

Understanding Qualitative Content Analysis in the Light of Literary Studies

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Abstract

Reading is personal and concepts decoded from the texts by the reader could be weighed with the world of the author and the reader as well. Diluting either of this would lead to a biased approach in reading of literature. Literature requires multi-dimensional approach as every literature is unique and dynamic showcasing many facet and meanings. There will not be any dispute between the text and reading if only the reader goes after the texts carefully whilst reading and unearthing both explicit and implicit meanings. However, this does not mean the reader has to merely follow the preordained framework or to employ the tools that are been set already for doing research on grounds of positivism nor accepting the quantitative receipt with number counts. This paper highlights how to understand content analysis, pragmatically, in analyzing literary texts and the need and process of subjective interpretation claiming the freedom of the reader to excavate themes based on satiating the research question. It also advocates the researchers not to have a blind walk on the texts rather going after the texts and allow the texts to unfurl its meanings.

Keywords: Content Analysis, Literature, Subjective Interpretation, Positivism, & Theme.

Introduction

In the early 20th century content analysis was propagated with strong emphasis on quantitative approach based on the formula promulgated by the father of content analysis Bernard Berelson (1952) who defined content analysis as a “technique for objective, systematic, & quantitative description of manifest content communication.”

Simultaneously some researchers, who embraced qualitative approach, rejected positivism which nullifies introspective and intuitive knowledge and claims for empiricism. For them qualitative approach, unlike number-based quantitative approach, helps to gain a deeper understanding of underlying meanings of the texts/data.

At the advent of mass communication and in-depth reading of literatures, content analysis has been increasingly employed as method/technique to intensely analyze written, verbal or visual communication messages' (Cole,1988), which could be in the form of written text(books, papers, and poems); oral text(speeches and discourses); iconic texts(text in the form of drawings, paintings, & symbols); audio-visual text(visual content of television programmes, movies and videos); and hypertext(content found on the Internet). Obviously, the essential purpose of doing content analysis from the process proposed by Lasswell (1948) to study who (says) what (to) whom (in) what channel (with) what effect? lined a strong growth and emphasis for a qualitative content analysis to make valid inferences from text (Weber,1990). Holsti (1969) sees it as "a technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages" And further Krippendorff insists upon the 'subjective approach' of reading the content by defining it as "systematic reading of texts and symbolic matter not necessarily from an author's or user's perspective."

Although in recent times content analysis has been widely used in qualitative research, there is no crystal clarity among the researchers especially in reading literature. Scholars find difficulty how to read the text; how to extract data from literature? How to codifying the themes for interpretation? what method and tool is to be employed to interpret the data/text and more over is it mandatory to use one method to interpret data/text which may put curtain in the mind of the researcher to travel on biased programmed route or to take multi-dimensional approach to make travel along with the text and goes where ever it takes the researcher unearthing different meanings with broadened contexts are some of the questions and clarifications that remain unanswered.

Historical Antecedents

The history of content analysis takes its date back to the period of Greek philosopher Aristotle where canons of Rhetoric were used to describe and analyze the subject of text, creator,

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message, audience, context, ethos and pathos. Later, the scholastics tried to discover the latent meaning of words particularly in hymns which could be first exercise in the history of content analysis. This further took the researcher to have a close analysis of explicit and implicit messages of a text through classification and evaluation of key concepts, symbols and themes to determine meaning (Reitz, 2004).

Whilst the use of content analysis prevailing in qualitative research mainly in literary studies, subjective approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) has been insisted upon more than examining texts for the frequency of the occurrence of identified terms (word counts) and in the late 1950s the researchers started focusing on the concepts rather than merely counting words and on semantic relationships rather than just presence. Further, content analysis as a qualitative methodology conducted in a naturalistic setting with a purposive sample (Patton, 2002) and evolving process of identifying themes within a particular context (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and one of the properties of content analysis is that many words of the text are classified into much smaller content categories (Weber, 1990, Burnard, 1996). Particularly, Satu Elo & Helvi Kyngas (2008) uses the word 'category' for literature. All these elements have shaped the content analysis in the purview of literary studies to explore multi-dimensional approach of the texts investigating the linguistic, affective, cognitive, social, cultural and historical significance.

Procedure of Qualitative Content Analysis

Researchers regard content analysis as a flexible method for analyzing text data (Cavanagh, 1997). Albeit it gives various approaches to study the qualitative data/textual details, the flexibility enables the researcher to choose the specific method based on the theoretical and substantive interests of the researcher include ethnography, grounded theory, thematic content analysis, and semiotics. Research using QCA focuses on the characteristics of language as communication with attention to the content or contextual meaning of the text (Budd, Thorp, & Donohew, 1967).

There are three distinct approaches in content analysis: conventional – coding categories are derived directly from data; directed – analysis starts with a theory or the existing findings as guiding principles for initial codes; and summative – involves counting and comparisons and

mostly number-based. Irrespective of any approach to be employed in the study, it is mandatory to develop categories/code/theme for analysis.

Excavation of Themes

Identifying themes and subthemes are important for social science research. Morris Opler (1945) saw of discovering of themes as a key step in analyzing cultures. Although the researchers use different words extracting data like ‘theme’; ‘code’; and ‘category’, the social scientists talk about the linkage of the different terms. For example, Miles and Huberman (1994) call it ‘codes’, Strauss and Corbin (1990) called them as concepts, Dey (1993) as labels, grounded theorists like Glaser and Strauss (1967) referred as categories and Krippendorff (1980) as ‘thematic units.’

Gery W. Ryan and H. Russell Bernard (2003) give the reason for discovering themes in qualitative data telling that the researcher tries to describe, to compare and to explain. It is possible to distil words into several categories and it is believed that when classified into same categories words, phrases and the like share the same meaning (Cavanagh, 1997).

Gery W. Ryan and H. Russell Bernard (2003) tell us about the two importance sources where the themes could be extracted. The themes come both from the data (an inductive approach) and from the investigator’s prior theoretical understanding of the phenomenon under study (an a priori approach). Further they explain how this ‘priori approach’ can be used to identify the themes: “ *A priori* themes come from the characteristics of the phenomenon being studied; from already agreed on professional definitions found in literature reviews; from local, commonsense constructs; and from researchers’ values, theoretical orientations, and personal experiences.” Normally themes are abstract constructs deeply rooted in the form of different expressions found in texts, images, sounds and objects. The act of discovering themes is what grounded theorists call open coding and what classic content analysts call qualitative analysis (Berelson, 1952) or latent coding (Shapiro and Markoff, 1997). With this background content analysis can be defined on the ground of literary studies ‘a qualitative research method for the subjective interpretation of content of the text with its context by a systematic classification process of identifying themes.’

Inductive and Deductive Approaches

Inductive and Deductive are the two approaches used widely to study the data in content analysis. Which of these is used can be determined based on the purpose of the study. For example, the phenomenon taken for the research has no former knowledge or the knowledge is fragmented then inductive approach is recommended (Lauri & Kyngas, 2005) and the deductive approach is based on an earlier theory or model. In a nutshell inductive data moves the specific to general and in the deductive approach it moves from the general to the specific (Burns & Grove, 2005).

Both inductive and deductive analysis processes have got three stages to get completed:

1. Preparation, organizing and reporting. The Preparation stage begins with determining the unit of analysis (McCain, 1988). The researcher must know what to analyze in what detail and this unit of analysis can be a word or a theme (Polit & Beck, 2004) but that should not lead to fragmentation. However it is not necessary that it ought to consist of more than one sentence which makes the analysis process difficult and challenging as it contains several meanings (Catanzaro, 1988). Robson (1993) offered solution that research question helps to determining the unit of analysis which can be a letter, word, sentence, portion of pages o words, the number of participants in discussion or the time used for discussion.

Inductive Content Analysis

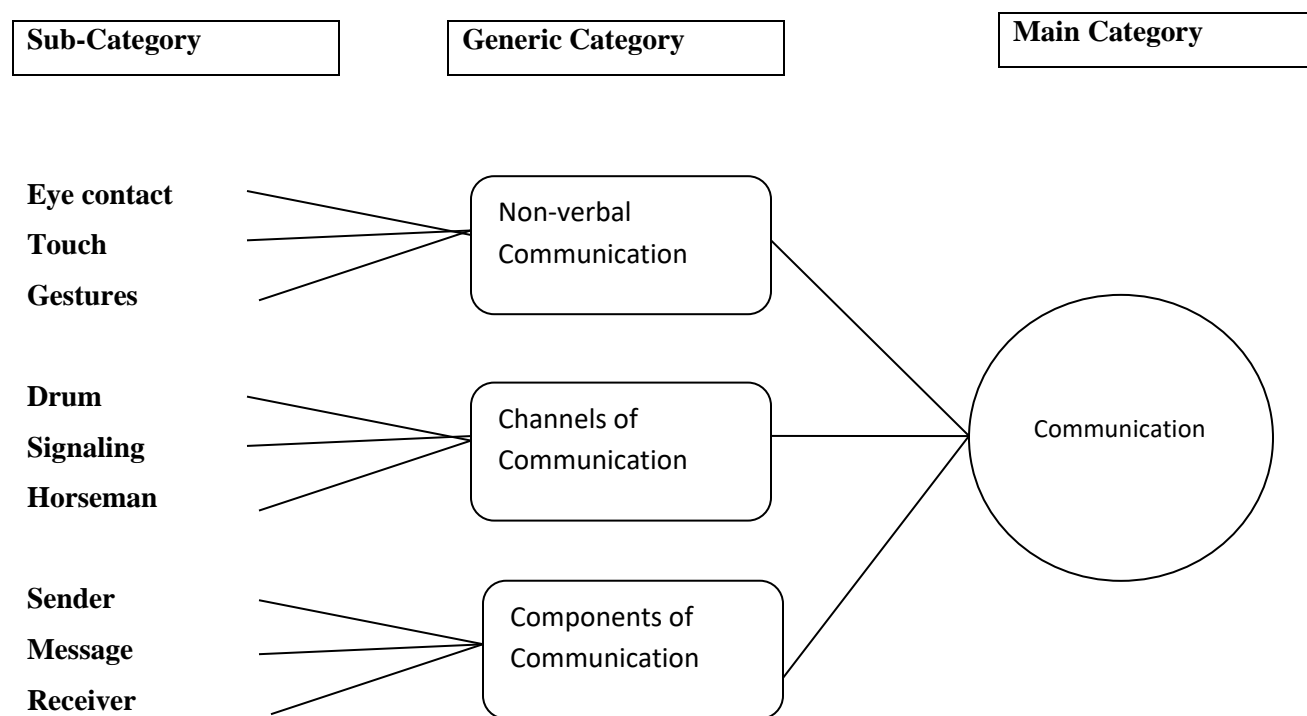
When it is decided to go for inductive analysis, the first step is to organize the qualitative data that included open coding, creating categories and abstraction. Open coding is that the research picks out some of the headings that are written in the texts while reading it and grouping of all the headings after careful considerations especially to treat those data/headings ‘belong’ to the same categories. Burnard (1991) tells that categories are freely generated at this stage. Further the categories are grouped into higher order headings (McCain, 1988, Burnard, 1991). Abstraction means formulating a general description of the research topic through generating categories (Robson, 1993). For example grouping of all data/headings will lead to form sub-categories and sub-categories are formed as generic category and generic categories are grouped as main categories (Dey, 1993, Robson, 1993). An example of the abstraction process is shown

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in figure 1 using inductive content analysis has been used for example in studies of ‘Literature as Communication.’



Deductive Content Analysis

Deductive approach has been employed to retest existing data in a new context (Catanzaro, 1988) involving to test categories, concepts, models or hypotheses (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Once deductive content analysis is chosen, the first step is to develop a categorization matrix and to code the data according to the categories. This approach is based on earlier work such as theories, models, mind maps and literature reviews (Polit & Beck, 2004) and Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) and the choice of method depends on the aim of the study (Catanzaro, 1988, Robson, 1993, and Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

Reliability and Validity

The use of reliability and validity are common in quantitative research as it is rooted with positivist perspective. This does not mean reliability and validity are not required for qualitative content analysis. As there are many ways of seeing and interpreting the data/text, how do the

investigators know that the themes that are been identified by them are valid? Gery W. Ryan and H. Russell Bernard (2003) tells that there is no ultimate demonstration of validity. Albeit some researchers suggest taking up inter-coder reliability for checking validity again it leaves for a room to discuss how far a naturalistic approach with ‘subjective interpretation’ could be validated? IN the light of literary studies, textual details require multi-dimensional reading and methodology is not applied to the text rather it is implied in the text. Here the researcher surrenders himself to the text and he/she goes after the ‘text’ and more so allows the text to unfurl the array of meanings it springs out.

Krippendorff (1980) provides three types of reliability applicable to content analysis: stability, reproducibility and accuracy. Stability, also known as intra observer reliability, is the weakest form of reliability when used alone and is a design that asks for a coder to code the same set at two different times, allowing for inconsistencies to be examined. Reproducibility, also known as inter-observer reliability, is a stronger form and uses multiple coders to code the same data set independently to illuminate inconsistencies. Accuracy, which is the strongest form of reliability, compares coding of the data set to some known standard.

Conclusion

Content analysis as method enables the researcher to systematically go for meaning reading of the texts/content. As Becker and Lissmann (1973) suggests there are two different levels of content: themes and main ideas of the texts as primary content; context information as latent content. Without rash quantification, the themes could evolved as Grey W. Ryan suggested developing themes from review of literature; characteristics of phenomenon beings studies; already agreed-upon professional definition and above all personal experience of the researcher with the subject matter. The procedures of qualitative content analysis start with identifying the themes based on research question for analysis using inductive or deductive approaches and interpretation requires multi-dimensional holistic approach as the text unfurls various meanings when it engages in social communication. In checking of reliability, there is no readymade and code of principles for data analysis. Hoskins & Mariano (2004) tells that each inquiry is unique and distinctive and the inferences depend on the skills, insights, analytic abilities and style of the

investigator. However, the researcher needs to demonstrate a link between the results and the data (Polit & Beck, 2004) to substantiate for the methods employed in the research.

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