

# De–fusing the Horizons?

## Content Analysis and Hermeneutics

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**ABSTRACT:** Content Analysis (CA) is a set of methods used for examining texts. I commence by outlining the conceptual foundations of CA articulated most recently by Klaus Krippendorff. He contends that in order for CA to be a reliable method, practitioners must cease understanding texts as ‘containers’ holding a single, inherent meaning. In contrast, the analyst and their interpretive context determine the inferences, and effectively the meaning, of texts.

Outlining the hermeneutics of Hans–Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, I challenge Krippendorff’s assertions, demonstrating that a hermeneutic approach renders visible necessary interpretive decisions which CA obscures. Hermeneutics thus offers an important critique, alerting us to the limitations of CA, and the boundaries it must remain within if it is to remain useful.

**KEYWORDS:** Content Analysis, Hermeneutics, Interpretation, Method, Big Word.

### 1. Introduction

The impetus for this paper emerged from a teaching experience. As I was preparing to deliver a lecture in a sociological research methodology unit, I commenced to read the required chapter that I had assigned my students on the topic of Content Analysis (henceforth ‘CA’). The updated edition of the unit textbook contained a new chapter on Content Analysis by Brendan Churchill. Churchill defined CA in fairly open terms as ‘the formal study of texts as a method of analysis.’ However, my interest was piqued when he included the following four characteristics of CA:

- 1) Texts have no inherent meanings in and of themselves. Understandings of the text are dependent on the reader or consumer, who brings their own interpretations to the texts.

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- 2) Texts can have multiple meanings and interpretations. This means that readers may find multiple meanings and interpretations within the one text, and that different researchers may interpret the same text differently.
- 3) Texts are reflective of contexts (political, social, cultural and economic), in that they reflect characteristics of the producer (of the text), the reader and the analyst.
- 4) Texts must be used to draw inferences about their properties as texts and, as importantly, in the social context in which they are situated (2013: 255).

The first thing that struck me on reading this list is that it seemed to contain some contradictions. Namely, assertion one seemed to me to be at odds with assertion three — if texts have no inherent meaning, than how can they be reflective of contexts, particularly the context of their producers? While the logic of assertion two seemed internally valid, I wondered if it would lead to ‘anything goes’ interpretations.

Assertion one above — that texts have no inherent meaning — seemed to me to present an interesting hermeneutical assumption about the nature of interpretation. At first glance, it looks similar to what is often referred to as ‘reader–response hermeneutics,’ most often associated with Stanley Fish. While Fish’s approach, which I will discuss later, is more nuanced than Churchill’s assertion, I could not help but wonder if another hermeneutic approach would offer CA practitioners more protection against ‘anything goes’ interpretations. If practitioners of CA want to make claims about how texts should be understood the meaning of texts, it would be prudent to think about an interpretive approach that offers both a conceptual framework and perhaps a methodology that allows the possibility of such claims. Reader–response approaches, particularly if practiced naively, tend to lead to ‘anything goes’ interpretation, and thus do not appear to be the answer here. Hermeneutics, particularly as articulated by Hans–Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, offers a history of deep engagement with the challenges one encounters in attempting to interpret texts, which was largely absent from the conceptual underpinning of CA.

Churchill’s assertions are drawn from a text on CA written by Communications academic Klaus Krippendorff (2013). Krippendorff theorises CA as an approach which eschews the authorial intention of a text’s creation or production in favour of the meaning ascribed to the text by those who ‘read’ it — their ‘contexts of use.’ The fact that Krippendorff provides a detailed and thoughtful articulation of the methodological underpinning of CA

makes his work an ideal case study for the method.<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I will begin by outlining Krippendorff's articulation of the conceptual foundations of CA, and then move on to discuss how hermeneutics offers an important critique of these. I will conclude with a discussion of the limitations of CA, and subsequently the boundaries it must remain within if it is to be useful as a method of textual analysis and explanation.

## 2. Klaus Krippendorff and the Conceptual Foundations of CA

Krippendorff begins with a brief history, tracing the beginnings of CA back to 1743, to a religious controversy in Sweden surrounding the publication of 90 Moravian hymns, entitled *Sions Sånger* ('Songs of Zion'). When the second edition of the hymns *Sions Nya Sånger* ('New Songs of Zion') were due to be published in 1773, a conflict arose between the established Lutheran church of Sweden and the Pietistic Moravian movement (*Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine*), which had moved into Sweden from Germany in the 1730s (Öhrberg 2008; Dovring 2009). The former perceived that the publication and use of the hymns was promoting Moravian theology over the state churches, leading to many attending Moravian churches outside their districts, as well as encouraging illegal private religious meetings. Lutheran clergyman Johan Kumblaesus undertook a numerical analysis of the songs, counting the references to the trinity and coming to the conclusion that the Moravian hymns focused unduly on Jesus at the expense of the other two members of the trinity. He also indicated that the frequency with which pietistic themes appeared — such as Christ's suffering and his love — 'deviated from normal practice' (Dovring 2009: 6). As can easily be imagined, dissenters took issue with Kumblaesus' method and conclusions for not recognising that concepts can be expressed in several different ways, and the importance of context.

The story illustrates some of the problems that can be associated with the method. After all, counting occurrences of words does not disclose meaning, which requires much more interaction with a text. Max Weber's (2009: 11) suggestion that sociologists should use scissors and compasses to measure the quantitative changes that have occurred over time in the content of newspapers runs into the same problems — the number of inches

1. It is perhaps worth emphasizing at this point that my intention here is to analyse and critique the theoretical underpinnings of CA. I am not attempting an empirical investigation of the ways that particular practitioners of CA carry out their work — as for example Biernacki (2012) attempts in relation to coding — as these will of course differ in many ways from the "ideal type" presented by Krippendorff's conceptual approach. Hence, Krippendorff's work is very valuable, as his is one of the very few attempts to construct a rigorous theoretical framework for carrying out this method.

devoted to a story, theme or demographic may not be meaningless, but the content of those inches is surely important to understanding any changes that may or may not have occurred. After all, how does noting column inches indicate the ‘content’ of those inches — just what ‘Content’ analysis might be presumed to be interested in? To his credit Weber does not stop there, indicating that after this quantitative analysis has begun, the analyst must next move to a more qualitative analysis to answer his questions.

Perceiving some of the problems with the early attempts, Krippendorff indicates that these are unsophisticated examples of approaches to CA, and that his modern approach is more useful. He also rejects Bernard Berelson’s classic definition of CA — ‘a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication’ (1952: 18). Articulating the conceptual foundations of his alternative approach, Krippendorff (2013: 28–31) outlines six features of texts which, apparently, he regards as axiomatic. They are as follows:

- 1) Texts have no inherent—that is, no reader-independent—qualities.
- 2) Texts do not have single meanings that could be found, identified, described for what they are, or correlated with states of their sources.
- 3) The meanings invoked by texts need not be shared.
- 4) Meanings (contents) speak to something other than the given texts
- 5) Texts have meanings relative to particular contexts, discourses, or purposes.
- 6) The nature of text demands that content analysts draw specific inferences from a body of texts to their chosen context.

Probably the most contentious of these are statements one, two and five. Six could also be added, but when Krippendorff’s rather idiosyncratic use of ‘context’ is understood, the statement becomes more legible. I will come to Krippendorff’s understanding of context shortly, and describe how it fits with his assertions that texts have no meaning independent of the reader.

Assertion one has to be read in the context of Krippendorff’s concern to debunk what he refers to as the ‘container metaphor’ of content analysis. Krippendorff seeks to move content analysis away from ‘naïve belief[s]’ that content is contained in the text itself, requiring the interpreter to correctly understand what is already there (2013: 26, 28).

The reason Krippendorff desires to move away from this container approach to CA is his concern with method. He seeks to make CA a replicable set of methods, which can be applied to texts in a systematic way. Krippendorff is not concerned with ‘correct’ interpretations of texts themselves. Assertion two and three make this clear — it is not important in CA that analysts come up with a meaning that everyone shares, neither is the di-

discovery of a single meaning for a text desirable, or even possible. Rather, Krippendorff is concerned with CA being able to apply a consistent set of methods to texts. This is clear in his definition of CA: ‘a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use’ (2013: 24). The meaning of texts themselves is secondary to this. Method is actually more important than meaning of texts, and in this sense Krippendorff’s vision of CA runs in the opposite direction of most of hermeneutics throughout history.

Another important difference in Krippendorff’s articulation of method and traditional hermeneutics is in regard to the way he uses the term “context.” In hermeneutics, and in common usage, context is understood to refer to the production of the text, and perhaps the author’s meaning or intention. In contrast, Krippendorff does not mean the context of the text’s production, but ‘the context of the text’s use’ — this is the context of the analyst, and anyone else interacting with the text. This fits neatly with his understanding that texts have no inherent meaning. For Krippendorff, the analyst must be able to fully describe the conditions under which they interpret the text, as these will determine the results of the analysis, and guard against ‘anything goes’ interpretations (2013: 30).

At this point, Krippendorff explicitly defines CA as different from a hermeneutic approach:

One can surely explore the meanings that come to mind while reading a text, following the threads of inferences to wherever they may lead, or engaging in so-called fishing expeditions. *Hermeneutical, interpretive, and ethnographic* approaches to reading cherish such open-endedness. However, when research is motivated by specific questions, analysts can proceed more expeditiously from sampling relevant texts to answering given questions. Content analysts who start with a research question read texts for a purpose, not for what an author may lead them to think or what they say in the abstract’ (2013: 37, emphasis added).

This approach of commencing with a research question is also more deductive than hermeneutic approaches. Furthermore, Krippendorff is concerned to ground CA as an empirical method. The analyst makes truth claims in framing the research question, and these truth claims can be supported or invalidated by analysis. Analysts can ‘compensate’ for the fact that they cannot directly observe — as per the natural sciences — by the rigorous application of this method. Texts are thus analysed by counting — ‘counting is what analysts do’ (2013: 38) — to determine answers to carefully constructed research questions and pre-existing categories, or codes.

Ostensibly, then, CA as conceptualised by Krippendorff is not primarily concerned with the meaning of texts, but rather answering quantitative questions about the content of the text — which does not take us much

further than Father Kumblaeus counting references to the trinity or Weber advocating the use of scissors and compasses on newspapers. However, it becomes clear that he actually wants to be able to draw some inferences about meaning as well when he returns to a discussion about his rather idiosyncratic understanding of context. As we have noted, context for Krippendorff refers to context of use — and particularly the context of the analyst:

In a content analysis, the context explains what the analyst does with the texts; it could be considered the analyst's best hypothesis for how the text came to be, what they mean, what they can tell or do. In the course of a content analysis, the context embraces all the knowledge that the analyst applies to given texts, whether in the form of scientific theories, plausibly argued propositions, empirical evidence, grounded intuitions, or knowledge of reading habits (2013: 38).

It seems, then, that Krippendorff is not entirely willing to abandon meaning, and thus whether he is aware of it or not his method for carrying out CA is attempting to address (at least in part) hermeneutic questions. He next moves to a more specific discussion of his analytical method, based on the primary concern that such analysis 'model' the text's context of use (2013: 40), which is broader than the analyst's own context. We can infer from this that Krippendorff's understanding of context is not only that of analyst, but also that of those who make use of the text.

Krippendorff proposes that, based on research questions and his understanding of context — both of analyst and the text's use — the analyst moves on to make 'inferences' in relation to the text (2013: 41–43). This proceeds along scientific lines — moving from the text to hypothesis which explains the 'data' of the text, and the establishment that a proposed hypothesis explains the data best. However, he continues by saying:

Content analysts are in a similar position of having to draw inferences about phenomena that are not directly observable, and they are often equally resourceful in using a mixture of statistical knowledge, theory, experience, and intuition to answer their research questions from available texts (2013: 43).

Such reliance on 'intuition' seems at odds with a scientific approach, and suggests a need to make an 'informed guess' as to the meaning or content of texts, or at least to the significance of data. To be fair, Krippendorff's method has not required a naïve requirement that the analyst be 'objective' and come to the texts with no assumptions or preconceptions — quite the opposite, as the deductive method he describes requires pre-judgement.

We return to more scientific ground with Krippendorff's insistence that CA should be "validatable" in principle (2013: 44). Validation can only come from a mixed-method approach in which CA is triangulated with another method. For example, Krippendorff suggests that a CA purporting

to describe the impact of particular television advertisements could be combined with a survey of a sample of viewers. This can be validated in principle because such a survey is possible, even if it is not carried out. This represents a concern that decisions about the significance of texts not rest only with the analyst, but can be verified empirically in another way. This is another way of guarding against the possibility of an ‘anything goes’ analysis.

These are the main features of Krippendorff’s conceptual understanding of the method of CA. Other recent approaches to CA — most particularly Roberto Franzosi’s ‘story grammar’ approach, in which he attempts to code texts by means of the linguistic-based categories of the text itself — are certainly different in the sense that he is attempting to base analysis on the text, rather than preconceived research questions set by the analyst. Thus, his approach appears more inductive, but is still an attempt to organise texts into quantifiable categories (Franzosi 2004: 60–61). Other, less comprehensive outlines (e.g. Semler 2001; Devi Prasad 2008; Sproule 2010; Churchill 2013) share this in common — the attempt to break texts into thematic categories which appear repeatedly, or even to count occurrences of words or themes appearing in the text. They may lack a detailed articulation of the epistemological underpinnings that Krippendorff (to his credit) provides, but attempt to do similar things — separating the content of texts into thematic codes, and then analysing the content of texts in order to address particular, pre-determined questions.

Krippendorff attempts to outline a method with empirical verifiability revolving around the significance of a text’s ‘context of use,’ but that also facilitates truth claims about the meaning (and therefore the “content”) of texts. In contrast, hermeneutics, a branch of philosophy concerned with understanding, has historically focused on the author’s intent as determinative of meaning. In the next section we turn to Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, two hermeneutic philosophers who worked to render visible the impact of the world of the reader on interpretation and the tensions in the creative process of understanding.

### **3. Hans-Georg Gadamer: the Fusions of Horizons**

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) was a student of the phenomenological philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976). From Heidegger, Gadamer inherits a concern for understanding the ontological ground of the human sciences, rather than simply an interest in constructing a method for achieving understanding. For Heidegger, we cannot divorce ourselves from our being in the world, what is necessary is to bring this to the understanding

of the text. Hence Heidegger's famous comment on the hermeneutic circle — what is important is not trying to get out of the circle, but to come into it the right way (2010: 148).

For Gadamer, all understanding is interpretation, which allows experience to come into words. Whoever has language 'has the world,' because the world is the totality of meaningful relations. What is not meaningful is the *Umwelt* (habitat) — not interpreted and meaningless (1975: 402, 411). As language is inherited — all humans live within a 'linguistic tradition' — therefore the idea that we could be neutral or 'objective' is wrongheaded. We are shaped by this tradition — the culture, society and history we inherit by being born into it and living in it (1975: 351). This is what we bring to interpreting texts, and indeed the world.

In his attempts to articulate how understanding happens, Gadamer (1975: 269–270) introduced the concept of "horizon" — the range of one's vision from a particular vantage point. The author of a text has a horizon, the text itself has a horizon, which may be different from that of the author (hence, the author's meaning is important in hermeneutics, but not the whole meaning of any text). Finally, the reader of the text has his or her (or their) own horizon also. In interpretation of texts, the reader's horizon and the text's horizon are fused — a new horizon is formed. Language can also change, as new truth emerges. This happens not primarily through reason and science, but through participation in the hermeneutical process — the fusion of horizons. In the fusion of horizons, the reader or interpreter's understanding of the world is enriched, changed — through the process of 'discovering meaningful relationships of being within the text' (Jensen 2007: 141).

The fusion takes place when the different horizons, which we imagine to be entirely separate, are brought together in the act of understanding. In fact, they are not entirely separate. The horizon of the interpreter him or herself cannot be formed without the past, and thus may share something in common with the horizon of the text or author — particularly if it is a culturally significant text. Also, of course, the reader and text often share a common linguistic tradition. Gadamer prefers to talk of a 'fusion' rather than the formation of a seamless horizon in the act of interpretation because he perceives the task of hermeneutics is not to eradicate tensions, but to bring them out (1975: 273). As he states:

The place between strangeness and familiarity that a transmitted text has for us is that intermediate place between being a historically intended separate object and being part of a tradition. The true home of hermeneutics is in this intermediate area (Gadamer 1975: 263).



This tension is important, because it is in this space that new truth can emerge. ‘Something comes into being that had not existed before and that exists from now on . . . something emerges that is contained in neither of the partners by himself’ (1975: 419).

While Gadamer did not address CA directly, in regard to quantitative analysis he was aware of the interpretive claims made by those who used statistics. Gadamer was scathing of claims to objectivity in interpretation — those who contend that statistics speak in the ‘language of facts’ ignore that ‘the questions these facts answer and which facts would begin to speak if other questions were asked are hermeneutical questions’ (Gadamer 1976: 11).

This is important in view of the research questions which Krippendorff proposes as the starting point of CA. Krippendorff’s deductive approach does not dismiss hermeneutical questions, but shifts them, from the interaction with the text itself to the questions that are being asked, which form a part of the analyst’s horizon brought to the text. Additionally, the process of analyzing results itself — often referred to as ‘interpretation’ — is thoroughly and ineluctably hermeneutic. There is no way around hermeneutics for Gadamer.

Gadamer has been criticised for not offering enough in the way of a method for interpreting texts. Certainly if one were hoping to actually ‘do’ hermeneutics, Gadamer might provide a conceptual foundation, but not much in the way of getting started. French hermeneutical philosopher Paul Ricoeur can offer us such a starting point, and to his work we now turn.

#### **4. Paul Ricoeur: Interpretation Theory and the Threefold Mimesis**

Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) was a French philosopher who studied the work of Edmund Husserl and Heidegger during his time as a prisoner of war. Working independently from Gadamer, his thought nevertheless developed in similar ways. Ricoeur offers more than Gadamer in the way of a critical method for explaining texts. Firstly, he presents a working definition of hermeneutics as ‘the theory of the operations of understanding in their relation to the interpretation of texts’ (1981: 43). He also attempts to reconcile the opposition between ‘explanation’ and ‘understanding.’ As Thiselton (2009: 249–250) notes, explanation provides the interpreter with a ‘checking device,’ necessary given the possibility of error. While Ricoeur would agree with Krippendorff that there can be multiple meanings of texts, this does not mean any interpretation is as good as any other. As he states, ‘an interpretation must not only be probable, but more probable than another’ (1981: 213).

While Ricoeur advocated the use of historical–critical methods to uncover the intent of the author, he accepted that critical explanation of texts did not end there. Rather, this must be interrogated by a hermeneutics of suspicion (1970: 27). In taking a suspicious approach, we are alerted to what may be behind the world of the author, of which they may have been unaware. Ricoeur (1970: 32) regarded Freud, Nietzsche and Marx as the ‘masters of suspicion,’ because they helped the interpreter lay bare what was hidden even to the text’s creator. For Freud, a text reveals the suppressed desire of the author; for Nietzsche, the will to power or suppression (by the powerless); and for Marx, false consciousness. Therefore, there is a ‘surplus of meaning’ in the text — it means more than the author intended.

Suspicion alerts the interpreter to what is behind the texts, but interpretation is by no means finished. The next step is to return to a critical, or ‘second’ naivety (1970: 28–29). When we approach a text, we read at a superficial level and develop a naïve understanding: an informed guess — or perhaps even uninformed — about what the text is about. This constitutes the interpreter’s pre–understanding, which Ricoeur refers to as starting ‘in front of the text.’ Next we move behind the text, using the tools at our disposal (such as historical–critical methods, suspicion) to arrive at a critical explanation. Once this critical explanation is reached, the interpreter returns to the ‘front of the text,’ reading again with a critically informed ‘naivety.’

In articulating what is happening in reaching this critical understanding, Ricoeur (1984: 54–71) proposes a threefold mimetic process of interpretation. This has significant commonalities with Gadamer’s fusion of horizons. Mimesis<sub>1</sub>, or ‘prefiguration,’ is the pre–understanding or pre–story we bring to interpreting a text. We do not attempt to divorce ourselves from this pre–story, but try to perceive what it is — to get into the circle the right way. Mimesis<sub>2</sub>, or ‘configuration,’ is the world of the text. However, it is more than that, constituting ‘an author’s imaginative construction of a text, particularly the emplotment, and the reader’s construal of a narrative world of the text’ (Stiver 2001: 68). In other words, this is our immersion in the text, and the world we create in interaction with it. Mimesis<sub>3</sub>, or ‘re–figuration,’ is similar to Gadamer’s ‘fusion of horizons.’ In the coming together of the world of the reader and the text, something new is created.

Interpretation for Ricoeur is a creative process, and it would be impossible to confine a text’s meaning within one person’s interpretation. However, this is not the same as an ‘anything goes’ approach, because interpretations compete in the ‘process of validation.’ In other words, different interpretations are presented, supported by their advocates, and more probable interpretations are accepted, less probable rejected. Ricoeur describes this process thus:

It is true that there is always more than one way of construing a text, it is not true that all interpretations are equal and may be assimilated to so-called 'rules of thumb.' The text is a limited field of possible constructions. The logic of validation allows us to move between the two limits of dogmatism and scepticism. It is always possible to argue for or against an interpretation, to confront interpretations, to arbitrate between them, to seek for an agreement, even if this agreement remains beyond our reach (1981: 213).

Ricoeur and Gadamer provide us with an approach which attempts to come to meaning through a process of engaging a text's creator, the text itself and the interpreter. It would seem that Krippendorff's approach to CA mutes or ignores the first two of these, and attempts to arrive at a valid assessment and interpretation of a text's content with only the third — the interpreter or analyst and his or her approach. The potential problems with this approach are the subject of the final section.

## **5. Defusing the Horizons? CA, Interpretation and Truth Claims**

In addressing the issue of establishing truth claims as an outcome of analysis, Krippendorff distinguishes between 'reliability' and 'validity' in CA — the former concerns ensuring that method can be duplicated under various conditions and concluded with 'substantial agreement of results.' Validity is the extent to which the claims made in CA can be said to be true (2013: 268). Truth claims are supported not by an appeal to authorial intent, but by external validation via triangulation with other methods, independent evidence or agreement with established theory — what Krippendorff refers to as 'empirical validity' (2013: 331). However, the conclusion cannot be escaped that interpretative decisions are still necessary. If, as Krippendorff indicates, analysts from different paradigms and disciplines are likely to come up with different results, which should be deemed to be 'true?' In regard to this latter objection, Krippendorff responds with what he calls 'semantic validity,' in which 'the categories of an analysis of texts correspond to the meanings these texts have within the chosen context,' remembering that his understanding of context is that of the analyst, not that of the text (2013: 335).

This is, of course, not the first or only approach to texts which effectively disregards authorial intent. Reader-response criticism is a similar attempt. Its most well-known exponent, Stanley Fish, articulates the view that it is the reader of a text's understanding which is definitive in interpretation: 'the reader's response is not *to* the meaning; it is the meaning' (1980: 3, italics original). For Fish, interpreting the text shapes the text as they are read, and are not merely strategies applied after the fact to discover what

was already there (1980: 13). Fish's view is nuanced by his commitment to interpretive 'communities' — the idea that interpreters are influenced in their hermeneutic by everything that constitutes their personal history, their culture and everything that goes into what we might call the 'horizon' of the interpreter. Further, and more significantly, Fish is uninterested in the kind of external validation Krippendorff is advocating, but attempts to demonstrate the plausibility of his interpretation by persuasion. His defence against the possibility of 'anything goes' interpretation is the link to the text itself, and so this represents another difference in Fish's approach — while the horizon of the author may be absent, the horizon of the text itself is not (1980: 356–360).

Krippendorff's focus on the horizon of the interpreter and the world of reception displays little of the nuance evident in Fish's understanding, nor is this surprising. He is, after all, concerned with finding a method for carrying out analysis that can be replicated, and from this springs his concern for articulating the conditions of interpretation. This is entirely consistent with a positivist approach: in order to repeat an experiment, the conditions under which said experiment takes place must be described, and how they may have influenced the results must be taken into account.

As we have noted, one of the advantages Krippendorff notes in the deductive, pre-determined questions approach of CA is its capacity to facilitate work with massive volumes of texts. This has led to so-called "Big Text" or "Text-mining" approaches to analysis, which rely on computer programmes to count word occurrences, map possible relationships between words, clauses and sentences, and even subsequently identify themes in many texts simultaneously. Such tools are known as "computer-aided qualitative discourse analysis software" (CAQDAS). While Nvivo has been the industry standard for semi-automated qualitative data coding for some time, recent CAQDAS applications developed at the University of Queensland — known as "Leximancer" and "Discursis" — offer the researchers a "visual-first approach" of thematic and sequential relationships within large numbers of texts (Angus, Rintel & Wiles 2013). That is to say, they allow rapid CA on a much larger scale, as small teams or even solo researchers can code thousands of texts.

In describing the capacity of Leximancer, Angus, Rintel, and Wiles (2013: 262) note that the programme dispenses with the need for researchers to "iteratively design lists of concepts and codes" — the software generates these automatically. One of the advantages of this, according to the authors, is that the codes are "statistically reliable and reproducible." The visual-first nature of the software results in "plots" of the occurrences of words and phrases in texts, displaying often mentioned words and phrases in large nodes, less articulated words and phrases in smaller nodes, and using connecting

lines to indicate relationships between these (Angus, Rintel & Wiles 2013: 263).

The authors take care to point out that the software does not replace human analysts: rather, “visually model[ling] text data for interpretation by a researcher” (Angus, Rintel, & Wiles 2013: 261). It could be argued that all that is being made available to analysts are some of the same Big Data tools already used across the disciplines, whereby the researcher has access to lightning fast algorithmic search engines that facilitate vast quantities of information at their fingertips.

However, it is not only at the end of the process, where it comes time for the human beings to sit in front of the data and make some sense of it, that hermeneutic decisions must be made. Nodes may indeed mark how many times a word or phrase appear in a conversation, interview or report — but knowing how many times something occurs tells us very little about the meaning thereof. This is evident in the application of Leximancer to speeches by former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott, taking the form of a quiz whereby readers can guess whether Abbott spoke more about themes such as “Jobs,” “The Budget” or “Asylum Seeker Boats” before or after his election victory in 2013. Readers can then compare their guesses with a graph plotting the number of times Abbott mentioned these concepts, and when (ABC 2015).

While knowing these numbers is suggestive, without the context of the speeches themselves, it is impossible to determine how the concepts were used, whether they were spoken of positively or negatively, or really what to make of the quantities at all. Further, the process whereby it was decided that these particular themes should be meaningful, as opposed to other things the former Prime Minister may or may not have said, is hopelessly obscured. All we are left with is our own interpretations of a set of numbers — what they mean in our own “contexts of use.”

As we have observed, the goal of content analysts is to draw inferences from the content of texts to their contexts of use. However, this process is riddled with interpretive decisions and questions. Understanding any social action — in this case, understanding both the meaning of a text’s creation as well as its reception — is, as Max Weber articulates so well, an interpretive process. In articulating the heart of his sociological method, *Verstehen*, Weber explains that in order to interpret the significance of people’s actions (in this case, this applies to both producers and consumers of texts), it is necessary through a process of empathy to attempt to view the world from the point of view of the one who we are trying to understand (1978: 4–6, 8–9, 11). Weber then famously describes the various “ideal types” of orientation to action: namely instrumental rationality, value-rationality, affectual and traditional, all of which can be offered as explanations for behaviour

(1978: 24–26). Thus, whether we attempt to understand texts in terms of the context of the producer or the context of its reception, interpretation and understanding is an inescapable part of the process.

Even if CA is triangulated with another empirical method, such as a questionnaire, interpretive decisions will have to be made as to what the appropriate questions to ask are, and this is true at all stages — from the deductive questions being asked prior to engaging in CA, to the survey questions which are to confirm or disconfirm the analyst’s conclusions. As to interpreting numerical results, Tucker (1965: 165) points out that understanding is necessary in making meaning from statistical correlations also. In short, hermeneutics is part of the practice of CA, whether practitioners are aware of this or not.

What is the alternative? Largely that is a topic for another paper, but at this stage I would suggest doing hermeneutics. That is, reading and interpreting texts, learning as much as possible about what may have influenced the author or authors of the text, who it was written for, what intention was behind this (horizon of the author), the language and genre of the text (horizon of the text) and the worldview, interests, intentions and myopias of the interpreter (horizon of the reader), and then offering an interpretation. As Richard Biernacki (2014: 173, 185) suggests, a humanist approach would declare the position of the interpreter and footnote the other possible interpretations of the data, inviting the reader into the process whereby validation through the “conflict of interpretations” has taken place. This is entirely consistent with the hermeneutic approach, one in which an interpretation is offered, one must be willing to defend this interpretation and/or modify it if a convincing case for another interpretation is offered.

This is not to say that CA has no usefulness as a set of methods, if it remains within methodological and epistemological boundaries — that is, if analysts do not try to do too much with the method. In his overview of CA, Steve Semler (2001) is modest in his claims about the utility of the method. Firstly, CA can be used to determine authorship, much like textual criticism in Biblical and Classical studies. Analysts would use CA to identify commonly used terms and phrases, thus building — or demolishing — a case for common authorship of different documents. Secondly, Semler proposes that CA is useful for ‘examining trends and patterns in documents,’ presumably through analysis of frequency of the appearance of words, phrases and themes. Finally, Semler suggests that CA can be ‘an empirical basis for monitoring shifts in public opinion’ as well as evaluating how well current practices align with stated goals (for example, in the case of mission statements). In a similar vein, John R. Hall (2014: 247) suggests that quantitative findings form the basis of “thin description,” which “can be an important springboard to hermeneutic enquiry.”

However, as I have argued throughout this paper, practitioners of CA do in fact have to be concerned with the meaning of texts and not just in the method by which they are interpreted. Indeed, this is entirely reasonable — a method sans content is an empty frame. Also, while CA purports to relate only to the meanings of texts as held within their contexts of use (rather than contexts of creation), practitioners of CA *must* make interpretive judgements concerning what this is, based on their intuition and reason.

If analysts limit themselves to identifying trends or determining authorship, then CA as outlined by Krippendorff has some legitimate uses as a method — as long as practitioners perceive the hermeneutical decisions they themselves must make during implementation. However, as I have stated, for the purposes of understanding what texts mean, CA as advocated by Krippendorff is inadequate. The process of effectively ‘de-fusing’ the horizons latent in CA merely robs the interpreter of critical perspectives that facilitate reasonable interpretation.

Hermeneutics is unlikely to facilitate the mass analysis of thousands of texts in rapid fashion, and thus interpreters will lose the efficiency CA claims to offer. What is gained is a critical understanding and method which takes seriously the task of interpretation and meaning making, as well as the role of human beings themselves in producing meaningful communications which are interpreted by other human beings in meaningful ways. CA may have promised a short-cut to this difficult and time consuming process, but unless practitioners have certain narrowly defined goals for their research, the method only succeeds in rendering necessary hermeneutical decisions invisible.

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