Questions and Questioning in Communication Research

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รายงานนี้ศึกษาบทบาทและหน้าที่ของคำถามและการตั้งคำถามในการวิจัยด้านการสื่อสารอย่างเป็นระบบหรืออย่างผู้เชี่ยวชาญ รายงานนี้อภิปรายถึงประเด็นต่าง ๆ ได้แก่ การตั้งคำถามและญาณวิทยา การตั้งคำถามและระเบียบวิธี การตั้งคำถามและการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูล การตั้งคำถามและการนำเสนอข้อมูล ในแต่ละประเด็นเหล่านี้มีการวิเคราะห์และศึกษาบทบาทของการตั้งคำถาม มุ่งไปที่บทบาทอย่างเป็นรูปธรรมของคำถามในกระบวนการวิจัย และบทบาทที่เป็นจุดเชื่อมโยง ทั้งระหว่างชนิดและเนื้อหาของคำถามที่ผู้วิจัยถาม และระหว่างเงื่อนไขทางสภาพแวดล้อมและระเบียบวิธีที่กว้างขึ้น ภายในเนื้อหาของการวิจัยนั้น

Abstract

This paper explores the roles and functions of questions and questioning in professional and organizational communication research. The paper discusses questioning and epistemology, questioning and methodology, questioning and analysis of data, and questioning and presentation of data. Within each of these areas, the role of questioning is analyzed, focusing first on the formative role of questions in the research process, and second on the links between the type and content of the questions that a researcher asks and the broader disciplinary and environmental conditions within which the researcher works.

1. Introduction

All research is at heart an attempt to answer questions. The form of the question may vary, but questioning itself lies at the heart of all academic endeavor. Given this, any discussion of the role of questioning in research is faced with the problem of where to begin. One way to solve this problem would be to simply list a variety of questions under various headings, as Candlin (2006), Cicourel (2003), and Sarangi (2004, in press) do. This has the obvious advantages of clarity and ease of

understanding. Accordingly, a similar organization is followed below. Rather than listing questions under categories such as "gaining access" and "intervention" (a la Cicourel, 2003), however, the role of questions and questioning is analyzed following the stages in the research process (inasmuch as an activity as 'messy' and recursive as research can be characterized as a 'process'). I will first discuss questions and epistemology, then questions and methodology, then questions and analysis, and finally questions and presentation.

2. Questions and epistemology

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that investigates the nature, methods, and limits of knowledge. Essentially, epistemology asks how can we know what we know? And what actually is it that we know?

In communication research, a researcher's epistemology determines the overall shape of their study. It delineates what questions they can ask, what kind of answer they can look for, and ultimately what they can claim as knowledge. Given this importance, then, it behooves researchers to critically examine their epistemology before engaging in research. Researchers will have an epistemology, and if they have not critically and consciously examined it, then they will default to the epistemology of the research tradition into which they have been apprenticed.

Taylor and White (2000) divide epistemologies in the academy into two broad categories: a realist/objectivist stance, and a social constructionist stance. The realist stance holds that knowledge is separate from the knower (the "mind in a vat" of Latour, 1999). This attitude toward knowledge follows a correspondence theory of truth, i.e., a statement is 'true' if it corresponds with a observed (or hypothesized) 'reality'. Although a realist epistemology is typically linked with a quantitative, statistical, experimental, scientific research paradigm, Taylor & White make an interesting observation that much qualitative research also fits into a realist epistemology. Studies that claim a qualitative paradigm allows for more 'accurate' understanding, or 'making sense' of complex phenomena are also following a realist epistemology, in that the goal is a set of 'true' statements which describe a situation that exists in 'reality'. Truth is still seen as absolute.

A social-constructionist epistemology, on the other hand, holds that knowledge is grounded and situated, and cannot be separated from the knowers. In

this view, language constructs rather than reflects. Taylor & White claim that a social-constructionist epistemology is "ontologically silent", in that 'thereness' is not discussed. This statement is problematic, however, in that a social-constructionist epistemology arguably does lead to an ontology, but of a rather different kind to that derived from a realist epistemology. While a realist ontology is Platonic--in that the universal exists apart from the particular, a social-constructionist ontology has only the particular. Truth is contingent. (Cf. the arguments presented in Coupland, Sarangi & Candlins (eds), 2001.)

Why, then, should researchers critically examine their own epistemology? The answer to this question is that our epistemologies, what we understand as 'knowledge', determine all other aspects of our research, from what we investigate, to how we investigate it, to how we present our findings, to how our peers view our work.

Thus, before asking 'What is it that is going on here?', researchers need to ask themselves: 'What is it that I hope to find here?' 'How will I know if I have found it or not?' and 'What is it that I already know that leads me to hope I might find it here?'

As well as the basic nature of knowledge, and what will count as evidence (and indeed, what 'evidence' actually is), researchers also need to question themselves in terms of the constructs and ideologies of the discourse community in which they work. On a more particular level than the broad epistemologies outlined above, the constructs of a discourse community shape the thoughts of its members. Researchers need to problematize what they may otherwise take for granted. They need to unpack the background knowledge--in the Faircloughian sense (Fairclough, 1988)--of the field. As Candlin (2006) points out, a discourse is a realization of "ideologically invested systems of belief and knowledge," which is maintained by the flow and use of the discourse in question. This applies as much to the discourse of research as it does to the discourse of the object of research. The ideologies and beliefs of the academy and our field influence what we look at and how we look at it. (Cf. Taylor and White 2000 for an illustration of scientists talking about how they work and how they present their work to fit with the ideologies of science.) This idea has links with Taylor & White's (2000) discussion of reflexion as distinct from reflection. Taylor & White define reflection as thinking on process issues and how they were handled. Reflexion, on the other hand, problematizes issues that reflection takes for granted. For example, a reflective question could be 'how can I become more adept at applying

child development theory?' while a reflexive question might be 'is child development theory justified?'

3. Questions and methodology

Researchers need to ask themselves a number of questions to do with research design. The first question is what questions to ask. As Cicourel (2003) points out, questions "create a frame of reference that may not be consistent with the research analyst's substantive and theoretical interests". This applies not only to questions used as data-gathering instruments, but also to the broader research questions themselves. Research questions, then, need to be aligned with the researcher's interests and epistemology. Part of this process of forming questions is what Sarangi (in press) calls "making the strange familiar and the familiar strange." Researchers need to problematize the taken for granted, to uncover the basic assumptions that underlie the discursive study-object. Researchers need to question if they are asking the right questions. Beyond this, researchers need to ask themselves if the questions they ask are questions of interest to their peers. Research is a goal-directed activity. The goal may be to influence an institution (cf. Roberts' 2005 discussion of applying applied linguistics), but very often it will be related to instrumental goals for the researcher. Research is, after all, the prime determiner for academic promotion and career advancement (very probably simply because it is easier to count papers than quantify teaching), and thus researchers must consider how their research will be received by their peers, target audiences and co-participants. The peer review acts as a gate through which research must epistemologically, ideologically, methodologically and textually fit if it is to reach publication. Sarangi's (in press) description of "newsworthy" research illustrates this: "newsworthy" research is research that stands a better chance of publication than does non-newsworthy research. Note that "newsworthy" here refers to the status of the findings among the discourse group of applied linguistics studying professional communication, not necessarily the members of the discourse community which has been studied. Researchers need to ask themselves who they are performing the research for, and why. This then must inform their choice of research question. Questions that lead to research valued by the discourse community of applied linguists may not be the same as questions that lead to answers/data of value to the members of the discourse community being studied.

Once researchers have decided what phenomena to study, they must then ask how to set a bound to the phenomena being studied. Given that all professional and organizational discourse takes place within orders of discourse (Candlin 2006) in which texts, processes and beliefs/ideologies are inherent (cf. Sarangi's in press "inherent paradox" of discourse analysis, in which discourse in the object of analysis, but professional knowledge and expertise--two of the 'determiners' of discourse--may not be explicitly manifest in discourse itself), the decision of where to draw boundaries which say 'this is of concern to me' and 'this is not' is a critical one. Most researchers cannot follow Smart's (2006) example and study an entire "activity system" within an organization over a period of years. The more realistic goal of examining a bounded system is a reasonable alternative, but this needs careful examination from the researcher. The researcher needs to ask themselves: Is this a "whole event" (following Roberts, 2000)? Discourse may appear to be clearly bounded, but even without the ultimate interdiscursivity of all discourse, discourse events may be strongly interdiscursive and intertextual even within a single organization (Candlin, 2006; Smart, 2006). Analyzing a fragment will aid only partially in understanding a whole.

Another question concerns the nature of the data to be gathered, and how this data is to be gathered. As Cicourel (2003) points out, data gathered from questions in surveys does not necessarily map onto actual instances of discourse. Related to this point, Candlin (2006) argues for methodological multiplicity, using a variety of methodologies to gather (and analyze) data. The value of this is seen in Smart (2006), whose analysis of discourses within the Bank of Canada illustrates how understanding can be deepened by employing a variety of analytical tools. Researchers need to ask themselves basic methodological questions such as : How can I record my observations without forcing the sense-data into categories which may be unnatural? How can I gain access to participants' viewpoints? How can I access the professional constructs and beliefs which underlie the discourse itself? What kinds of data can I gather to give insight into the discourse under study? How can I deal with the observer's paradox?

The last question in the previous paragraph --the observer's paradox--deserves further attention. Given the fundamental nature of the issue--the way in which it can affect all data gathered--and the fact that it is inescapable, researchers need to spend time addressing this issue. A number of prominent researchers in the field (Cicourel,

2003; Sarangi & Candlin, 2003; Sarangi 2004) have discussed the kinds of questions that researchers should either ask of themselves or should ask of research, concerning the observer's paradox: "What steps were taken to gain entry into the organizations studied?" (Cicourel, 2003), "What do you call yourself?" (Sarangi, 2004), "What role does the researcher adopt?" (Sarangi & Candlin, 2003). Clearly, the role the researcher plays will affect the data he/she gathers. Sarangi (in press) argues that "thick participation" is necessary for thick description--but thick participation in which the researcher is seen as a threat (cf. Roberts & Sarangi 1995, 2001, cited in Sarangi & Candlin, 2003 for a discussion of differing reactions to the researcher by the subjects of the research) will probably not lead to useful insight! What may seem like the ideal--long-term membership in the discourse community being studied, with members of the discourse community being unaware of the 'secret identity' of the researcher--is also fraught with difficulty, with what Sarangi & Candlin (2003) describe as the "analyst's paradox": the need to access participants' practices and insights while explicitly reporting on these in the discourse of research (cf. also Sarangi's (in press) comments about "making the familiar strange and the strange familiar", discussed above).

4. Questions and analysis

When data have been gathered, the next step is to analyze the data gathered. Analysis is, of necessity, a form of abstraction: a way of isolating the general from the particular, an Aristotelian approach to truth. The first set of questions researchers need to ask themselves concern coding schemes and categorization. Cicourel's comment about questions creating a "frame of reference" (referred to above) is relevant here. Researchers need to be aware of how the questions and categorizations they ask of or apply to the data may determine what they find. Candlin (2006) holds an example of the kind of thing that researchers must be wary of. Candlin discusses the example of a counselor engaged in the activity of Counseling, but without engaging in the discourse of counseling. If the discourse had simply been labeled 'counseling' as a virtue of the participants and site--then this interesting distinction between activity and discourse would have been lost. Another area is transcription and selection of taped material. Linguistic interaction is surrounded by a host of other biological and social communication systems, which may be lost if the transcription followed is a simplistic one. For example, Roberts (2000) includes brief descriptions of body

language in her transcription of a gatekeeping interview in the medical field. Given the subtle interplay of contextual cues she identifies, ignoring body language would have resulted in a less rich analysis. Arguably Hak's (1994) analysis of doctor-patient interaction would have been enriched by including a transcription of body language. The same applies to Hall, Slembrouck and Sarangi (2006) in their analysis of decision-making and client character construction in social work. On the other hand, though, certain forms of discourse, such as the legal discourse studied by Bhatia, Langton & Long (2005), would obviously not require or benefit from this kind of transcription. Researchers need to ask themselves if they are using the best transcription tools for the research questions they have. Rather than simply using transcription conventions because they are thought of as standard in the researcher's field, or because the researcher is familiar with them, the selection of what and what not to transcribe needs to be made after careful thought. For example, it is certainly possible that in an analysis of a gatekeeping interview, not only the linguistic data should be transcribed, but also body language, and the layout of the site where the interview takes place: the arrangement of chairs, the relative positions of the interviewer and interviewee, etc.

Last, researchers also need to question how they will validate their analysis. Given the nature of organizational and professional communication, statistical validation will not usually be possible (except in instances of discourse such as that analyzed by Bhatia, Langton & Long, 2005). Rather, researchers will have to employ a variety of methodologies (as advocated by Candlin, 2006), asking themselves as they do how the results of the different analyses mesh or conflict with one another. As Sarangi (in press) points out, instances of discourse, while shaped and directed by the meanings, beliefs and values of a discourse community, may not actually contain those meanings (cf. Fairclough's idea of backgrounded knowledge embedded in discourse: Fairclough, 1988). If that is the case, then those meanings must be uncovered through varying forms of analysis, each making its own contribution toward understanding.

5. Questions and presentation

The last stage of the research process is the presentation of findings. Researchers in professional and organizational communication are faced with two

main sets of questions in this stage: 'Which data should they present?', 'Who should they present it for?', and 'How should the data be best presented?'

The first question, which data to present, concerns which instances of discourse/communication should be included in the presentation. Cicourel (2003) addresses this when he asks "How should we address the problem of representing different observational settings to show typicality?" The amount of data gathered in any research project involving transcription and analysis of linguistic data will be immense. A recent transcription of a single interview for a unit within the DAppLing took me around four hours to complete and required eleven pages to print. For the author's MA dissertation, which involved a systemic functional analysis of sixteen ESL student essays, the depiction of the analysis ran to nearly three hundred pages. Obviously, this amount of data is impractical--not simply because of the size limits for publication and/or presentation, but because the mass of data is not in itself enlightening: it is the analyst's selection of examples to illustrate general points which is useful. Researchers need to ask themselves why they are choosing these instances of data and not others, whether this is the best or most typical instance that can be found. As Sarangi (in press) points out, in the presentation of data, researchers need to tread a narrow path between the overly micro and the overly macro. Too much of either will rob the research of its value for its intended audiences.

The second question, who to present for, is one that ideally will have been answered in the design stage of the research. If the audience for the research is not the discourse community of which the researcher is a member, then the researcher needs to question their presentation carefully and their assumptions about how to present and how their presentation will be perceived and received. These questions--as with many of the questions researchers must ask themselves--cannot be answered alone. The researcher must engage with members of the discourse community studied in order to find the optimal way to present and construct their findings. Research results handed down from Mount Sinai and engraved in stone tablets will in all likelihood be resented and/or not implemented or utilized. Research findings that are presented in such a way that respects the knowledge and expertise of the members of the discourse community studied will, on the other hand, have a much better chance of fulfilling Roberts' (2005) call for practical relevance to real world problems.

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