Beyond semiotics and hermeneutics

Discourse analysis as a way to interpret consumers’ discourses and experiences

Lionel Sitz
EM Lyon, Lyon, France

Abstract

Purpose – This paper contends that the central question in understanding consumers’ experiences is not what is said (lexical analysis) or why (ideological analysis), but how consumers relate these experiences. The purpose is to present a method called discourse analysis (DA) to examine consumers’ narratives. This interdisciplinary perspective advantageously complements the lexical, content analytic or semiotic approaches traditionally used in marketing.

Design/methodology/approach – In order to show the potential of DA as a method to analyze qualitative data, the paper reports on a research concerning consumers’ shopping experiences. Data used stemmed from in-depth interviews that are analyzed through a critical DA informed by discursive psychology and foucauldian approaches.

Findings – DA allows marketers grasping the experiential value of shopping activities by depicting these experiences as ongoing constructions which meaning is constantly reinterpreted. DA also gives access to the various ways informants’ manage their identity through narration. Hence, it challenges the simplistic dichotomy between consumers and producers and allows marketers to look at consumers as co-producers of their lived experience. Given the scope of the study, the obtained results are situated and further researches should be conducted to critically analyze various types of discourses, produced by different actors. This paper shows the potential of DA in analyzing qualitative material. DA could be usefully employed to grasp the thoughts and feelings of the consumers. Rather than solely conducting lexical and/or semiotic analyses, marketers could use DA as a complementary investigation tool.

Originality/value – Through DA, this paper suggests new ways for seeking knowledge about the consumers and the market. To this end, it presents DA principles and shows that it is too often neglected by marketers trying to analyze consumers’ narratives.

Keywords Consumer research, Consumer psychology, Narratives

Paper type Research paper

Contemporary analyses of consumers’ narratives mainly rely on semiotic, psycho-cognitive, hermeneutic or phenomenological approaches (Escalas and Bettman, 2000; Sinkovics et al., 2005; Thompson et al., 1990). These approaches are mainly concerned with the text-content relationship and therefore overlook the socio-discursive conditions of production, diffusion, and reception of complex discursive configurations (Mick et al., 2004). The main contribution of discourse analysis (DA) is to insert the discursive level so as to understand how discourses and practices together constitute the “reality” of the social world (Fairclough, 1992; Ricoeur, 1986). The key to analysis is to locate specific issues in participants’ own practices of accountability for that whatever people say is always action-oriented. This perspective suggests that any story or account is indexically and rhetorically tied to particulars.
DA challenges taken-for-granted understandings and undermines the tendency to “naturalize” knowledge. It proposes to go beyond the semiotic analysis of signs as well as the “fusion of horizons” aimed by the hermeneutic perspective and to take a semantic and pragmatic stance. Discourses can no longer be regarded as transparent media giving onto an objective (i.e. cognitive) phenomenon. In this sense, researchers have to treat discourses as “conduits” to a reality beyond the discourses — i.e. take seriously the discursive level. Thus, every versions of reality is a socio-discursive construction enacted and held together by ongoing processes of discursive production and distribution (Edwards and Potter, 1992). In other words, discourses are both constructed by and constructive of the lived social reality (Berger and Luckman, 1996). Hence, DA explores the discursive production of the social reality, acknowledging that there are no “true” representations of reality from which one can critique other versions. This entails discourse is in an active relation to reality: language signifies reality in the sense of constructing meanings for it (Wittgenstein, 1975). More precisely, DA deconstructs the processes through which discourse constitutes social subjects, social relations, and systems of knowledge and belief (Fairclough, 1992). It is this constructive stance that makes DA a powerful method for studying social phenomena. This interpretive orientation can help qualitative market researchers better understand consumer behaviors that are complex, ambivalent and sociocultural by their nature.

Drawing on these arguments, this paper calls for the use of DA so as to interpret consumers’ narratives and other consumption-related discourses. It argues that DA is a well-suited method for analyzing the phenomenological dimensions of consumption and the sensemaking and sensegiving processes that connect an individual to the market and its institutions and “assemble” him as a consumer (Miller and Rose, 1997). Semiotics (Arnold et al., 2001; Holbrook, 1987; Stern et al., 1998), hermeneutics (Arnold and Fischer, 1994; Thompson, 1997; Thompson et al., 1990), and narrative analyses (Scott, 1991, 1994a; Stern, 1998; Stern et al., 1998) have each been introduced as a method for understanding consumption. DA shares their interest in the role of language in structuring social action but is distinguished by its specific interest in the discursive level.

The objective of this paper is to show that DA provides a structured method for examining the role of symbolic phenomena in consumers’ lives and is particularly relevant to study the experiences lived by and through consumption. This paper adopts an interpretive perspective and strives at showing the potential of DA in the field of consumer research. To this end, we illustrate our methodological discussion with the analysis of relevant empirical materials. The results show that using DA in order to analyze consumers’ discourses and experiences provides new insights into the processes through which experience is given meaning to as well as into how individuals are able to rhetorically manage their identity as “consumer.”

First, we present the core assumptions of DA. Then, we move to the key notions of DA and present the main results. Finally, we discuss the implications of this paper and suggest ways for future researches using DA as a method of analysis.

**Discourse analysis, so-called**

*Beyond the text: toward situated meanings*

Dictionaries usually set out entries for words in ways which imply the following view of meaning potential:
- meaning potential is stable;
- meaning potential is universal, in the sense of being common to all members of a speech community;
- meanings within a word’s meaning potential are discrete, that is, clearly demarcated from each other; and
- meanings within a word’s meaning potential are in a complementary “either/or” relationship to each other, and are mutually exclusive (Fairclough, 1992).

This allows lexical approaches of texts such as content analyses. Following this perspective, meaning is considered to be univocal and uncontested. It is carried out by words and is waiting to be interpreted by knowledgeable, interchangeable interpreters. In so doing, the researcher clearly overlooks the discursive dimension she is analyzing, neglecting its rhetorical and constructive nature (Edwards and Potter, 1992).

Previous researches have already underlined the “messy nature” of meaning and called for new intellectual developments to theorize and specify the “meaning below the surface” (Mick et al., 2004). Nevertheless, marketers still lack a toolkit of methods and conceptualizations to grasp the situated meaning of the consumers’ narratives (i.e. taking seriously the fact that meaning has many forms, is always dynamic, contingent, and multidimensional). This paper suggests taking a stronger turn toward a cross-fertilization of narratology, conversation analysis, philosophy of language and semiotics (Fairclough, 1992). To this end we put forward DA as a way to complement traditional methods such as content analysis.

Content analysis’ implicit assumption, not always and/or entirely specified, is that the content of the message somehow communicates meanings which can be imputed to both originator and receiver quite independently of information about the encoding and decoding activities of these actors (Eco, 1985). That is, the content analyst assumes that the “meanings” which he ascribes to the content, by assigning it to certain categories, correspond to the “meanings” intended by the communicator and/or understood by the audience. Hence, the assumption is that there is a common universe of discourse among the relevant parties, so that the manifest content can be taken as a valid unit of study. It presupposes a common culture unequivocally translatable into explicit symbolic forms. The meanings of these forms are assumed to be in one-to-one correspondence with the intentions and understandings of writer and audiences.

Moreover, content analysis implicitly posits a representation-importance function (the more a category is represented in a text, the more important it is for its author). Nevertheless, many researchers showed the necessity to be aware of the non-lexical contexts of messages (Edwards and Potter, 1992).

In the same vein, semiotics lays down a link between sign and meaning. This allows the analyst to withdraw the interpreted text from its context of production, distribution, and consumption. Eco (1985) shows the productive role of the interpreter but misses to acknowledge the importance of the situation of interpretation. Yet, the development of the philosophy of language taught us that the meaning is, by its very nature, indexical. In Wittgenstein’s (1975) words, the meaning of a word resides in the ways it is used within the diverse contexts of human practices. Meaning is a process of “language game” – a term used to designate fragments of actual linguistic practices, rather than a “lexical game.” The aspects of truth and reference are displaced: a “true”
meaning exists only insofar as members of a given community recognize it as reality-grounded.

The situated approach of meaning was extended to the analysis of practice and human action (Garfinkel and Sacks, 1970; Ricoeur, 1986). The productive capacity of actors is recognized and underlined. There exists (social, semantic, grammatical, etc.) constraints but actors are constantly doing “bricolage” in order to put up with these limitations (Holt, 2002; Holt and Thompson, 2004; Thompson and Haytko, 1997). Hence, meaning is always situated and dialogic. These developments led to a “linguistic turn” in consumer research (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1992; Sherry, 1991) that calls for interpretive approaches taking the indexicality of meaning seriously.

These elements call for a comprehensive framework for consumer research that takes into account both the productive role of actors and the constraints that limit their agency. Interpretive/naturalistic approaches in consumer research mainly rely on qualitative data, particularly from consumers’ narratives. In this perspective, DA is a promising method that permits the marketers to shed a new light on the interpreted material.

Presenting DA
DA has its roots in various philosophical traditions. One may speak of discourse analyses rather than DA because of its diversity. Nonetheless, it is possible to find out a common set of assumptions between the various approaches of DA. According to Maingueneau (1991), DA consists of the analysis of the articulation between the text and the social locus in which it is produced. The text alone belongs to textual linguistics – i.e. mainly lexical level; the social locus is treated by disciplines such as sociology or anthropology – i.e. the social constructionist level. DA is situated at the junction; in other words the discursive level. Theoretical development in pragmatics showed how language acts are at the junction between the linguistic and the social (Sperber and Wilson, 1989). This reality is hardly grasped by traditional semiotics (Eco, 2001).

Drawing on a panoply of theoretical perspectives (sociology, philosophy, psychology, linguistics, cognitive sciences, among others), DA challenges the taken-for-granted nature of language. A large part of human activities are performed through language. Hence, communication is a central part of human lives. Human beings tell stories and construct narratives to account for their experience, both for others and themselves (Shankar et al., 2001; Stern, 1998; Stern et al., 1998; Thompson et al., 1998). Human conduct is largely “storied” in the sense that narratives and stories allow human beings to deal with the world and to make sense of their phenomenological experiences (Bruner, 1990, 1991; Ricoeur, 1983, 1986). Activities and stories are not vehicles by which a univocal meaning is communicated. Rather, they constitute the condition of existence of sensemaking and sensegiving and leave open the interpretation of the involved meaning (Bruner, 1991).

DA object of analysis is linguistic texts. In addition to texts as “products” of processes of text production and interpretation, these processes themselves are analyzed (Fairclough, 1992). Thus, discourse must be studied dynamically, and analysts should be sensitive to the social constructive nature of discourse.
Another core assumption of DA is the view of discourse as constitutive. This entails discourse is in an active relation to reality in the sense of constructing meanings for it. For DA, the world and the words have a dialogical relationship. Discourse analysts agree that discourse is both shaped by and helps to shape the world as we experience it. Hence, discourse analysts question the simplicity and neutrality of rendering the world into versions as well as the assumption of epistemological privilege that goes with it. There is no outside “proof” and the discourse should be interpreted with the “justifications” it provides (Boltanski and Thevenot, 1991, 1999).

Critical DA
This paper proposes a critical framework for DA. Critical DA is informed by discursive psychology, ethnomethodology and foucauldian approaches. The critical DA is concerned with power relations in discourse, but also with how power relations and power struggle shape and transform the discourse practices and the social practices in general.

Moreover, critical DA considers that description is not as separate from interpretation as it is often assumed to be. As an analyst one is inevitably interpreting all the time, and there is no phase of analysis that is pure description. Consequently, one’s analysis of the text is shaped and coloured by one’s interpretation of its relationship to discourse processes and wider social processes (Fairclough, 1992). Context must be explicitly integrated in the process of analysis, since it permits the analyst to comprehend the various appropriation of a specific discourse. Thus, critical DA must consider the manifold possible interpretations for various audiences.

Critical DA must encompass three interrelated aspects:
(1) a critic of the discourse aiming at discovering inconsistencies, contradictions, paradoxes and dilemma displayed by the discourse;
(2) a socio-diagnostic critic seeking demystification of the pervasive, “manipulatory” discursive practices; and
(3) prospective critic associated with an ethic and pragmatic dimension, seeking to interpret the discrepancies and contradictions of the discourse by linking it to other types of discourses.

But discourse is not merely apprehended through its ideological or macrosocial dimension but also through its interpersonal or microsocial dimension. Discourse is also an interactional and cognitive tool (Cicourel, 1972; Schegloff and Sacks, 1973) and therefore provides the key cultural frames necessary to live meaningfully. For this reason, the critical DA presented in this paper differs from other, more ideologically-oriented critical approaches (van Dijk, 1993).

Data
The empirical materials analyzed consist of a set of 12 interviews conducted with shoppers (9) and retailers’ employees and managers (3). This set of data is taken from an ongoing research that strives to understand consumers’ shopping experience. To this end, we conducted several interviews. During these phenomenological interviews, we asked open-ended questions. We did not follow an a priori framework, relying on the remarks of the informants to organize the interview. This follows a phenomenological
framework, which is well-suited to uncover the lived meaning and the experiential
dimensions of consumer behavior (Thompson et al., 1990; Thompson et al., 1994).

The interviews were then transcribed, respecting the oral traits of the given
accounts. They were then analyzed with Atlas-Ti, a qualitative data analysis software.
Inspired by grounded theory principles, this software allows the researcher to conduct
efficiently a qualitative analysis of qualitative data. Atlas-Ti is a useful device to
retrieve information without imposing any given framework to the analysis since the
actual coding process is conducted by the researcher. The discursive analysis
constantly moved from general to particulars, alternating the phases of coding, writing
memos and connecting bits of interviews together.

During this process, numerous codes emerge. The task was then to merge these
codes in order to move toward “conceptualization.” While doing so, we were amazed by
the similarity of the “discursive dynamics” of the different interviews. We noticed
marked convergences of rhetorical strategies, reflected in similar justifications.
Though the vocabularies were analogous, our interpretation of the data led us to
believe the described experiences were different. Hence, the experience per se is
identical; the store is the same, furnishing the same “text” or, in Gibson’s (1979) terms,
affordances to the actors entering the shop. Nevertheless, the lived experiences are
quite different according to one’s motives and interests.

In order to investigate these discrepancies, we adopted a DA framework inspired by
the works in discursive psychology (Bagozzi and Dabholkar, 2000; Edwards and
Potter, 1992) as well as rhetoric and more precisely the so-called “new rhetoric”
(Perelman, 1977). For this reason, the DA conducted in this research should be
considered a subset of DA. In other words, compared with more linguistically-inspired
DA, ours is more focused on rhetorical strategies and use of categories in talk. To this
end, we focus our analysis on the various ways experiences and ideas are made socially
accountable by our informants. This leads us to a special interest in the public
“justifications” (Boltanski, 2002; Boltanski and Thevenot, 1999) and the “vocabularies
of motives” (Mills, 1940) offered by the actors.

Moreover, the proposed DA is inspired by critical theories. Nevertheless, contrary to
more traditional critical theories, our method does not seek to uncover grand
ideological constructions but remain on a more micro level. Hence, we strive at getting
an outlook on intertextuality linking the gathered discourses rather than the
ideological constraints framing them.

The next section presents some results from our analysis in order to illustrate the
potential of DA in interpreting consumer narratives.

Results
This section focuses on two main results of our research. The first paragraph
illustrates the potential of DA in understanding shopping experience as an ongoing
construction. The second paragraph revolves on the management of identity in
discourse and its importance in the lived experience. These results are heuristic in
nature since they illustrate the potential of DA as a method of analysis.

**Constructing one’s experience: rhetoric as a sensemaking/giving strategy**
The analysis conducted on our data shows that a consumption experience cannot be
reduced to a perceptual-cognitive process involving the mechanisms of anchoring
and objectification. Consumption experience as the researcher is able to retrieve is an ongoing construction (re)assembled in practices and discourses.

The narratives one can obtain are particular versions of the world that are action-oriented and rhetorically undermined. More precisely, discourses are used by consumers as one means of reconciling the multifaceted tensions involved in the apprehension of their shopping experiences.

Consumption experiences, like every other experiences (Bruner, 1990, 1991; Ricoeur, 1983), are ordered in a narrative that is presented as the description or account of the experiences’ circumstances. Its function is to link the consumption experience as a local, isolated act and more stable and justified structures such as the institutionalized cultural categories, the identity of the consumer:

My feeling in this store is special. I feel calm, welcomed. The colors are warm. The employees are generally nice [...]. It's not that this store is very special by itself, I mean like Nature & Découvertes [a retailer well-known for its “experiential” stores] or whatever, but still [...]. I heard on the radio that it is a marketing tactic for the retailers to construct nice stores, but I like that. Even if it’s in order to do business, I like to feel good in a store [...]. Not always, like when I go to Ed [a discount store chain] I don't care if it’s not nice “cause I’m looking for bargains when I go there.” It’s another thing. [...] I accept to pay a little more to get a little more. I know it’s silly but [...]. Well it’s not that pricy in this store. It’s just better products, better displays. I’m not a “consumer” I want to have good products good prices and good displays. And here I can find all this. I can come here after work. It’s near my home. It’s not only marketing (male, 46 years, manager).

Earlier in the interview this informant related his shopping experience in phenomenological terms. But as the interview continues, he tried to link his personal feelings with more general categories. Accounting for his experience this informant is constructing a narrative. The given story constitutes an opportunity for him to make sense of his experience. The narrative should not be considered as a stable output but rather as a process through which this consumer is still and constantly interpreting his lived experience.

The rhetorical orientation of this narrative is obvious. He is not a “consumer” but accept to pay more in order to optimize the perceived value created by his activities. The account is not neutral and rhetoric affordances inform the researcher of the justifying intentions of the informant. Apparent contradictions give the researcher an opportunity to glean information regarding the sensemaking and sensegiving processes. The extract shows several “logical” contradictions such as “I know it’s silly but...” Even though it is more expensive than other alternatives, the informant deliberately chooses to shop here. Since this description contradicts his claim not to be a “consumer,” the informant put into perspective his choice so as to defend it. He likes the store, its merchandising (i.e. he mentions the assortment several times through the interview), its atmosphere and accepts to pay more to shop there. However, he is not fooled by some marketing practices: he knowingly decides.

There are no clear lexical markers of rhetorical strategies (Perelman, 1977). At first glance, the informant simply describes his attitude, but the rhetorical orientation indicates that he is justifying his choices: through his narrative the informant is making and attributing a sense to his choices and experiences.

Consumer researchers tend to be focused on a somewhat reified textual level and to regard consumer narratives as a window on their experiences. Shifting from the
completed story to tensions within the narrative helps the researcher to find out the rhetorical tactics employed by the informant. That is, if marketers are to look closely on the discursive dynamics, they are able to see how the informant manages to narrate his feelings and how he makes them comprehensible and accountable for someone else (i.e. the researcher). Narrating his experience, the informant is making sense of it in order to be able to account for what he “really” has felt and currently feels. Thus, the meaning of a shopping experience for a given consumer is an ongoing process managed through shopping practices as well as accounting ones (i.e. the successive narrations of one’s shopping experience):

Informant: I simply love this store [a urban supermarket]. It offers me a nice spot to shop, always . . . When I come here, I know I will have a good time […] [20 minutes later].

Researcher: You said earlier that you usually feel good while shopping here. And still, you just told me you didn’t like the way the products are set in this store.

Informant: Now that you ask […] Yes, I see […] The way I look at it now is different I think. See, the fact is that I feel good but I don’t know exactly why. [silence] Well I know why: the people I meet here are very nice and I don’t always feel good. The point is that I usually like the store, but sometimes I’m fed up with it. Well not with the store itself, with what it represents: shopping, daily chores […] Sometimes, I just need to get away from all this, to get lost in an usual store, more decorated, or a very simple store like Liddle or so […] (female, 32 years, employee).

Posing a direct link between message and content would lead the analyst to overlook this kind of contradictions. On the contrary, DA points out these tensions and tries to understand them by looking closely at the justifications offered to reconcile the displayed contradictions. By following different sorts of contradictions of this type; we were able to detect some patterns and to get an understanding of their causes. These contradictions can be explained by the dynamic nature of experience (Carù and Cova, 2003; Joy and Sherry, 2003) and the different “regimes” in which one’s experience is embedded (Brakus, 2001).

However, this does not imply that shopping experience is only discursive and does not have any “real” grounds. It only suggests that the actual narrative of the lived experience is a situated discursive achievement rather than the product of an outside reality. Hence, consumer researchers should look for the rhetorical procedures the consumers employ to make sense of their experiences rather than looking solely for the meaning of these experiences. By focusing its attention on the production of meaning as a dialogical construction between action and discourse, that is the lived experience and the accounted lived experience, DA constitutes a promising method to uncover parts of consumers’ experiences that often remain overlooked by marketers using exclusively lexical methods.

Managing one’s identity as consumer

The researcher interested by consumer experience must take into account the procedures through which an actor defines himself as a “consumer.” Different streams of researches underline the interactional nature of one’s identity, showing that identity is constantly (re)defined (Ahuvia, 2005; Brewer, 1991; Escalas and Bettman, 2000; Salerno, 2001):

I feel good in this store. I feel like . . . Well […] I think it’s my way of seeing the world my way of feeling things. I guess it’s personal. In a way it’s very personal, but on the other hand I think
it’s the same thing for everybody. [silence] Yes […] Everybody must feel like me in the store […] I guess. I mean we are all the same, the consumers […] so we should have the same experience, right?! (female, 37 years, employee).

In her account, the informant is describing her positive experience. First, she acknowledges the indexical nature of her experience, assuming her experience to be unique or at least “personal.” She then acknowledges that this experience may be compared to the experiences of others. This shift is marked by the use of different pronouns: “I”/“we.” Hence, one’s identity as consumer is relationally constructed through several aspects of the relationship between self and other as well as self and commercial institutions (Escalas and Bettman, 2000; Holt and Thompson, 2004; Hopkins and Kahani-Hopkins, 2004).

The discourses of our informants produce a range of identities for the “consumer” (e.g. active/passive and satisfied/dissatisfied), construct and negotiate different boundaries (e.g. I/we and consumer/producer), and draw on broader discursive resources (e.g. commercial slogans and activists’ movements discourses). Discourse provides an arena for actors to negotiate the meaning of their identity as consumers by deciphering their practices as consumption practices and linking one’s identity to others.

When describing the world, the informants have to choose who they want to attribute agency to (e.g. the store environment/themselves). For example, some of our informants acknowledge their shopping experience derives directly from the retailer’s strategy through experiential apparatuses (e.g. they designed their store so as to give us a good experience … in order to encourage the consumers to buy …); others present themselves as active producers of the experience (e.g. I think my feeling depends on my mood.). These differences have important consequences on the way the actor interpret his own experience. In the first case, he considers himself as a recipient of experience and apprehends the commercial apparatuses as structural/physical constraints. In the latter, he regards himself as the locus of agency and takes an active part in the production of experience. Being the locus of agency gives the consumer the feeling he actively produces his (consumer) experience.

DA pays attention on the use of rhetorical tactics to manage one’s identity. Since identity and identity management is central to understand the interpretation one does from his experience (Joy and Sherry, 2003), it sheds a new light on the production of shopping experience and more generally on consumers’ experiences.

Critical DA is particularly attentive to the rhetorical use of categories in the discourse (Edwards, 1998). For this reason, it is able to grasp the significance of categories in the sensemaking processes. Assigning categories to elements of the environment, one is able to create ad hoc categories (Barsalou, 1983) that help to assemble their experience and to assign meaning to it. These ad hoc categories are not necessarily inexistent categories but also a new way of using them in situation. The indexical discursive use of categories is central to make/give sense to one’s experience (Barsalou, 1983; Edwards, 1998) and DA is an efficient way to complement existing methods to grasp the discursive strategies one’s use in her discourse.

**Discussion**

*Conceptualizing discourse as an implementational device*

The knowledge structure as presented in the discourse is a situated one and is the emergent outcome of the relationship between speaker and audience, and its
psychological function and status cannot be understood independently of this relationship. Discourses constitute situated knowledge structures by which social coupling is achieved. Their production is regulated by the cognitive and motivational implications of the speaker-audience relationship. The message is a product of motivational (like or dislike for the target), cognitive (preparation of instructions) and behavioral (speech acts conveying a cognitive map) processes. The message is designed to impact the audience cognitively, behaviorally and motivationally. For these reasons, interviews, as well as every qualitative data, cannot be reduced to their explicit message and must be treated as discourses. In other words, marketers should treat qualitative data as the outcome of situated acts and be sensitive to their indexicality. For that matter, DA constitutes a useful tool for marketers interested in grasping the sociocultural system embedded in human practices that influence so profoundly the consumption practices. In other words, DA complements the semiotic approach by providing a clearer focus on the indexical-, dynamic- and multi-sensory nature of meaning. Hence, the concentration on the discursive level of consumers’ narratives is a (partial) response to numerous calls for approaches capable of surpassing the limitations of traditional semiotic analyses (Mick et al., 2004).

To use DA, one should consider the following basic principles. First one should take seriously the mutually constitutive mind-reality relationship. Second, the researcher should follow a methodological relativism and begin with no specific assumptions about truth and reality. Third, the researcher must take seriously the participants’ accounts, descriptions, stories, justifications and/or explanations. Finally, the researcher should carefully examine inconsistencies, paradoxes and contradictions existing in the participants’ accounts. These principles are not contradictory with current methods and usefully supplement them by focusing on the discursive construction(s) of reality (or realities).

**DA and discursive approach of attitudes**

When looked at closely, discourses are never fully coherent. On the contrary, they display various kinds of internal contradictions and tensions. One should not treat these tensions as irrelevant elements. On the contrary, this set of circumstances creates interesting loci for those wishing to get a deep understanding of the sociocultural process underlying consumption. These inconsistencies undermine the considerable emphasis usually made on attitude in consumer research and in marketing in general.

In consumers’ narratives, as in every discourse, the nature of “the object” is formulated in the course of evaluating it. People do not construct neutral versions of attitudinal objects (e.g. a store) and then evaluate them. They assemble versions of the object which display evaluations. Factual and evaluative features are inextricably linked. Thus, factual-type description is meshed into explanation, and the constructed discourse has an evaluative orientation.

Discourse is not a direct mirror of actors’ inner states but a complement to them. Following this perspective, attitude surveys are not dismissed, but should be handled carefully. As various strands of researches have shown, attitudes should not be reified and one should be precautious when measuring and using them (Potter, 1998; Wiggins and Potter, 2003). DA as proposed in this paper is a way to look differently at attitudes and to comprehend the various action regimes between which the consumer is making her way. Human thoughts are polymorphous, they constantly adapt to the
environment, be it social (Hochschild, 1979) or physical (Gibson, 1979). Thus, discourses are in a constant flux and measuring “real” attitudes becomes a tricky business.

**Implications for the analysis of consumers’ experiences**

Apart from the content and lexical analysis of consumers’ narratives, our research shows in what way(s) a critical DA could help the marketers grasping the consumers’ feeling toward their lived experiences. In this paper, we used a discursive stance in order to better understand the consumers’ shopping experience. Following this approach, we showed that the value ascribed by an individual to her shopping experience cannot be reduced to what she explicitly relates. Thus, marketers interested in figuring out the value they created should adopt critical discursive lenses when approaching consumers’ narratives. These critical discursive lenses adopt a critical stance on discourses but do not rely on a “grand” critical outlook devoted at unmasking the structures of power behind ideologies (Murray and Ozanne, 1991). Rather they take on a symmetrical approach that takes seriously the consumers’ viewpoint and capabilities throughout their practices.

This paper contends that the central question in understanding consumers’ experiences is not what is said (lexical analysis) or why (ideological analysis), but how consumers relate these experiences. Applied to actual marketing practices, this research has several implications.

One of the most important applications of DA may be market intelligence. For example, organizations currently rely on focus groups interviews to generate data allowing them to understand their markets and consumers. These data are then analyzed through semiotic and/or content analyses and/or statistical methods. Although these methods are essential to get a general understanding of the average consumer, one way to make marketers more fully aware of their potential for creating (experiential) value for the consumers is through consumers’ narratives and DA. Focus groups have their own dynamics and place consumers in specific schemata. According more attention to discursive dynamics, rhetorical orientation, and justifications, marketers could enrich their understanding of consumer experience (Puchta and Potter, 2004).

DA challenges marketers to move beyond the reified consumer’s figure and to constantly question their assumptions. For this reason, DA could be a way for marketers to imagine new ways of understanding their markets, their practices and to avoid the “marketing myopia.” Although we focused our attention on the analytic part, these new ways of seeking marketing knowledge comprise the whole process of research, from data collection to data analysis. Data collection is a crucial phase when doing DA: rich analysis cannot emerge from badly collected data. Hence, marketers could complement their current data collection processes with new ones and triangulating the data collection methods in order to enrich the collected data. This would lead to better knowledge and better efficiency.

Following this perspective, the satisfaction surveys conducted by so many enterprises these days should be taken cautiously since the collected discourses cannot be re-situated in their contexts. They freeze complex thoughts in pre-specified categories (Puchta and Potter, 2004). In so doing, they reify attitudinal stability and tend to take the informants’ answers as granted. The topic of discourse would thus seem to be a productive point around which different perspectives might meet,
answering calls for greater disciplinary cross-fertilization. Therefore, we do not suggest that marketers stop using focus groups and attitude surveys, but rather that they complement these approaches with DA.

**Conclusion**

Rather than depicting meaning as a relatively stable outcome of a text-content relationship, DA considers it as a dialogical process. Using DA to analyze consumer narratives concerning their shopping experience, this paper shows that the meaning of shopping experience is not a result but a process in which consumers play an active role. Focusing on discourses, DA offers a way to uncover the ways through which consumers manage their experiences discursively. This perspective supplement existing consumer research and could helpfully be used by qualitative market researchers interested at grasping the traditional approaches of narratives in consumer research tend to treat language and more generally every meaning system (e.g. the fashion system) as an information vehicle and extract information by paying attention to what is denoted by the displayed symbols. The meaning accessed through an analysis of propositional utterances belongs to the endogenous meaning of the activities, intentions and motives. DA considers the propositional content and its form are not ends in themselves but elements of the position a person takes towards others in a specific social space. Hence, it gives the analysts an interesting tool to analyze consumers’ narratives. Some researches, mainly in advertising, already called for rhetorical and discursive approaches to analyze advertising (Hirschman et al., 1998; Scott, 1994b). This paper goes further by advocating the use of DA as a research tool for consumer researchers in parallel of semiotics, hermeneutics, or content analysis. Given the space limitation, the material provided to illustrate our demonstration is very limited and further researches should supply readers with additional and longer extracts.

**References**


**About the author**

Lionel Sitz is a Professor of Marketing at EM Lyon. He works in the areas of branding and consumer behavior. His research interests revolve around brand communities, social movements, experiential marketing and qualitative methods in marketing. He is also involved in a European research program on New Approaches in Consumer Resistance funded by the Agence Nationale pour la Recherche and he strives at understanding the link between discourses and the emergence of consumer social movements. Lionel Sitz can be contacted at: sitz@em-lyon.com

To purchase reprints of this article please e-mail: reprints@emeraldinsight.com
Or visit our web site for further details: www.emeraldinsight.com/reprints