There are, of course, other researchers who use the term 'discursive psychology' in rather different ways. The most notable use of this term is by Rom Harré, who has described it as the 'new cognitivism', and takes a critical realist stance on the nature of discourse and cognition (see Harré & Gillett, 1994; and Davies & Harré's positioning theory, 1990). That version of discursive psychology is concerned with understanding the logical relationship between discourses and selves, and the conditions under which certain grammatical structures will make relevant certain mental concepts. As such, it works with idealised (invented) examples of discourse, and follows Wittgenstein's and Austin's ideas about the logical functions of discourses and the relevance of these for mental structures. Other researchers also use the term 'discursive psychology' – such as Nigel Edley and Margaret Wetherell (e.g., Wetherell & Edley, 2014) and Ian Parker (1992) – though some of this work is characterised as critical or Foucauldian discourse analysis (see Chapter 2).

The 'difficult relationship' between discursive and cognitivist psychology

It should now be clear that while DP was developed within psychology, its theoretical and methodological approach are quite different from the cognitivist approaches in psychology that seek to theorise, examine and measure mental processes. It is probably fair to say that this has resulted in what might be described as a 'difficult relationship' between DP and cognitivist psychology, and the cause of some tension between researchers and their colleagues, universities and funding bodies. It is therefore worth focusing specifically on this issue to be clear about what these points of difference are and what they mean for research.

DP takes a very different stance on cognition from much of mainstream psychological research (see te Molder & Potter, 2005, for detailed discussion on this topic). This is what is meant when we refer to DP as rejecting cognitivist approaches or as being anti-cognitivist: this is *not* the same as rejecting cognition (which would be 'anti-cognition'). In other words, this does not mean that DP assumes that there is no cognition, and that we do not think, feel or experience things. It does not make ontological claims (i.e., about what exists in the world), but does make epistemological claims (i.e., about what we can know about things in the world). DP does not deny, for example, that cognitive processes exist. Instead, it argues that these should not be the primary focus for studying, and making claims about, discourse and social interaction. In that sense, DP prioritises discourse as action (what talk and text actually does) rather than discourse as representation (whether and how discourse might relate to thought processes). Given that, it focuses on *language in use*, on the analysis of talk and text *in social settings* – hence the use of the term 'discourse'. There are areas of research therefore, such as the neural processes that co-ordinate sounds coming into the ear with comprehension of words, that do not involve social settings (though, of course, it is possible to imagine how this example might involve medical consultations and accounts of those with comprehension difficulties, which would themselves involve social interaction) and for which DP is not appropriate.

Cognitive approaches to language are often based on a referential, representational or structural theory of language, with an emphasis on grammatical knowledge or cognitive understandings of language. This means that they tend to treat language as, at least for the most part, referring to or representing 'inner' states, whether those are thoughts, emotions, attitudes, stereotypes, and so on. Even where such research concedes that people might vary their talk depending on the context, there is still the assumption that there is a reality *behind* the talk. By contrast, DP approaches discourse (that is, language in use, as talk and text) as social action, and primarily as a product of the interactional and sequential environment. In other words, DP argues that there are no mental states that we can access *without language*, that as soon as we might try to represent or identify thoughts, feelings and so on, they become produced (or interpreted) through language. Even bodily gestures, dance or artwork – those things that apparently are separate from language – require some form of language to interpret their meaning. But more importantly, DP is concerned with interaction and social settings, and with how we are to understand the construction and relevance of psychological issues within the social world.

This brings me to the final point, which is that while DP is anti-cognitivist about the analysis of discourse, this is only one small area of the much broader discipline of psychology. DP has its roots in ethnomethodology, sociology and post-structuralism, and so has a much broader sphere of relevance. Psychology is also an extremely broad and vibrant discipline in itself and thrives on debate and competing paradigms. So DP is just one of a range of approaches, and part of the way in which disciplines develop interdisciplinary connections. Even in the 25 or so years since DP emerged, there has been considerable change within psychology. Qualitative research more broadly

has grown from being the footnote at the bottom of a questionnaire to a diverse and vibrant field in itself. The computational model that lurks among the theories of many cognitivist approaches might itself need an upgrade, given increasing developments in social technology.

The main point here is that when seeking to understand and examine people and psychological concepts, DP starts with people's practices in interaction: it begins with the observable and the analytical, not because thoughts, feelings or bodily sensations are not considered to be important, but because humans are primarily social beings, and that discourse is the primary means through which, it is argued, we create our social worlds.

KEY POINTS

- DP is an approach to analysing discourse that treats talk and text as social action, and psychology as an object to be analysed for how it is made consequential in social interaction.

- DP takes a relativist, social constructionist stance to knowledge.

- DP was developed within psychology but is influenced by linguistics, philosophy, sociology, post-structuralism, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis.

- DP is anti-cognitivist but not anti-cognition; it does not deny that mental processes take place, but does argue against the prioritisation of these when analysing discourse.

- Discourse is treated as social action rather than representation; talk and text are argued to accomplish actions in the social world.

- Discourse is treated as constructed and constructive, as situated in a particular context, and as action-orientated.

Recommended reading

Edwards, D. & Potter, J. (1992). *Discursive psychology.* London: Sage.

Potter, J. & Wetherell, M. (1987). *Discourse and social psychology: Beyond attitudes and behaviour*. London: Sage.