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Revealing Perception: Discourse Analysis in a Phenomenological Framework

Abstract

Phenomenology and Foucauldian discourse analysis are two different epistemic stances that can be applied to the legitimation of knowledge. Although based on two different traditions and interests, the combination of both approaches is presented as a possible and valid way to improve the efficiency of its individual components, thus helping to reveal the artificial construction and the perception of knowledge by individuals in the critical historical dimension and the unstated epistemology driving some classifications. An example of application of this new method is the study of the perception of the Spanish flags in Spain, a shifting perception in history linked to the effects that power discourses and strategies of control have had in the lived experiences of the population. In this example, while discourse analysis might help to reveal the artificiality of the power inequalities and the exclusions in the creation of knowledge, the phenomenological approach helps to reveal the construed nature of this knowledge by the individuals in the different moments of their lives and depending on the different lived experiences and perceptions at any moment.

1.0 Introduction

Phenomenology is the epistemic stance concerned with the study of how people make meaning of their lived experience. Phenomenology is rooted in the early 20th century European philosophy and mainly in the work of Edmund Husserl. The phenomenological approach and some of its components, such as noesis, eidetic description and reduction and social space, have been studied for the understanding of, among other aspects, the role of cognition and cultural conformity in everyday classification (Smiraglia 2008; 2010). As Smiraglia (2008) put it, noesis “describes an epistemological foundation that is essential for post-modern knowledge organization systems. Social contexts, cultural moderation, and perceptual fluidity are constants in the ego acts of classification.” A further step in this epistemological foundation would be the deepening and combination of phenomenology with other post-modern methods in order to understand and reveal the artificial construction of concepts and relationships in everyday classifications, something that sometimes also drives the development of “official” classifications and other Knowledge Organization Systems (KOS).

We propose the incorporation of Foucauldian genealogical discourse analysis in KO (see Martínez-Avila 2010) to a phenomenological framework as a valid approach to better understand how lived experiences and cultural moderation affect the perception of knowledge and construction of concepts in everyday classification and in de facto or unexpressed official classifications. Here, components of phenomenology such as the perceptions and syntheses in different moments might be treated as analogous to the Foucauldian discursive formations and the concept of discourse, while the lived experiences and the way these are presented to the subjects might be studied as practices and strategies of control. Using genealogical discourse analysis to reveal how different perceptions are construed in different moments, due to cultural moderation

and everyday experiences, can help to understand the artificiality of presumed universal models and the construction of more effective and inclusive KOS according to the needs of specific groups. The assumption and convenience of neutrality and naturalness in the organization of concepts, even in Social Sciences and Humanities, is commonly used as a justification for many arguments and (moral) judgments that lie behind political decisions and actions. Decision-making is heavily grounded in construed hierarchies of concepts and meanings, being presented as commonly accepted by some. As well, some locations and relationships between concepts in KOS are presented by some classificationists as natural and universal. While phenomenology helps to reveal the artificiality of these universal arguments and organizations of concepts by showing how individual lived experiences conform individual classifications that are different from those of others with different lived experiences, Foucauldian discourse analysis can assist in the task of revealing the interests and power inequalities underlying official classifications and arbitrary decisions that prevail over “other” classifications and users. mainly through official discourses and official structures and meanings in KOS. In other words, while phenomenology is being used to study and understand the construction of concepts at a personal level, according to their different lived experience, discourse analysis is being used as a complementary method to deconstruct the artificial relationships between individuals and individual constructions of concepts while studying how “official” elements and individuals (including here organizations involved in the construction of concepts and systems) privilege some constructions of meanings and individuals over others.

2.0 Application of discourse analysis to phenomenology

The first challenge that the application of a post-modern method such as Foucauldian discourse analysis to phenomenology might present is how to deal with the possibility of one knowable truth, that some attribute to phenomenology, and the rejection of absolute truths and absolute single knowable objects by Foucault and other post-structuralists. However, as it will be argued here, this aspect does not present either a contradiction or a problem in our approach.

Habermas (1971) established three categories of human interest that underscore knowledge: prediction, understanding and emancipation. The interest of positivism would be to predict, the interest of phenomenology (as well as of others such as constructivism, hermeneutic, etc.) would be to understand, and the interest of other stances such as feminism, neo-Marxism and more would be to emancipate. Working on the basis of this taxonomy, Lather (1991) added one more category of interest to legitimate knowledge: deconstruction. Post-modern and post-structural approaches, that arguably include Foucauldian discourse analysis, would fall into this deconstruction category added by Lather. Here, Lather successfully positioned and developed her work in the emancipation interest, acknowledging and combining it with a great fascination with deconstruction. In this vein, following Habermas' taxonomy and Lather's example, we believe that different combinations of interests might also be followed to underscore knowledge. The interest of emancipation in combination with deconstruction, as suggested by Lather, might be helpful although not necessarily

required depending on the degree of establishment of the repressive knowledge that the emancipative action is trying to counteract. The interest of understanding might be combined with the interest of emancipation in order to strengthen the emancipative stance that it is being followed, because every emancipation goal, e.g. feminism, might be well assisted with the understanding of knowledge in that particular stance. Of course if we interpret understanding of knowledge as the understanding of the only one knowable truth, and here we might apply this interpretation to phenomenology too, this combination might not be helpful at all unless we accept that the only knowable truth is the same one as in our emancipative stance, feminism in our example. In this case, predictive and understanding interests might also be combined only until reaching the point at which the one knowable truth is acquired, while predictive and deconstructive interests would make no sense at all because there is no need to deconstruct the only accepted and desired truth. However, from our point of view, neither the understanding interest or phenomenology imply a unique and universal truth to be known by all, but a personal truth and organization of knowledge that is acquired by an individual according to lived experience. In this vein, the combination of the understanding and deconstructive interests, and more specifically of phenomenology and discourse analysis, would not be a contradiction but indeed a desirable complement in which deconstruction gains effectiveness by understanding, and individual understanding is better studied by the deconstruction of universal assumptions. Indeed, and following Lather's possible combination of emancipation with deconstruction, we might also consider the combination of the understanding, deconstructive and emancipative interests as a plausible third step to underscore knowledge in which each phase complements and enriches the other while pursuing three different but not contradictory goals. Indeed, the combination of phenomenology and genealogical discourse analysis tries to supersede any criticism or shortcoming found in one or another individual approach while enriching them with each other. In our study, we work with phenomenology as a basis, in the same way that Derrida, considered part of the second generation of French phenomenologists, also criticized Husserlian phenomenology without abandoning it, taking over Husserl's conception of philosophy as open-ended, radical inquiry (see Moran 2000), and developing his own notions of deconstruction while acknowledging primarily the work of Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger (Kearney 1984).

In the present approach, our combination of phenomenology and Foucauldian discourse analysis is not presented as something necessarily more contradictory than the mere academic application of discourse analysis itself, but rather complementary to each other as though in two different stages. While the Platonic essentialist elements in Husserlian phenomenology might have not been shared by the Foucauldian approach, these aspects are not being considered in this application of discourse analysis to phenomenology either. For Foucault, the main questions were never "what" or "why," but "how" instead. Those elements avoided by Foucault and his method, the "what" and "why," are still omitted (i.e., left aside at that stage) by our application of discourse analysis and reserved for the phenomenology approach, without any preliminary Foucauldian judgment. On the other hand, the application of discourse analysis to the

phenomenological approach might also help to address some of the limitations and concerns that other “post-structuralist” authors, such as Derrida, detected in the Husserlian approach (Derrida 1967). As Moran (2000) points out, Derrida realized that “Husserl was troubled by the problem of how, in repeated yet different acts of thinking, each a unique, unrepeatable, occurrent psychological episode, we can intend the same meaning and succeed in referring again and again to the same object. How can the sameness of the intended meaning be guaranteed in the midst of the different acts of thinking?” The answer to this question in Husserl's works, as Moran indicates, was usually posited in terms of “an ideal domain of multiply accessible 'senses' or 'meanings' (Bedeutungen) that are instantiated within the act of thinking, but which nevertheless, because ideal, can sustain approaches from different paths at different times,” and in terms of repeatability in the later works of Husserl (such as in “The Origin of Geometry,” famously revised by Derrida).

In our approach, the ideal domain of multiply accessible meanings attributed to Husserl might not be limited to an essentialist knowable truth, as some have attributed to phenomenology, but rather would consider the multiple meanings construed by each individual according to lived experience none of which are more real or “true” than the others. Second, the delays and different moments of the acts of thinking and syntheses in the perception that are presented in phenomenology would not be studied as a matter between the essence of the object and the sameness of the reference act on the psychological act of thinking, but rather focusing on “how” the social discourses and strategies of control affect the transformation and emergency of these concepts in different moments of History. For instance, in “Madness and civilization,” Foucault (1971) studied how the concept of folly was separated from reason by reason itself, being the perception of mad people shaped and transformed in different moments of history. Since Foucault does not go very deep into the daily perception of individual subjects according to what they lived and experienced, these subjects cannot corroborate as individuals the shift in their daily perception of meaning (actually, in his analysis of madness, Foucault talks about four different periods in history centuries apart, therefore individuals hardly could experience such transformations but through the asynchronous study of history). In our combination of discourse analysis and phenomenology, “why” the lived experience of the individuals affects and causes them to perceive “what” in their knowing process would be part of the phenomenological approach. Meanwhile, the study of “how” the different discourses and strategies of control affect the perception and emergence of concepts in those individuals and the imposition of a dominant meaning in a universal system, would be products of the discourse analysis. The combination of both approaches would help to gain insight on the overall process of revealing knowledge (especially established and official knowledge) as artificially construed by social factors and individually perceived according to the exposure to these factors.

3.0 An example of application

Examples of application in which the combination of both approaches might work better would be those in which the historical transformation of the concept is recent

enough to study the shift of perception and divergence in individual subjects according to different lived experiences and historical events. One example of this shift is the genealogy of perception and construction of meaning of the different official and unofficial flags of Spain. In the last century, the official flag of Spain has been changed on several occasions following on several political events that transformed its meaning and classification for individuals depending on lived experience.

During the Second Spanish Republic (1931-1939), the official Spanish flag was red, yellow and purple, being the official flag until the military coup of 1936. During the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) there were two factions with two different ideologies and two different flags with two different meanings attached to them. On the one side, the Republican faction, loyal to the Government, kept the official red, yellow and purple Spanish flag until the end of the war in 1939, a flag that has retained the original meaning of the Second Spanish Republic leftist values until today (positive for some and negative for others, depending on who is asked). On the other side, the Nationalist faction, characterized for their far-right ideology in concordance with the totalitarian movements in Europe during the years prior to the Second World War, hoisted a red and yellow flag during the war years (similar in some ways to the pre-Republican flag) and added a distinctive black eagle during the aftermath. This flag, the red and yellow one with the black eagle, was the only official flag of Spain during the dictatorship (1939-1979) and has also become a symbol of the Francoist values afterwards (again, positive for some and negative for others). Of course, although the official flag of Spain -according to the state and common international recognition—is one and unique depending on the historical period of the country, the accepted flag for individuals and factions specially in the case of the Spanish Civil War and dictatorship was not necessarily the same depending on which side they took. For instance, the Spanish Republican government in exile (settled between Mexico City and Paris until the end of the dictatorship) only recognized the Republican flag—red, yellow and purple—as the representative and official flag of Spain, in spite of not being considered official by the Spanish State and the majority of the international community. During the war years, the Nationalist faction did not accept the official Republican flag of the state as representative of the nation. In every case the meaning of each flag for individuals was shaped by their values, propaganda, discourses, and lived experiences during those years. With the death of the dictator and the end of Francoism, in the historical period called Spanish transition to democracy, the political situation and constructions of meanings in many contexts were at best even more complex (Aguilar Fernández 2002), and imposing and unsatisfying for most, far from being exemplary at worst (see for instance Navarro 2006; 2007; 2008; 2009; 2010a; 2010b; 2011; 2012a). While right-wing parties demanded and expected a continuation of the Francoist regime, left wing parties demanded a restitution of the legitimate Republic that was overthrown with the military coup. However the result of the Spanish transition was the sovereignty of the royal House of Bourbon and a constitutional monarchy that in political terms did not fully represent anybody. Since then, the official flag of Spain has been a red and yellow one with the symbol of the monarchy.

Today, present, past, official and unofficial flags co-exist in many aspects of society construing and shaping many different meanings in diverse contexts such as demonstrations, political events, media and protests. While all of these different historical flags hardly can be considered components of the global Spanish identity today (note the singular form of the word identity here, as if there were only one), the existence of different identities and flags with different values attached to each of them highlights the discordance between the existence of one official and supposedly neutral flag and the polarized and political use of flags and the attempt to classify them and shape their meaning by some, especially by those who gather the power to create systems of values and social effects through laws, media schedules, educational programs and so on.

While the colors of the Second Republic Flag are commonly depicted (and perceived) as a representation of leftist, anti-constitutional and sometimes even violent movements, due to the flag's history, unfulfilled historical demands or even the defamation of this flag by the right-wing Government (see for instance Europa Press 2012; Público 2013), the black eagle in the flag is also perceived as a representation of the far-right wing movements, not necessarily representing the nostalgia for the old dictatorship or its political system in a strict sense but also the emergence of something completely new to the flag such as neo-Nazism in Europe and neo-Nazi groups in Spain. This perception, in the case of Spain, might also be caused by the image that is projected in the media as well as the experience and testimonies of people seeing these far-right neo-Nazi groups wearing the Francoist flag in demonstrations. In this vein, the lived experience and everyday classification of flags by each individual and the flags' meanings are revealed to be affected not only by the original historical discourses attached to them, but also by new discourses and experiences that although perceived individually might be socially driven by political interests and agenda settings.

On the other hand, the fact that not too many people in Spain acknowledge today any strong sentiment for the official constitutional monarchy flag (including controversial cases of athletes in official competitions showing no identification with the flag, unofficial replacement for a red and yellow flag with a bull, etc.), might be explained in part by the historical retrospective deception and transformation of the role of the monarchy's symbology since the historical period of Spanish transition to democracy (Navarro 2012b) and the relatively weaker influence over people today of "moderate" power discourses such as the institution of the monarchy and other key political parties during the Spanish transition to democracy (such as the extinct UCD – Unión de Centro Democrático party), in comparison to other more polarized and ambitious political stances both at the left and at the right. However, although there seems to be a lack of values and identification with the official monarchy flag of Spain (in favor of any of the other more politicized unofficial Spanish flags) this flag has also been rejected occasionally by those who reject the idea of the current Spanish identity and the official model of the state, including those individuals who belong to a wide range of conservative to liberal parties e.g. those in the Catalanian and Basque regions. For instance, political parties in Catalonia have recently expressed that the "flags act" of Spain that mandates the obligation of raising the official Spanish flag together with

other regional flags, such as the Catalanian one, is problematic and trouble-making (Redacción 2013). On the hand, sentiments like this might be deliberately fed by political interests such as the current Spanish government stating that the Catalanian flag might incite violence (Muñiz 2012). In this case, whether these sentiments are shared by individuals or just power institutions, the meanings of these flags in relation to other social agents (agitators or problematic or violent agents, etc.) and national identities, seem to have been conveniently classified as something mutually exclusive in both day-by-day perceptions and classifications as well as in political Spanish discourses, in spite of the fact that the official Spanish Constitution of 1978 in its second article recognizes several nationalities and regions within the Spanish nation, and in its forth article recognizes the coexistence and use of different regional flags in public buildings and at official events.

Conclusion

In this paper, the application of Foucauldian discourse analysis to phenomenology is presented as a valid combination to enrich and expand both individual stances, and to increase the effectiveness of the revelation of knowledge as something artificial and socially construed in every day perception and power relationships.

In the example of the Spanish flags, the shift of perception and divergence of meaning for each individual are revealed to be construed and transformed day-by-day by political discourses and strategies of control that affect the living experiences of the people exposed to them. What people read, hear and see in different contexts affects their perception and shapes meaning in their every day classification as well as seemingly answering to power discourses of control by the media, political institutions, ideologies, and “officialist” histories, which try to influence what it is perceived by the population. The perception that people have about those concepts and the way they are understood in knowledge acquisition is revealed to be something artificial and variable, linked to a wide spectrum of political agendas and power interests that are individually processed by lived and influenced experiences, and applicable to the construction of KOS.

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