Workshop Report

“Qualitative methods of Textual Analysis”

Workshop of the Graduate School „Society and Culture in Motion“
organized by Daniel Kremers and Serena Tolino

Halle (Saale), May 7th – 8th 2010

by
Serena Tolino
Introduction

On the 7th and 8th May 2010 a workshop on “Qualitative methods of Textual Analysis” was held at the Graduate School “Society and Culture in Motion”. The workshop, organized by Daniel Kremers, (PhD candidate at the Institut für Politikwissenschaft und Japanologie, MLU) and Serena Tolino (PhD candidate at the Orientalisches Institut, MLU), both scholarship holders at the Graduate School, proposed a reflection on the different methods that can be used to gain interpretation from different kinds of textual sources.

The workshop was organized mainly in order to give students an inspiring overview of qualitative methods of textual analysis: in fact all the PhD students of the Graduate School deal with texts and are requested to extrapolate scientific interpretations from them and to a certain extent to be able to generalize their results. The primary questions addressed at the workshop were: what do we intend with “text”? How can we use texts to find interpretations that can be used to build a theory? How do theory and practice interfere with each other?

The workshop was structured into two main parts: the first one, held by Dr. Dominique Schirmer, from the department of sociology of Albert-Ludwigs-University, Freiburg, was intended to give participants the opportunity to gain familiarity with the different typologies of textual analysis and the preferred techniques for each of them.

During the second part, two scholars were invited to present their personal understanding and use of textual analysis: Dr. Daniele Cantini (at the time lecturer in Social and Political Anthropology of the Middle East at University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, and now post-doc fellow at the Graduate School Society and Culture in Motion) and Dr. Anja Osiander (Political Science / Japan Studies, Freie Universität Berlin), which unfortunately had to cancel her participation due to personal reasons.

First day

After Daniel Kremers and Serena Tolino welcomed the participants and introduced the speaker, Dr. Schirmer presented a general introduction of her understanding of textual analysis and in more details laid out the main differences between content analysis and hermeneutical analysis. She explained that the core idea of qualitative methods it to interpret and understand complex interrelations. In doing so, the “object” of research has to be taken as a subject with an emic perspective and subjective space.
Thus, the relationship between researcher and research subject is not an interference, but an explicit part of research. This demands openness, doubt, interactivity on the side of the researcher.

Using qualitative methods one can not isolate relations of cause and effect. As such they were challenging deductive techniques and concepts of representativity and objectivity. However, they were not to be considered an alternative to quantitative methods. Rather they offer an approach that works the other way around and ideally starts with observation and ends with the formulation of theories.

Aims of qualitative research were among others to explore and introduce a field, describe a rather unknown topic, to test and experiment with details a problem, to devise and test theories and maybe even to predict effects. Its targets were attitudes and opinions, frameworks of orientation and structures of meaning, habitus and action, discourses and structures.

In qualitative research, texts were “the means of measurement, which has to be transformed into data.” Concerning data, in qualitative methods, one should rather speak of production, than of collection of data. This process could also be called translation of social reality into data.

After the lunch, she focused on content analysis, as a method between qualitative and quantitative textual analysis, and hermeneutical qualitative analysis, presenting some helpful techniques that should help the researcher to generalize his/her findings.

Content analysis was about structuring a huge amount of material along empirical and theoretically meaningful aspects and aims at systematically comparing or contrasting content. It was a way of reducing data. The material of concern could be texts, audio-visual data, pictures, artifacts etc. While applying deductive methods, content analysis would often work very close to theory: it is a highly systematic and standardized method and a very important tool to reduce data, Dr. Schimer gave an introduction to coding, which can be summarized as the assignment of content to specific categories.

Hermeneutics, on the other hand, hinted to the understanding of the meaning of social reality from the perspective of a subject, by inductively examining this meaning(fullness). It could also be called double hermeneutics because it requires the researcher’s interpretation of the research subject’s interpretations. Its most important tool is iterativity in a hermeneutic circle, that contained four stages, which have to be repeated several times: pre-production, production, post-production and review. In these circles the researcher goes back and forth between text and interpretation.
Second day

During the first session of 8th May, the participants to the workshop presented their projects and tried to reflect, through the help of Dr. Schirmer, on what methods of textual analysis they could better fit their project.

Case Study:

During the second session of 8th May, Dr. Cantini presented his understanding of textual analysis practically showing how he used texts in two cases, both during his fieldwork in Egypt.

In the first part of his presentation, Dr. Cantini shortly pointed out the debate on what use of texts should and could be done in anthropology, reflecting on the theoretical problems that it poses and referring to the post modern idea of “culture as a text”. This made the participants aware of the general theoretical and methodological problems that the use of text poses in anthropology, but also on the new possibilities of research they offer.

After that, Dr. Cantini presented two researches in which he used the methodology of textual analysis. In the first paper he presented (“Les relations entre coptes et musulmans dans la littérature égyptienne contemporaine: une perspective anthropologique”, Confluences Méditerranée, n. 66, 2008, pp. 143-154) he showed how he made use of literary sources (and mainly two contemporary Egyptian novels) in order to shed light on the relations between Copts and Muslims in contemporary Egypt. The second paper he presented (Des nouveaux riches poindes jeunes martyrs. Les évolutions de la migration de travail égyptienne au prisme de ses représentations médiatiques, with Lucile Grunz, Chroniques Egyptiennes 2008, Le Caire, Cedej, pp. 79-99) dealt with the debate in the Egyptian Press on the problem of illegal migration from Egypt to Europe and was based mainly on the sources collected in a special Revue de Press of Cedej, the Centre d'Études et de Documentation Économiques, Juridiques et Sociales, based at Cairo.

In both cases Dr. Cantini, due to the controversy of the topics, could not content with the notes he got from his fieldwork and in order to get a more comprehensive understanding of the arguments decided to integrate his field notes with textual sources.

Of course this approach presented many theoretical, methodological, and even practical challenges (such as the availability of sources, the selection process, the theoretical reflection, the possibility of generalization).
Dr. Cantini presented the difficulties in finding the materials (especially for what concerns the first case, while in the second one he could rely on a quite compete corpus) and how it was important, in any case, to combine the findings of his fieldwork with his textual sources.

In conclusion, Dr. Cantini pointed out some problems that an ethnographer has to face when dealing with textual sources, giving room to an interesting debate.

Evaluation:

We did not do a systematical evaluation of the workshop, but we talked with participants, and ask them for a statement via Email. Of those who responded the resonance was very positive, especially for the students and young researchers who were in the state of planning their master thesis. However there have been complaints about the tight schedule, especially because the slot for practical aspects was felt too short. Especially the PhD. Candidates of the Graduate School would have benefitted from more concentrated group work, which they remembered to be very fruitful in the Workshop on “Discourse and Dispositiv Analysis” which took place in February 2010. This shortcoming has to be attributed to the organizers. A planning of working groups would have demanded a more intensive coordination with the main speaker Dr. Dominique Schirmer. We may conclude that workshops can be a great opportunity to learn new aspects and bring together discussants, but they are also a time consuming challenge. They should be voluntarily, more focused on research subjects and organized later in the process of research, so that the researchers can contribute more effectively with their own expertise. On the other hand methodological workshops should be jointly organized by the Graduate School, the Post Docs and PhD. Candidates, maybe on a yearly basis. This has been shown by the great success of the “Discourse Analysis” Workshop, who was organized by the Post-Docs and the organizer of Graduate School Dr. Hagen Findeis.