

## What is a discourse?

In the previous chapter I introduced a number of issues which will occupy us for the rest of this book. I talked about language as the basis of thought and selfhood, about the multiplicity of meanings inherent in any piece of text or speech, and about how this leads us to consider personal identity as temporary, fragmented and open to question. I suggested that our sense of ourselves as people, our identity, can be seen as constantly being sought after, contested, validated, maintained and so on through the use of language.

If it is the way that language is structured that provides us with the basis for our notions of selfhood and personal identity, we need to look at these structures and see how this is accomplished. One way of looking at how language is structured has been taken up with enthusiasm by many recent writers (e.g. Foucault, 1972, 1976; Parker, 1992; Hollway, 1984), and this is the idea that language is structured into a number of discourses, and that the meaning of any 'signifier' (for example, a word) depends upon the context of the discourse in which it is used.

The terms 'discourse' and 'discourse analysis' are increasingly common in books and articles written by people interested in giving language an important place in psychology and social psychology. However, these terms can have rather different meanings depending upon the theoretical traditions that the writers are using, and this depends in turn upon the particular issues and problems the writers wish to address. It will be useful at this point to say something about these differences.

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### TWO APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF 'DISCOURSE'

The ideas that I have been drawing upon have come primarily from the French philosophical traditions of structuralism and poststructuralism, as they have recently been taken up by those interested in issues of identity, selfhood, personal and social change and power relations (e.g. Hollway, 1989; Parker, 1992; Weedon, 1987; Walkerdine, 1987). The particular conception of 'discourse' offered by these traditions is very fruitful when applied to such issues (though, as we shall see, they also lead us into some knotty problems). Some of these writers also draw upon psychoanalytic concepts in order to understand selfhood and subjectivity, and this is a matter of some debate and conflict within social constructionism. I will say more about their use of psychoanalytic theory in a later chapter.

However, other writers' interest in 'discourse' has a different focus, and consequently draws upon different traditions. A productive line of enquiry has focussed upon the performative qualities of discourse, that is, what people are doing with their talk or writing, what they are trying to achieve. While still drawing upon the idea of the essential variability of meaning in language, such work is also informed by speech act theory, conversation analysis and ethnomethodology. Research and writing about 'discourse' in this tradition focusses upon how accounts are constructed and bring about effects for the speaker or writer (e.g. Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Edwards and Potter, 1992; Potter and Reicher, 1987) or upon what rhetorical devices are used by people and how they are employed (e.g. Billig, 1987, 1991). Writers within this tradition are not particularly concerned with issues of selfhood, subjectivity or power, and therefore reject the use of psychoanalysis (or indeed any other brand of traditional psychology) in their accounts.

These different approaches are not incompatible; they simply reflect the different concerns of people working essentially under a 'social constructionist' umbrella, and I will be drawing upon both kinds of work in this book. However, since my current focus is primarily upon issues of personhood, identity and change I shall, for the moment, concentrate upon the work of those writing within structuralist and poststructuralist traditions. I will explore in more depth the nature of the differences between writers inhabiting the world of 'discourse' in a later chapter.



## WHAT IS A 'DISCOURSE'?

Within this framework, then, what do we mean by a 'discourse'? Parker (1992) cautiously gives a working definition of a discourse as 'a system of statements which constructs an object' (p. 5). Like many abstract things, a discourse is difficult to define in a way that is 'watertight'. For example, if you tried to define 'play' you would soon find that someone could come up with examples of play that did not fit your definition, and yet for the purposes of common usage, people have sufficient understanding and agreement as to what is meant by 'play' for the term to be meaningfully used. In the same way, no definition of discourse is sufficient, and so I shall instead offer examples, illustrations, analogies, etc., which together will give the flavour of what is meant by this term.

A discourse refers to a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events. It refers to a particular picture that is painted of an event (or person or class of persons), a particular way of representing it or them in a certain light. If we accept the view, outlined in the last chapter, that a multitude of alternative versions of events is potentially available through language, this means that, surrounding any one object, event, person, etc., there may be a variety of different discourses, each with a different story to tell about the object in question, a different way of representing it to the world.

Let us take an example to illustrate what is meant by a discourse. Foxhunting as an 'object' could be said to be represented in at least two radically different discourses. The 'foxhunting as pest control' discourse could be said to represent foxhunting as a natural method of keeping the fox population down to manageable numbers. Within this discourse, foxhunting is not immoral but is ultimately in the best interests of both humans and the fox, and its long tradition can be said to testify to its 'tried and tested' effectiveness. People drawing upon this discourse in their talk might be expected to say things like 'If it wasn't for the hunt, the fox population would run out of control' or 'The fox is a pest to farmers, who lose thousands of pounds each year in attacks on livestock.'<sup>1</sup> Consistent with these statements might be a letter to a national newspaper extolling the virtues of foxhunting, or a poster advertising the annual hunt ball.

A different discourse of foxhunting could be 'foxhunting as the contravention of basic morality'. From the vantage point of this discourse, people might be expected to say things such as 'Animals have basic rights to life, just like humans' or 'The hunting and killing of animals is uncivilised and is unworthy of human beings.' You might also find photographs of foxes being savaged by the dog pack in newspapers or magazines, or of animal rights protesters carrying placards bearing slogans. These photographs too are manifestations of the discourse, even though they are not spoken or written language, because they can be 'read' for meaning in the same way and appear to belong to the same way of representing 'foxhunting' (putting the word in scare quotes serves to point to the fact that the nature of the object is contentious).

You might like to suggest further possible discourses of 'foxhunting', such as 'foxhunting as healthy outdoor sport' or 'foxhunting as pastime of the idle rich'. The point is that numerous discourses surround any object and each strives to represent or 'construct' it in a different way. Each discourse brings different aspects into focus, raises different issues for consideration, and has different implications for what we should do. So discourses, through what is said, written or otherwise represented, serve to construct the phenomena of our world for us, and different discourses construct these things (like 'foxhunting') in different ways, each discourse portraying the object as having a very different 'nature' from the next. Each discourse claims to say what the object really is, that is, claims to be the truth. As we shall see, claims to truth and knowledge are important issues, and lie at the heart of discussions of identity, power and change, and I will go into this in more detail in the next chapter.

Notice that what is absent from this account is any reference to notions such as 'opinion' or 'attitude'. I suggested above the kinds of thing that people might say about foxhunting, and to say that such statements issued from the person's opinions or attitudes would be completely opposed to a social constructionist view. 'Attitudes' and 'opinions' are essentialist concepts of the 'personally' kind. They invite us to think of structures residing inside the person which are part of that person's make-up and which determine or at least greatly influence what that person does, thinks and says (the presence of a positive or negative 'attitude' is



inferred from what a person says, but the attitude itself is a hypothetical structure which cannot be directly observed). But such 'essences' have no place in a social constructionist understanding of the person, and have no status as explanations of the things people say. The concept of 'attitude' has been thoroughly addressed from a social constructionist position by Potter and Wetherell (1987). Let us be clear about the status of the things people say and write, from the perspective of a poststructural social constructionism: these things are not a route of access to a person's private world, they are not valid descriptions of things called 'beliefs' or 'opinions', and they cannot be taken to be manifestations of some inner, essential condition such as temperament, personality or attitude. They are manifestations of discourses, outcrops of representations of events upon the terrain of social life. They have their origin not in the person's private experience, but in the discursive culture that those people inhabit.

The things that people say or write, then, can be thought of as instances of discourses, as occasions where particular discourses are given the opportunity to construct an event in this way rather than that. Pieces of speech or writing can be said, to belong to the same discourse to the extent that they are painting the same general picture of the object in question. Of course, the same words, phrases, pictures, expressions and so on might appear in a number of different discourses, each time contributing to a rather different narrative. To go back to the foxhunting example, the words 'Sentimentality over vermin is misplaced' could appear as part of the 'hunting-as-tried-and-tested-pest-control' discourse, or as part of the 'hunting-as-pastime-of-the-idle-rich' discourse. Words or sentences do not of themselves belong to any particular discourse; in fact the meaning of what we say rather depends upon the discursive context, the general conceptual framework in which our words are embedded. In this sense, a discourse can be thought of as a kind of frame of reference, a conceptual backcloth against which our utterances can be interpreted. So there is a two-way relationship between discourses and the actual things that people say or write: discourses 'show up' in the things that people say and write, and the things we say and write, in their turn, are dependent for their meaning upon the discursive context in which they appear.

A discourse about an object is said to manifest itself in texts – in speech, say a conversation or interview, in written material

such as novels, newspaper articles or letters, in visual images like magazine advertisements or films, or even in the 'meanings' embodied in the clothes people wear or the way they do their hair. In fact, anything that can be 'read' for meaning can be thought of as being a manifestation of one or more discourses and can be referred to as a 'text'. Buildings may 'speak' of civic pride, like the town halls and factories of the industrial revolution, or of a yearning for the past as in the recent trend towards 'vernacular' building. Clothes and uniforms may suggest class position, status, gender, age or subculture and as such can be called texts. Given that there is virtually no aspect of human life that is exempt from meaning, everything around us can be considered as 'textual', and 'life as text' could be said to be the underlying metaphor of the discourse approach.

## DISCOURSE AND IDENTITY

Let us now look at the implications of all this for personal identity. We have moved one step forward from the position we reached at the end of the previous chapter, where I suggested that our identity arises out of interactions with other people and is based on language. We can now say that our identity is constructed out of the discourses culturally available to us, and which we draw upon in our communications with other people. People's identities are achieved by a subtle interweaving of many different 'threads'. There is the 'thread' of age (for example they may be a child, a young adult or very old), that of class (depending on their occupation, income and level of education), ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and so on. All these (and many more) are woven together to produce the fabric of a person's identity. Each of these components is 'constructed' through the discourses that are present in our culture – the discourses of age, of gender, of education, of sexuality and so on. We are the end-product, the combination, of the particular 'versions' of these things that are available to us. A young, black, unemployed man will have his identity constructed out of the raw materials of the various discourses surrounding age, ethnicity, work and masculinity. And the different components have implications for each other. The discourses of age, for example, represent people at various stages of life in different ways. Old age is often associated with loss (of personal competencies such as memory and motor skills, of status



and power), decline and an absence of 'development'. But alternative discourses of old age can paint a picture of wisdom, respect and serenity. Similarly, youth is variously represented as the time of progress, development and change, a period of identity crisis, or a period of danger and non-conformity. The version of 'youth' that a person can live out is affected by the discourses of ethnicity, gender, class and so on that she or he is also subject to. The 'youth' who is black, working-class, unemployed and male is likely to be represented or 'constructed' out of rather different discourses of youth than the 'youth' who is white, middle-class, employed and female.

For each 'thread' of our identity, there is a limited (sometimes very limited) number of discourses on offer out of which we might fashion ourselves. For example, the discourses of sexuality on offer in our present society offer a restricted menu for the manufacture of sexual identity. Some newer, more recent discourses of sexuality are gaining ground; for example, there is emerging a variety of lesbian and gay sexualities, many of which have been consciously constructed and have been developed using a poststructuralist theoretical framework. However, two well-established discourses in particular call upon us to identify ourselves with respect to them – 'normal' sexuality (usually embodying notions of 'naturalness' and moral righteousness) and 'perverted' sexuality (which more or less includes anything else). The dichotomy of hetero- and homosexuality is overlaid on this, so that heterosexuality is usually represented as normal, natural and right, and homosexuality as perverted, unnatural and wrong (the two dichotomies are not synonymous, since some heterosexual practices are also seen as perversions). Given these representations of sexuality that are culturally available to us, we have no choice but to fashion our identity out of them. Our sexual activities (or lack of them!) can have no form of representation to ourselves or to the people around us other than in the form of these discourses, and so we must inevitably adopt the identity of 'straight' or 'pervert', of hetero- or homosexual: the representations or discourses of sexuality available within our language leave us with very few other alternatives. It is also worth pointing out here that the very use of the terms hetero- and homosexuality (like normal and perverted) creates the illusion that all varieties of homosexuality and lesbianism (and all forms of heterosexuality) are functionally

equivalent, and that homosexuality is in some simple way just a mirror image of heterosexuality.

Surrounding any aspect of a person's life, then, are a variety of alternative discourses, each offering a different vision of what it means to be, say, young, educated, employed, disabled and so on. Sometimes there is no problem with combining identities supplied by discourses from different 'threads'. For example, a young person just entering higher education might effortlessly adopt the identity of 'student', because the prevalent discourses of youth and education have much in common. Youth as a time of development, exploration, and mental and physical agility fits well with the discourse of education which represents it as a process of self-development and preparation for adulthood. But a middle-aged person returning to education after a long period of employment or child care might be expected to have difficulties 'bringing off' the identity of student, because our usual ways of talking about and representing middle age do not include concepts of development or of mental and physical prowess. Middle aged students are faced with the problem of how they can construct a feasible identity for themselves out of the available discourses.

The discourses of 'science' and of 'gender' are also good examples of this. Science and masculinity pose few problems for each other. Science is thought of as logical, objective and value-free. Masculinity embodies rationality and an ability to keep one's emotions out of one's reasoning. The man who becomes a scientist can expect few identity problems. But for women there is a potential area of conflict or confusion. Prevailing discourses of femininity speak of emotionality, illogicality and intuitiveness – not the stuff of science. Women who want to do science are faced with the problem of how they can bring off their identity without appearing to be either 'not a proper woman' or 'a bad scientist'. The same is probably true in politics, and whatever one may think of Margaret Thatcher her identities as politician and as woman/wife/mother did not sit easily together.

For each of us, then, a multitude of discourses is constantly at work constructing and producing our identity. Our identity therefore originates not from inside the person, but from the social realm, where people swim in a sea of language and other signs, a sea that is invisible to us because it is the very medium of our existence as social beings. In this sense the realm of language,



signs and discourse is to the person as water is to the fish. However, as I pointed out in the previous chapter, although identities are not fixed or determined by some essential nature, this does not mean to say that they have been arbitrarily or randomly fashioned. To say that identities are socially constructed through discourse does not mean to say that those identities are accidental. It is at this point that a poststructuralist social constructionism brings to bear a political analysis of the construction of our social world, including personal identity.

### DISCOURSE, SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND SOCIAL PRACTICES

The discourses that form our identity have implications for what we can do and what we should do. Prevailing discourses of femininity often construct women as, say, nurturant, close to nature, emotional, negatively affected by their hormones, empathic and vulnerable. From this it is only a short step to the recommendations that women are particularly able to care for young children, and that they should do so, that they are unsuited to careers in top management or positions of responsibility, and that they should avoid potentially dangerous activities such as walking home alone at night or hitch-hiking. Prevailing discourses of 'the individual' paint a picture of human beings as separate, disconnected units 'naturally' differing from each other in terms of their motivation, talents, intelligence, determination and so on, so that, within a market economy, competitiveness and ambition secure the survival of the fittest, according to their natural abilities. But why do these particular versions of 'femininity' and 'the individual' enjoy such widespread popularity and acceptance? Why do some versions or ways of representing people or events appear as 'truth' and others as 'fiction'?

Discourses are not simply abstract ideas, ways of talking about and representing things that, as it were, float like balloons far above the real world. Discourses are intimately connected to the way that society is organised and run. In our society we have a capitalist economy and we have institutions such as the law, education, marriage and the family, and the church. These things give shape and substance to the daily lives of each of us. They offer us social positions and statuses: the capitalist economy makes us into 'workers', 'employers' or 'unemployed'. The institutions of

marriage and the family mean that people can be married, single or divorced and they can be mothers or fathers or childless. The institution of education provides 'educated' and 'uneducated' people, and so on. Each of these ways of structuring society is put into practice every day by the things that people do, by social practices. Capitalism is being put into practice every time a worker 'clocks in' or collects a wage packet or unemployment benefit. Education is put into practice when children sit in classrooms or truant. The family is put into practice when mothers cook dinner for their husbands and children, or when they take time off work to care for a sick child. And all of these social structures and social practices are variously ensured or encouraged by the law and other state controls such as the benefits system and the laws of the church. The legal contract between worker and employer ensures the practices of clocking in and collection of wage packets. The law can punish parents if their children do not attend school. The lack of state benefits or provision of child care means that many women with children who might otherwise choose to work outside the home cannot afford to do so, and that some women who might prefer to stay at home with their children are forced to go out to work.

The discourses that form our identity are intimately tied to the structures and practices that are lived out in society from day to day, and it is in the interest of relatively powerful groups that some discourses and not others receive the stamp of 'truth'. If we accept that men, relative to women, are still in a more powerful position in society, then we can say that prevailing discourses of femininity serve to uphold this power inequality. Discourses such as 'education as a meritocracy' and career success as 'survival of the fittest' serve to justify the greater wealth and opportunity of the (relatively powerful) middle class by representing education and capitalism as unbiased, egalitarian institutions. Discourses representing education and capitalism as systems of social control and exploitation are less likely to enjoy widespread acceptance as common-sense truths. However, there are two cautions to be sounded at this point. Firstly, we should beware of coming to the conclusion that prevailing discourses are ensured their dominant position for eternity, or that other competing discourses cannot complete a successful 'takeover bid'. For example, this century has seen a gradual emergence of alternative discourses of femininity, and more recently of masculinity, which are gaining more



ground. What can be said of women or men, or how they can be portrayed in stories, images and so on, is undergoing change, and these changes go hand in hand with changes in the way society is organised – paid work (and therefore a degree of financial independence) is available to more women than it was a century ago, and the traditional 'nuclear' family is no longer the predominant household form. Secondly, discourses do not simply 'map on to' particular political arrangements. The version of woman as nurturant, close to nature and empathic is also used by some feminists who wish to see the ascendancy of 'feminine' ways of being, and attacks on the notion of 'madness' are used simultaneously by the anti-psychiatry movements as well as by those who wish to close down the mental hospitals and replace them with doubtful 'community care' for financial reasons.

Let us sum up the position so far. We have taken up the idea that all the 'objects' of our consciousness, including our 'self', our notion of what it means to be a person, and our own identity, are all constructed through language, and that it is discourses as coherent systems of representation that produce these things for us. As Parker puts it, 'A strong form of the argument would be that discourses allow us to see things that are not "really" there, and that once an object has been elaborated in a discourse it is difficult not to refer to it as if it were real' (Parker 1992: 5). Objects such as 'intelligence', 'marriage' or 'love' are good examples – their existence has been brought about by the things people do and say, like developing 'intelligence tests' or describing how they 'fell in love', but we tend to treat them as if they had the same kind of existence as physical objects.

We have looked at the relationship between social structures, social practices and discourses, and suggested that particular discourses, particular ways of representing events and people, enjoy widespread acceptance in the form of common sense or 'truth' because such discourses are in the interests of the relatively powerful groups of society. However, illuminating though this idea is, we should not accept it uncritically. For instance, how are we to recognise a 'prevailing discourse'? By whose criteria? How can we be sure that we have correctly identified the people or groups in society whose interests they serve? Can we be sure that we are not simply dressing up, in intellectual jargon, our own common sense as social theorists? These matters have not been sufficiently addressed by researchers in social constructionism,

who often appear to depend solely upon their own intuition in the identification of discourses, and have drawn some criticism on that account (e.g. Potter *et al.*, 1990). I will look at these problems in more detail in chapter 10.

The discourses we employ often have political implications that we should investigate if we are interested in changing ourselves or the world we live in. I shall look in more detail at the issue of discourse and power in the next chapter, but before we move on we ought to pay some attention to a couple of the 'knotty problems' that are lurking beneath the surface of what I have been saying in this chapter.

#### PROBLEMS: PERSONHOOD, AGENCY AND REALITY

If you are not already reeling from the onslaught that I have been making upon long-cherished assumptions about human life, let me now state the social constructionist case in its most extreme form. You may have been saying to yourself 'OK, so language is more important than psychologists might have thought, but this is beginning to sound as though language is all there is.' This is exactly what the extreme version of this view is saying. All the objects of our consciousness, every 'thing' we think of or talk about, including our identities, our selves and those of other people (whatever 'self' may mean), are constructed through language, manufactured out of discourses. Nothing has any essential, independent existence outside of language; discourse is all there is. The French poststructuralist philosopher Foucault (whom we will hear more about in the next chapter) put it quite simply. Discourses are 'practices which form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault, 1972: 49). A discourse provides a frame of reference, a way of interpreting the world and giving it meaning that allows some 'objects' to take shape. Going back to the example I gave in the previous chapter, 'weeds' and 'flowers' only have an existence as different objects by the application of language, by viewing plant life through a particular pair of spectacles (which we might label the 'gardening' discourse or the 'agriculture' discourse). Even 'plant life' as distinguishable from, say, 'animal life' exists only within the frame of reference of language.

Now all this presents us with two of the 'knotty problems' I mentioned earlier, and they have to do with the nature of



personhood and personal agency. Firstly, we are accustomed to thinking of ourselves as having a certain kind of personality, as holding beliefs and opinions, of making up our minds about how the world works or how it should work, and we are used to assuming that our ideas, experiences, opinions and beliefs, upon which we act, have originated in our own minds – we are their ‘author’. We also assume that we exercise choice and make decisions, and that, within the limits of our practical circumstances, we fashion our own lives and take responsibility for the kind of person we have become. All of this is laid open to serious question within this extreme view of language and discourse. I have already, in previous chapters, suggested that we cannot think of ourselves as having ‘personalities’, or a unified, coherent self, and now I am throwing out other psychological ‘properties’ such as attitudes and opinions, and saying that all of these ‘things’ are only present in discourse, they have no existence beyond language, they are an effect of language. Well, what about the rest of the ‘contents’ of the person as we know it? What about drives, motivations, emotions and so on? These meet with the same fate. We experience ourselves as if these things had a concrete existence in the world, but they are all brought into being through language. They are examples of objects formed through discourses. Terms such as ‘personality’, ‘attitude’, ‘skill’, ‘temperament’ and so on present a particular vision of human-kind. Through the use of these terms we are invited to think of human beings as if they were endowed with varying amounts of different qualities, whether inborn, acquired through life experience or learned. Together they contribute to what might be called the discourse of individualism, a way of talking about, writing about or otherwise representing people as unique combinations of psychic material which determine the kind of life a person is likely to lead. A ‘nurturant’ person may well end up caring for children or taking up a career in nursing, and a white person with ‘racist attitudes’ might be expected to decide where to live according to the likelihood that black people might come to live next door. But, according to the social constructionist view I have been outlining, these ‘qualities’ only exist within the discourse of individualism – this discourse makes it possible for us to think in terms of personalities and attitudes, it brings these phenomena into view for us, but the words do not in themselves refer to real entities or psychological properties.

This means that, to all intents and purposes, we are left with an empty person, a human being with no essential psychological properties (at least none that we would find recognisable), and this is the first problem. It is certainly the case that we feel ourselves to be the bearers of personality traits, to be the holders of attitudes, and to experience emotions, drives and motivations. Our subjective experience needs to be explained, and we need to find alternative kinds of explanation for the phenomena that have previously been the domain of concepts like ‘personality’, ‘emotions’ and ‘opinions’. For example, how can we explain why some people show emotion more readily than others, or why they become mentally ill? Why do some people hunt foxes and others try to stop them? What is happening when we ‘fall in love’? We can no longer draw upon traditional psychological concepts, but appear to have put nothing in their place. To some extent, the social constructionist view answers this with the idea that our subjective experience is provided by the discourses in which we are culturally embedded. Going back to an example I gave earlier, our language provides the categories of ‘mind’ and ‘body’, and we talk, think and experience ourselves as if this dichotomy were a concrete reality. It is as if we internalise the ways of representing human life present in discourses (like the discourse of the ‘individual’) and our subjective experience flows from that. It is a complete reversal of our common-sense understanding, in which our subjective experience comes first and we then describe it and label it with language. Language (in the form of discourses) provides our subjective experience of the world. However, this claim does not really answer in detail questions like the ones I have posed above, and I think it is a fair criticism of this kind of social constructionism that the nature of personhood and subjectivity is left with a question mark hanging over it. It is a question that I will return to in later chapters.

To return to the two ‘knotty problems’ I spoke of, the second of these is the problem of human agency. If people are products of discourse, and the things that they say have status only as manifestations of these discourses, in what sense can we be said to have agency? The actions, words and thoughts of human beings appear to be reduced to the level of by-products of bigger linguistic entities of which we may be largely unaware. Our hopes, desires and intentions become the products of cultural, discursive structures, not the products of human agents. And not

only are we unaware of this state of affairs, but we continue in the belief that human beings can change themselves and the world they live in through the force of their (apparently) independently developed and freely chosen beliefs and acts. We look around us and see the world changing, and imagine that human intention and action is at the root of it, but this is an illusion.

There is a real danger that we can become paralysed by the view that individual people can really do nothing to change themselves or their world. The problem of how human agency might be addressed within a social constructionist framework has not been neglected, but neither has it been resolved. Again, I will return to this issue later, when I will discuss more fully how we might re-conceptualise personhood and subjectivity.

A further problem with this view is how you conceptualise reality and truth. The claim that 'discourse is all there is' is a logical conclusion of the argument that language does not label discrete entities in the real world that exist independently of it. All that language can do, then, is to refer to itself. Language is a 'self-referent' system. This means that any 'sign' can only be defined in terms of other signs existing in the same language system. For example, if I was asked to define 'a tree', I could only do this by contrasting the concept 'tree' with other concepts, to demonstrate the category. I could say 'A tree is living (rather than inanimate), but not sentient like an animal, and is different from a shrub in that it has one main stem.' But all I am doing here is referring to other signs (animate, sentient, shrub) which themselves can only be defined in terms of yet more signs from the same language system. There is no way out of this into the 'real' world that might exist beyond language. Whatever the nature of the 'real' world, we cannot assume that the words in our language refer to it or describe it. The extreme form of the argument would be that things are only 'real' to the extent that discourses exist which describe them. Given that there are numerous and conflicting discourses surrounding any 'object', we are left with no notion of 'truth' (i.e. the discourse that can be said to describe the object correctly, all the others being false). All we have is a variety of different discourses or perspectives, each apparently equally valid. This is referred to as the problem of 'relativism'. The claims of each discourse are simply relative to each other, and cannot be said to be either true or false when compared to 'reality'.

This gets us into difficulties if we want to say that things like the economy, or our bodies, are real and have real effects independent of language. It also creates difficulties if we want to say that discourses which describe women (or black people or the working class) as oppressed are more valid than other discourses. The relativism which looms over this view of discourse is a minefield, and some writers prefer to conceptualise discourse as a very powerful formative influence upon our thought and experience but falling short of entirely constituting that experience for us. I intend here not to try to offer a solution to these problems, but to point to them as highly contentious theoretical and philosophical issues which are by no means clearly worked through in the discourse literature.

These problems of truth, agency, choice and their implications for personal and social change will come up throughout the rest of this book. In the next chapter, I look at how the relationship between discourse and power has been conceptualised, and the implications that this has for identity, personal agency and change.

#### SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

- Lalljee, M. and Widdicombe, S. (1989) 'Discourse analysis', in A. M. Coleman and J.G. Beaumont (eds) *Psychology Survey 7*, London and Leicester: British Psychological Society and Routledge. A clear account of the 'speech act' variety of discourse, using good examples.
- MacDonnell, D. (1986) *Theories of Discourse: An Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell. Starting from 'the demise of structuralism', MacDonnell traces the rise to prominence of discourse theory and particularly looks at the issues of ideology and the discourse/reality problem.
- Parker, I. (1992) *Discourse Dynamics: Critical Analysis for Social and Individual Psychology*, London: Routledge. Though not a particularly accessible book to students without a multidisciplinary background, this text includes a useful account of the nature of discourses. It also tries to resolve some of the difficult problems in the area, such as agency and the relationship between discourse and reality, as well as providing an extensive guide to the discourse literature.
- Shofter, J. and Gergen, K.J. (eds) (1989) *Texts of Identity*, London: Sage. A rich collection of chapters by key writers in the social constructionist field (e.g. Gergen, Harré, Parker, Kitzinger, Shofter and Rose), including several specifically concerned with discourse, identity and power.