

NARRATIVE DIDACTICS IN BUILDING CATEGORIES OF ANALYSIS WITHIN RESEARCH PROCESSES IN SOCIAL SCIENCE. AN EXPERIENCE IN DEGREE STUDIES IN MEXICO

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Abstract

Facing the process of Qualitative Research in Social Sciences requires diverse linguistic and semantic skills; a situation that is not easy to deal with whilst degree students are attending to their studies, preparing to design and write a thesis. It is mainly in setting a problem and building an object of study that these skills become certainly more needed.

As a scientific discipline that studies language, linguistics integrates diverse sub-disciplines. For the purpose of this paper we are focused on the uses of semantics, pragmatics, socio-linguistics and (speech) discursive genres. While the first is related to how meanings are inferred from words and concepts, the second is more concerned with how meanings are deduced from diverse or particular contexts; the third one is associated with the interaction of language, meaning and people or collectives; and finally the fourth is related to the different communication processes that goes from brief replies in daily conversations to scientific and literature complex constructions. However, it is particularly in regards to the concept of reference of reality that these linguistic skills can help to improve the process of learning qualitative research in Social Sciences. References can connect individuals with diverse worlds of meanings and then, offer possibilities to broaden the awareness of social reality.

From a methodological perspective, this paper shows some important advantages of using linguistic resources by degree students in Mexico. This is on-going research shows how linguistic resources are put in place through the use of traditional fables in order to enhance the construction and development of categorical thinking while also learning the processes of qualitative research in Social Sciences. In addition, this communication highlights the importance of using discourse analysis in fables to stimulate categorical thinking and the analysis of speech (discourse) genres. Taking into account that this type of thinking is not only connected to an instrumental taxonomy, but also rather oriented towards the amplification of meaning of concepts and ideas in a particular epistemological domain ; training students in developing categorical thinking could contribute significantly to a better understanding of qualitative research and to a realization of the role of a future researcher in being part of creating and transforming social reality.

Key words: Social Sciences, research, qualitative approach, fables, categorical thinking.

Introduction

Amongst other elements, social science research processes are based on a qualitative perspective that is founded upon the construction of two interpretive or hermeneutical structures: theoretical categories and categories of analysis. While the first ones, as a theoretical construction, originate from the study of the literature related to the object of study, and include in them theories and concepts from authors that have served to establish theoretical frameworks, categories of analysis emerge from the analysis of narrative processes of particular individuals (informants), included in the research itineraries. The arising of these categories of analysis involves the analysis and definition of concepts, statements and speech (discursive) genres, and finally, throughout the construction of categories, all are included in the narratives processes related to their experiences.

Consequently, the process of how degree students acquire these research skills within social sciences from a qualitative perspective and with an interpretative approach faces different methodological issues that are not accurately addressed by traditional degree courses,

normally known in Latin America, as “research methodology courses”, where an instrumental and algorithmic written protocol is followed, representing the center of “learning how to research” at this educational level.

This paper focuses its analysis on the methodological process that goes from the approach to problems, the emergence of concepts, the composition of complete statements according to Bakhtin’s concept of speech (discursive) genres, and finally, the construction of categories of analysis using a particular literary genre: the fable. We initiate the explanation within a context of the process of research known as a didactic bridge built by the use of Fables. From a didactic perspective, fables allow individuals and precisely degree students in Social Sciences to focus on a particular issue, a troublesome situation developing a story and building a conclusive thematic synthesis, called a moral, which allows them to reflect deeply in the way they construct problems of the research and how conceptual categories and categorical categories are linked and related one to another.

We will continue analyzing the uses of speech genres related to the processes of learning how to build categories of analysis, and finally, before reaching the conclusion, we will analyze the experiences of degree students in Mexico in building categories of analysis towards a hermeneutic perspective.

This paper offers a didactic perspective in order to improve research skills, mostly from an interpretive perspective and categorical analysis within qualitative research among degree students in Social Sciences in Mexico.

Fables as a device for the categorical construction

For researchers in the domain of Social Sciences and from a hermeneutical perspective, the testimonies of the subjects involved in a research become scientific data. According to Bourdieu (1975), the problem of understanding phenomena from the scope of natural sciences and from social sciences lies in the fact that “in the Social Sciences perspective the object of study is a subject, but also this subject speaks” (Bourdieu, 1975, p. 51). The way in which we talk about our experiences is linked to language, but significantly, it is related to narrative processes about what happens in the world of the teller, and in the particular sphere of others.

As individuals we build stories that show part of us, our nature, the individualities of others and the world we live in. Also, stories elucidate the way individuals interpret the relationships between all these elements at the same time when they tell a story.

“Stories may not actually breathe, but they can animate. The breath imputed by this book’s title is the breath of a god in creation stories, as that god gives life to the lump that will become human. Stories animate human life; that is their work. Stories work with people, for people, always stories work on people, affecting what people are able to see as real, as possible, and as worth doing or best avoided. What is it about stories—what are their particularities—that enables them to work as they do? More than mere curiosity is at stake in this question, because human life depends on the stories we tell: the sense of self that those stories impart, the relationships constructed around shared stories, and the sense of purpose that stories both propose and foreclose” (Frank, 2010, p.38).

Stories implicate directly upon human experiences in the world of reality, the affects of humans because they have the power to reinterpret the human experience in the relationships between time and action. The narrative context inaugurates the story. It shows the spaces where the story happens, the characters, their roles, the places and time, and the linguistic and literary resources the story uses: adjectivation, enumerations, comparisons, metaphors, analogies, hyperboles, etc. Stories conform a unit of a comprehension as a whole and a rich space of comprehension (Ricoeur, 1984).

For Ricoeur (1986), narratives are in strict sense both lived and told. Narrative configurations mediate between the world of action and the world where the readers deploy their experiences. This possibility to retell the story in the eyes of the reader, makes it easier for degree students and young researchers to comprehend the story, the problems they try to understand and the possible alternatives of solutions they can offer, and finally a better analysis of the object of study degree students and young researchers are building on through the process of research.

Ricoeur (1987), introduced the term of narrative identity by affirming that we do not only tell stories about ourselves but, that we are the stories we told. Narrative identity does not mean that individuals are merely the one who tells the story, or the one about whom the story is told, but they "appear both as a reader and the writer of its own life" (1987, p. 246). Thus, the individuals are the interpreter and the interpreted, as well as the recipients of the interpretations. This situation allows an interpretative distance for the individual who tells the story. For the degree students and young researchers this represents an opportunity to analyze the interpretative skills when tellers read the story they related before.

The way individuals narrate are related to their particular experiences and the experiences of others, as well as with objects of reality and fiction. The story reveals something about us and about others that are present in the world of our reality, even if it is represented by fiction. In fact, the fiction used through literary genres is a vehicle for chasing reality in terms of comprehension and action.

Within the relationship between reality and fiction we find literary genres such the fables, tales, novels, etc. In this paper we are particular interested in fables, since they can work as vehicles for comprehension but also as didactics bridges between a conceptual construction and a categorical production.

During the time of the Greeks, fables were called stories and primarily featured animals which were anthropomorphized and illustrated a moral, a sort of ethical and civil values supported by the cosmogony of this time (as the Greek concept of polis), but as well, with the real pretension of remain in time. Mainly, animals dominated the stories and were involved in "human" conflicts that they had to resolve by themselves. The disagreements between the characters of fables had to be solved in such a way as to potentially establish ethical guidelines or values of fair play, and towards a good life, a term defined in Aristotle's Poetics. Fables contributed, and continue to so, to the civilizing process of all societies and the constitution of a sense of humanity.

The use of fables in improving the research skills in degree students in Social Sciences represents a linguistic domain of comprehension. In general, fables as a literary genre, begin their narrative deployment with a title that marks the problematic context of history, "The Fox and Grapes", "The Bird and the Jar", "The Two Frogs", "The Lion and the Mouse", etc. Afterwards, the fables develop a story that shows a problematic relationship. The characters of the story find themselves in a problematic situation that facilitates and encourages the reflection about the reason for this challenging relationship and its resolution in a creative, educational and ethical way, in the form of a moral, as the conclusion and closure of a fable.

The importance of using fables in building research skills lies in the fact that they can become a didactic bridge that allow grade students to build categories when researching within the domain of Social Sciences. Fables allow the passage from the narrative context to a space of comprehension through the inclusion of analytical categories as extensive concepts in their epistemic content and with a relational nature with other concepts. This process guides us towards the problem and its resolution, and the reference of this problematic situation to social reality. The moral condenses this process in the components of the fable: the title, the story and actually, the moral.

Fables induce degree students to a reflective get back to these components, to analyze the relational world that allows the development of complex thought process, and the comprehension of a phenomenon or a problem. Thus, the fable demands us to answer the proposal of the moral, to communicate with the object of the problem solved, to reject or agree, to expand upon the comprehensive world which is evidenced by the conceptual synthesis of the moral, to relate the concepts included in the moral, the story and the title, finally to build categories of analysis according to the story told, such as, cooperation, virtue, deceit, arrogance, sagacity, tenacity, effort, etc.

The comprehension of fable evidences the use of critical thinking about social relationship asymmetries. Interpreted by specific cultures yet important throughout thousand of years, the fable speaks to imbalanced power relations and encourages those without power to speak in metaphoric codes that can emancipate both the teller and listener.

But what do the stories say about particular individuals? The force of the story lies not only in the capacity of self-identification and the world of reality but also in the possibility of constructing a privileged space of communication. This situation opens the consideration of the central role of speech (discursive) genres in building categories of analysis.

Expressed as oral and written constructions, speech genres complexity lies in the heterogeneity of their nature because they can be manifested in an informal story as simple speech genres, or in dramas, novels, and scientific investigations of any kind, the big journalistic genres and others, as complex speech genres. These last genres are located in the frontiers of the heterogeneity of literary genres and they represent the concretion of the processes of building conceptual categorizations.

Speech genres in the process of categorical construction

When particular subjects talk about their experiences in the context of an investigation they build a narration, a story that finally crystallizes in a discourse as a whole construction and an overall unit of comprehension (Ricoeur, 1987). These stories begin with a discursive composition of a linguistic nature, especially as complex discursive genres. That is, genres arising from a more complex communication (mostly written), developing from the cultural development and relatively high organization such as in the artistic, scientific, social and political communication, etc. (Bakhtin, 1986).

Bakhtin (1986) states that speech genres are belts of transmission between the history of society and the history of the language. It is important to notice that in speech genres, the process of communication motivates listeners to perceive and understand the linguistic meaning of speech, and to take an active posture of response: they agree or disagree with the content of the discourse (total or partial), they complete it, apply and activate it. Consequently, in the processes of building categories of analysis the passage from using fables to activate speech genres is done by discussing the categories that have resulted in analyzing the whole content of fables from the perspective of the moral, and applying this networking of categories analysis in terms of communicational discussion.

It is important to notice that according to Bakhtin (1986) speech genres organize our daily and situational speech in a manner that is quite similar to the way grammatical rules organize sentences and paragraphs.

The discourse exists because of concrete statements of the speakers. The discourse is decanted by the shape of the wording of a particular discursive subject, and does not exist outside this. The borders of each statement as discursive communication unit are defined by the change of discursive subjects, what Bakhtin called, alternation. Before the start of a dialogue there are the statements of others, after the end, it remains for the statements responses from others. A speaker ends and gives to the word its active understanding as a response or alternation. And this response is built as a conclusion. Here we find the resemblances to the moral but as well, speech genres expand the limits of this comprehension.

“The relationships established between alternations (question, claim, objection, consent, etc.), are impossible between units of language (words and sentences), nor within the system of the language, or the statement. They are possible between the statements that belong to different discursive subjects, because they presuppose the existence of other members” (Bakhtin, 1986, p.49). It means that speech genres compulsorily need a communicative relationship and alternation between at least, two individuals that propose statements needed to be responded in different ways.

Everything the speaker says at one time is an utterance (Bakhtin, 1984), they reflect the speaker’s individuality, but it also invites an alternation or responses from others. The utterance is a term very close to narrative identity, in the sense that what the speaker says, may reveal the nature of him/her, and also, always invites a response of someone, that is why utterances are planned before the concepts are selected. An utterance begins at the time that speaker starts talking and ends when the next speaker begins. The implication of being an author of a text or an idea expressed by a statement occurs thanks to utterances.

“Any concrete utterance is a link in the chain of speech communication of a particular sphere. The very boundaries of the utterance are determined by a change of speech subjects. Utterances are not indifferent to one another, and are not self-sufficient; they are aware of and mutually reflect one another. Every utterance must be regarded as primarily a response to preceding utterances of the given sphere (we understand the word ‘response’ here in the broadest sense). Each utterance refutes affirms, supplements, and relies upon the others, presupposes them to be known, and somehow takes them into account. Therefore, each kind of utterance is filled with various kinds of responsive reactions to other utterances of the given sphere of speech communication” (Bakhtin, 1986, p.91).

In accepting Bakhtin affirmation that every utterance is mainly a response to preceding utterances, then the listener's processes of comprehension is formulating what his or her response to a speaker's utterance should be, by agreeing or rejecting the utterance, or more interestingly, acting according to or taking distance from this utterance.

“The fact is that when the listener perceives and understands the meaning (the language meaning) of speech, he simultaneously takes an active, responsive attitude toward it. He either agrees or disagrees with it (completely or partially), augments it, applies it, prepares for its execution, and so on. And the listener adopts this responsive attitude for the entire duration...of the process of listening and understanding...” (Bakhtin, 1986, p.68).

The challenge in terms of communicative comprehension is to understand one another, to learn about the corresponding context of the concepts and utterances. Asking where do they come from and how do they affect reality.

“Any true understanding is dialogic in nature. Understanding is to utterance as one line of a dialogue is to the next. Understanding strives to match the speaker's word with a counter word. Only in understanding a word in a foreign tongue is the attempt made to match it with the ‘same’ word in one's own language” (Bakhtin, p.102).

The importance of the utterances is the discursive intention that regulates the selection of the object or the matter of speaking, the linguistic resources and the type of speech genre selected. Furthermore, in an expressive or emotional moment, we can find a subjective and evaluating attitude towards the semantic content of the combination of statements.

In this sense, the process of using Fables as a literary genre in: a) the detection of a problem, the context and individuals that are involved in the problem; and b) a retrospective reflection oriented towards comprehension (these two steps give as a result the construction of analytical categories), to the construction of a communicative sphere based on complex statements and Speech Genres, this produces a continuous conversation and a dialogical atmosphere about the analytical categories analyzed before. This didactic bridge induces and motivates the construction of analytical categories and different networks of analytical categories aimed at the understanding of the object of study, within the process of research in degree programs in Social Sciences.

Degree students in Mexico building categories of analysis towards a hermeneutic perspective

This ongoing research is related with the analysis of the socio-cognitive research skills in degree students from the Campus of Economical and Management Studies and the Campus of Social Sciences and Humanities Studies. The academic programs involved in this ongoing research are related to programs that mainly use qualitative or mixed research based in an interpretative approach.

The criteria for the selection of the informants (individuals for this research) were as follows:

1. Students in the last year of Master and Doctoral courses.
2. Students using interpretative and qualitative approach in the development of their thesis.
3. Students willing to use the two linguistic resources (Fables and Speech genres) in part of the development of the thesis.

This research obtained data from twenty (20) students coming from five (5) graduate programs of each of the above campus, for a total of ten (10) academic programs and forty (40) students. In this sense, we interviewed the first group of students who followed traditional courses of methodology of research (Group A); as well as other group of students who used fables and speech genres and other linguistic resources for the construction of categories of analysis. (Group B). Currently, the analysis has lasted for six (6) months.

In the "A" group of twenty (20) students belonging to masters and doctorates degree programs from both campuses that did not use linguistic resources focused on fables and discursive genres, we found the following synthesis of the situation of these students:

- 1) 65% of graduate students had a deep lacking related to cognitive skills aimed at the construction of problematic situations. The narration of the students discussing the problems of the research was quite simple, weak and confused since they did not pointed out the three common elements in the analysis of a problem: object, subject and context.
- 2) 55% of graduate students had large deficiencies in clearly setting out a problem. They did not include objects, subjects and context of the problem. Deficiencies in skills for the semantic construction requiring the approach to a problem are evident in degree students of these two campuses.
- 3) 60% of graduate students presented deficiencies in the construction of conceptual categories, although this value is very variable since there are too many variables that do not allow generalizing the students' lack of skills to build a theoretical framework from conceptual categories. This construction came from the analysis of different authors related with the object of study of these researches, and it was included in the content of their thesis.
- 4) 79% of graduate students had deficiencies in the construction of analytical categories, making it difficult to identify dimensions of analysis in organizing, interpreting and making the analysis of data coming from the voices of the individuals of the research (informants).
- 5) 85% of graduate students had deficiencies in the handling of the discursive genres, due to the lack of abilities to build analysis networks since these students had poorly built analytical categories. This situation produced an epistemic reduction in the content of the object of study, the trivialization of the data analysis and the lack of quality of the theoretical and interpretative discussions within the process of the investigation.

In the "B" group of twenty (20) students belonging to masters and doctorates degree programs from both campuses that used linguistic resources focused on fables and discursive genres, we found the following synthesis of the situation of these students as follows:

- 1) 62% of graduate students presented progress in the development of cognitive skills aimed to the construction of problematic situations. The students' narration about the problems related to the research presented greater clarity with differentiations of the three elements in the analysis of a problem: object, subject and context.
- 2) 51% of graduate students presented development of cognitive abilities in their approach to problems. These students included objects, subjects and context of the problem. The semantic skill for setting problems was present.
- 3) 45% of graduate students had skills in the construction of categories, but this is a heterogeneous character. Although this value is very variable since there were too many variables that did not allow generalization of the students' skills to build a theoretical framework from conceptual categories. This construction came from the analysis of different authors related with the object of study of these researches, and it was included in the content of their thesis. However, the students improved their skill in structuring concise and coherent theoretical frameworks.
- 4) 39% of graduate students had skills in the construction of analytical categories, this allowed the construction of dimensions of analysis in organizing, interpreting and in the analysis of data from the voices of the individuals of this research.
- 5) 50% of graduate students had skills in managing speech genres; they built some simple and complex networks with categories of analysis. This facilitated the construction of a coherent object of study that it was interesting for scientific development. Data analysis and discussions about the object of study produced the establishment of research seminars.

Conclusion

Graduate students who carried out research from a qualitative scope and from a hermeneutical paradigm within the Social Sciences, have deep deficiencies in the construction and/or detection of problematic situations, in the approach and setting social problems, in the synthesis and theoretical acutance, in the construction of networks, and in general, in the overall comprehension of research processes in the field of the Social Sciences.

However this systematic educational gap in training degree students in Mexico is not faced with a decision or awareness by teachers and educational authorities when regarding a Latin American traditional curriculum. This curriculum demands teaching traditional research methodology courses centered in the construction of a research protocol, as another didactic device important at the time of structuring the research outcomes. However, a research framework, as a protocol, does not represent the totality of the processes of investigation. Center research processes in a protocol that is a didactic, mistake that all students evidenced in this analysis, because this structure does not offer students strategies to reflect deeply in the process of interpretation and comprehension of social reality. It represents a guideline after the conceptual analysis is done, and it does not help greatly in the development of socio-cognitive skills that are required in the process of research.

The didactic bridge that is generated by the conjunction of fables as a literary genre and speech genres allow students the passage from confronting a social problem to the construction of categories of analysis and the creation of networks of analytical categories by discussing them within a scientific community in the research processes in Social Sciences. The speech genres demand this processes of communication from the base of the conceptual categories that have been built by the action of literary genres such as fables. This means the development of socio-cognitive skills for research such as the development of expert observation of social phenomena, the use of complex, inductive, deductive and abductive reasoning, concretion and theoretical synthesis, clearer understanding of the problem of the research construction of conceptual networks, besides the improvement of the interpretation of stories coming from the informants, now translated into scientific data.

It is required that teachers and students make use of/ take advantage of the wide range of opportunities that give us the didactics in teaching about the processes of qualitative research in the context of the social sciences, in order, not only, to improve cognitive skills but also to integrate them into an overall comprehension of social problems and to offer viable alternatives to solve these problems from a critical perspective offered by the process of research.

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