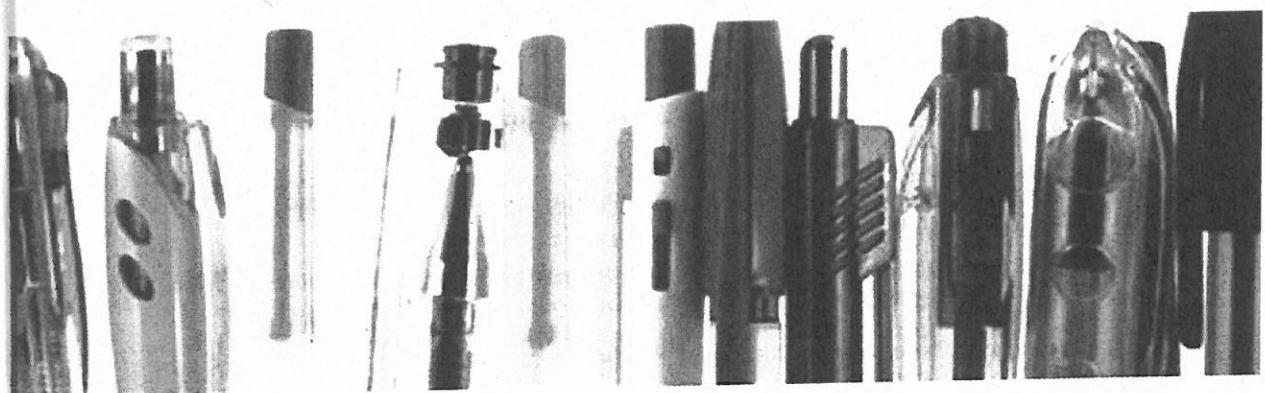


The SAGE Handbook of
**Qualitative Data
Analysis**



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Hermeneutics and Objective Hermeneutics

Andreas Wernet

HERMENEUTICS – FROM EXEGESIS TO DIALOGUE

Hermeneutics as the art of understanding has its origin in the problem of exegesis. And as the basic point of reference of exegesis is the text, hermeneutics initially is *textual exegesis* (Ricoeur, 2004 [1969]). It deals with the question of the ‘true meaning’ of texts. This strong textual orientation clearly accounts to the fact that the authors of antique and sacred, religious texts (to mention the historically most important objects of exegesis) are not in reach. They cannot be questioned whether the interpretation of their texts (see Willig, Chapter 10, this volume) corresponds to their intentions (Baumann, 1978).

This scriptural orientation finally comes to an end with the hermeneutic conceptions of Schleiermacher and Dilthey. Their interest is not a philological one, but a philosophic interest in the question of understanding as such. For Dilthey, the distinction between the natural sciences and the ‘*Geisteswissenschaften*’ is

built upon the aim of ‘understanding’ in the field of human affairs in contrast to the search for ‘explanations’ of natural phenomena. Hermeneutics no longer only deals with the narrow topic of textual understanding but widens to the question of understanding as a fundamental principle of human action and everyday life encounters.

Philosophical hermeneutics seeks to formulate a theoretical concept of understanding as a basic principle of the constitution of the human world and as a necessity of scientific investigation of this world (Grondin, 1994). The idea of the one and only adequate interpretation is rejected in favour of a notion of understanding that emphasizes the role of tradition, prejudice and different subjective horizons (Freeman, 2008). The hermeneutical approach is a biased one. The process of interpretation therefore involves a ‘self-examination’ of the interpreter. Interpretation is no longer seen as the result of a distanced view of a scientific interpreter that leads to an unbiased understanding, but as a dialogue, in which different perspectives meet.

It is the encounter, the 'hermeneutic experience', which leads to a fusion of horizons (Gadamer, 2011 [1960]).

It should be quite clear that philosophical hermeneutics, despite its important contributions to a theory of understanding and interpretation, does not provide methods of interpretation in the narrower sense of data analysis in qualitative empirical research. The several approaches of qualitative research that refer to hermeneutics rather stand in close relationship to phenomenology and sociology of knowledge (Soeffner, 2004; Alfred Schutz and Karl Mannheim are the most important theorists in these fields – see Eberle, Chapter 13, and Bohnsack, Chapter 15, this volume). Nevertheless the qualitative paradigms of phenomenology, interpretivism and social constructionism (as three of the 'five qualitative approaches to inquiry' suggested by Creswell, 2007) more or less refer to certain concepts of philosophical hermeneutics, for example the hermeneutic circle, the importance of fore-conceptions or the significance of subjective experience.

project was to study the 'natural' interaction of family members. But the research setting confronted the researchers with the fact that a naturalistic approach to family interaction has to fail, because the presence of researchers deeply influences the reality they are studying. This experience of the sheer impossibility of grasping family interaction in an authentic way contrasted with the experience that audio recording of interaction nevertheless preserved the particular characteristics of a concrete family interaction. This led to a basic theoretical and methodological concept: in its varying interactions a family is still identifiable. There must be a structure operating beyond the strategies of 'impression management' (Goffman, 1959), which does not allow a family to hide its identity. And this structure can be disclosed by a detailed study of records of interaction. This was the starting point of conceptualizing qualitative empiric research as a reconstruction of the meaning of texts. Over the years objective hermeneutics has developed into a highly influential method of qualitative data analysis with a wide range of research contributions in nearly every thematic field.¹

OBJECTIVE HERMENEUTICS

In the field of these hermeneutically influenced research approaches, objective hermeneutics plays a specific role. It takes up the older tradition of textual hermeneutics in a radical reference to the *text* as the object of data analysis. There is no method in the field of qualitative research that is bound so strictly to the text as the central point of reference of hermeneutic inquiry.

The method of objective hermeneutics was developed in the 1970s by the German sociologist Ulrich Oevermann. To give a first insight into the central features of this method it is helpful to bring to mind the research context in which objective hermeneutics was developed. This was a research project concerned with the interaction process in families based on participating observance of families and audio records of family interaction. The aim of this

SOME GENERAL REMARKS ON BASIC METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

The basic theoretical orientation of objective hermeneutics is based on structuralistic theory. The psychology of Jean Piaget, the ethnology of Claude Lévi-Strauss and the grammar theory of Noam Chomsky are central theoretical references. Their interest in social reality as based on meaning is focused neither on description nor on the subjective experiences or intentions of actors. In accordance with this approach the main interest of objective hermeneutics in meaning (in the sense of 'structure of meaning') is to reveal the *latent* meaning of utterances and its relation to the intentions (manifest meaning) of actors. This difference between manifest and latent meaning, similar to the difference between

manifest and latent functions, formulated by Robert K. Merton (Merton, 1968) and to the difference between the manifest topic of a dream and its latent idea (Freud, 2001a [1900]; 2001b [1900–1]; 2001c [1915–16]), is of great importance for the methodological point of view of objective hermeneutics. In order to guard against misunderstandings, the aim of objective hermeneutics is not just to reveal the latent meaning of an actor's speech; it is to reconstruct the relations between the manifest intentions and the latent meaning of utterances (Oevermann, 1987: 438). The social object of this method is not the meaning of action, lying beyond an actor's consciousness and his or her intentions, but the differences, tensions and even contradictions between intentions and the latent meaning of action.

Objective hermeneutics stands in the German tradition of sociology of language (Gerhardt, 1988: 34). The world (of meaning) is represented by texts.² The empirical fundament of the reconstruction of latent meaning structures is a *fixed text as a precise record of interaction*. As Oevermann argues, there is no other access to meaning than through symbolic representation (Oevermann, 1986). Meaning only occurs in its symbolic form. And a method of reconstruction of meaning therefore has to rely on texts. To claim validity (see Barbour, Chapter 34, this volume), the interpretation process needs a fixed record as a basis of scientific dispute.

These few remarks help to understand the characterization of this method as 'objective'. It points out to the principle claim of validity. It does not mean that objective hermeneutics suggests that its interpretations achieve absolute or final truth or a non-biased viewpoint. It only means that it highly values the possibility of controlling interpretations by the scientific community.³ Without a fixed record, this control is impossible. The designation of the method as hermeneutic points less to the scientific conception of understanding but more to the conception of a method of understanding as a method of analysing texts (see the introductory paragraph). The

difference between manifest and latent meaning follows up the claim of classic hermeneutics to understand 'the utterer better than he understands himself' (Schleiermacher – see Smith, 2007: 4).

Finally we want to point out that Oevermann characterizes his method as a method to reconstruct case-structures (*Fallstrukturrekonstruktion*). The term 'case' – in general dependent on the methodological background in which it is embedded (Ragin and Becker, 1992: 4) – is used in objective hermeneutics in a special manner. The notion of 'case' is rooted in the structural concept that a particular phenomenon (the case)⁴ cannot be seen as an isolated event, but as a variation of a general structure. This model can be divided into two further assumptions: (1) A case is not only an expression of a subjective or individual social constellation, but also an expression of general structures. (2) These general structures cannot be studied as such. They do not appear beyond or outside of cases. The empirical path to generality leads through the study of the particular case. Therefore, the reconstruction of the structure of a case allows two directions of generalization. First, a case appears as a token of a type. It represents a special and insofar typical disposition for solving a certain problem. Second, this special and typical solution is only one way of reacting to a general problem. To give an example, according to Parsons the basic problem of the modern, nuclear family interaction lies in the dissolution of the family of origin and its replacement by a foundation of new, nuclear families ('the process of selfliquidation of each particular nuclear family' – Parsons, 1964: 74). Every family has to handle this process of dissolution and foundation. And every family is an outcome of this process. But every family has to find its own way to solve this problem. In examining families, we can formulate types of solutions of this problem (e.g. the centripetal and centrifugal mode of detachment; Stierlin, 1977) in the same manner, as we can formulate an empirical-based general theory of dissolution and foundation of families.

RULES

(Inter)action is based on social rules. Social action emerges in line with these rules, and the interpretation of the meaning of action is only possible by recourse to our knowledge of rules. The rule concept constitutes a link between object and method. On the one hand it concerns the constitution of social action; on the other hand it represents the key issue of the methodically guided reconstruction of social action.

The concept of rule differs from the concept of convention as well as from the concept of knowledge. Whereas conventions define social action as conforming (resp. deviant), rules define the horizon of action alternatives and the *meaning* of these alternatives. As a simple example, the modalities of greeting can be seen as conventions that define in which situations it is adequate or not to greet one another. When boarding an airliner, we know that it is expected to greet (or to greet back) the members of the crew awaiting the passengers. And we know that it is unusual to greet all the passengers we meet. Behind these conventions there are operating rules that define the social consequences of greeting or not greeting. In a situation in which greeting is expected, not greeting may be a deviation; but it may also be a meaningful action that shows the other – that ego is not interested in social exchange. The possibility to do so and the fact that this action has specific consequences are only given by rules of action.

This example also shows that conventions and rules stand in different relation to knowledge. Conventions belong to common knowledge and to our expectations of everyday life. Rules generate action by ‘tacit knowledge’. They are not consciously applied by actors. Like linguistic rules – as with Chomsky’s concept of linguistic competence – rules in general enable the actor to create meaningful action.

A very interesting implication of this concept concerns the question of validity. How can we identify rules and how can we know whether the identified rules are operating? Oevermann points out that rules according to

the competence concept can only be examined and reconstructed by relying on them and by presuming their prevalence. According to Oevermann, this applies to the following types of rules: (1) the universal and language-specific rules of linguistics; (2) the rules of communicative or illocutionary competence (universal pragmatics); and (3) the universal rules of cognitive and moral competence (Oevermann et al., 1979: 387). These types of rules can be considered universal insofar as their validity is ineluctable. Criticism of the material content of these rules must always utilize its validity beforehand. For instance, I can only criticize the adequacy of a linguistic judgement utilizing the validity of linguistic rules.

In addition there are several types of rules with restricted scope and extent: rules that apply only in specific social classes or milieus and rules that change in time (Oevermann, 1986: 22ff.). Because the validity of interpretation depends on the validity of rules, we have to prove the validity of the rules that the analysis is based on. In the process of interpretation, on some occasions there may remain an uncertainty in this question (see Willig, Chapter 10, this volume). It is important to accept that and to be frank about this uncertainty rather than to hide it.

In order to avoid these uncertainties the privileged type of rule drawn upon by the methodical controls of objective hermeneutics are the ineluctable rules we draw on as competent members of society. The objective hermeneutics method aims at basing the interpretation on these rules. The practical interpretative procedures make use of our rule competence.

In this context, special attention is paid to the fact that the validity of an interpretation does not rely on knowledge about or familiarity with the object of research. If, for example, an objective hermeneutic analysis has to interpret a promise, the main interpretative operation will not consist of activating our everyday life experiences – perhaps that promises are often not serious – but to explicate the rule-based implications of a promise, for example the supposition of fulfillment. The rule competence

enabling us to specify clearly 'what a promise is' provides the basis for the establishment of validity in textual interpretation.

The rule concept is of great importance for defending the methodological and epistemological capability of interpretation. Because the interpreter shares the same rules as the object of examination, it is possible to understand the meaning of action. To do so, it is not necessary to reconstruct the operating rules themselves. We do not need grammar theory to understand a sentence and to differentiate between linguistically correct or wrong sentences. In the reconstruction of a case structure we rely on rules and we formulate social theories along with the case, not theories of rules.

STRUCTURE AND HABITUS

Rules do not determine action; they only determine the realm of possible actions. They do not tell the actor what to do; they only constitute a frame of reference to the actor's decisions. These decisions are not a function of the underlying and ineluctable rules but a function of the autonomy of the actor (Oevermann, 1991, uses the term 'autonomy of life-practice'). This autonomy constitutes the subjectivity of action. Without this 'freedom', social action could only be understood as a rule-determined and insofar fixed reality. Processes of change and of subjective variation could not be explained. On the other hand, subjectivity is not the result of sheer contingency. Subjectivity emerges as a structured process of action. We can say that the autonomy of the subject is limited not only by the rule-generated possibilities, but also by its own, self-generated structure. This structure can be conceived of as the identity of the subject or the identity of the case. This identity is formed by the iteration of decision-making by acting in the same way. The reproduction of a case structure seen as its identity can be studied by the fact that in a new situation the subject tends to decide or to act in a similar way. To describe this phenomenon Bourdieu has suggested the

term 'habitus'. He conceived habitus as the 'modus operandi' of a case (dependent on different perspectives on social structure; Bourdieu, 1984 [1979]; see Bohnsack, Chapter 15, this volume).

We refer here to the concept of habitus and 'modus operandi' to point out that this process of the reproduction of a structure is itself a creative process, which cannot be appropriately understood as a reproduction of the same behaviour. It is not the simple repetition of the same action as with mere habits. The shape (*Gestalt*) of action that reproduces a certain structure shows unlimited variations. Therefore the recognition of processes of reproduction of a case structure requires a procedure of reconstruction.

HOW TO DO OBJECTIVE HERMENEUTICS TEXT INTERPRETATION

After having outlined the basic methodological assumptions of objective hermeneutics above, the following paragraphs will be concerned with the methodical procedures of text analysis and with the principles that the interpretation has to follow.

The basic tool of objective hermeneutics interpretation is the "thought experiment" to formulate different stories, that is different contexts, in which the text to interpret could occur as a well-formed utterance. This procedure helps to reveal the latent implications of an utterance – its objective meaning structure. As an example of this first step of analysis Maiwald considers the utterance A: 'Where have you been?' (2005: 8). Maiwald comes to the following conclusion: 'it implies that the recipient should have been there or at least the speaker should have known that the recipient was not where he should have been, and, in general, that the speaker claims to have a right to know' (2005: 8). If we imagine an answer of the recipient, like B: 'Why do you want to know?', the importance of the foregoing analysis seems to be quite clear. Now we can see that the interaction deals with the question of

the relationship between A and B. B's counter-question doubts that A has the right to ask where B has been. Only if we push forward the interpretation to the level of the objective meaning structure can we reveal the dynamics of the relationship that lie behind the simple game of question and counter-question.

This basic procedure of the reconstruction of meaning in detail is based on the principles of interpretation that I will outline in the following. These principles are (I) to exclude the context, (II) to take the literal meaning of a text seriously, (III) sequentiality, and (IV) extensivity.

Exclude the Context

The methodical principle to exclude the context before a text is interpreted may seem surprising at first. Why should a method which claims to understand texts not make use of the context? Does the con-text, as the word itself suggests, not add relevant information to the text? Is it not sometimes even necessary to know in which context an action or a speech act has taken place to understand its meaning?

These are some of the objections that the first principle of objective hermeneutics text interpretations frequently evokes. To a certain extent they are based on a misunderstanding, as the context of a text is not completely excluded in an interpretation. As a matter of fact objective hermeneutics even systematically contextualizes its interpretations. What the principle to exclude the context in interpretations demands, though, is to interpret a sequence separately without its context *before* taking into account the kind of situation in which a sentence was uttered. The contextualization follows the context-free interpretation of a text.

This methodical proceeding helps to differentiate analytically between the meaning of a text as such and its meaning in a certain context. This is important as it forces the interpreter systematically to contrast a latent and a manifest level of meaning in every text sequence. Following the principle to exclude

the context before starting to interpret a text makes sure, for example, that ambiguous meanings of expressions that are overlooked in everyday conversations because the context of an utterance is taken into account are exposed in an interpretation.

To give an example, imagine a couple sitting at the kitchen table eating pudding and the woman saying to her husband: 'You can take some more if you like.'⁵

From the context it is quite clear what the woman wants to say and even if the sentence sounds a bit odd there hardly seems to be a great demand for an in-depth analysis of her utterance. A context-free interpretation, though, can show that the exact words the woman uses in the example to tell her husband he can take some more imply that she is treating her husband as a child who cannot express his own wishes.

The methodical operation by which this can be revealed is to formulate contexts in which the utterance 'You can take some more if you like' could be said absolutely naturally. This would be the case in the following situation. A young boy visiting a friend's house for the first time after school has finished his meal and shyly looks at the dishes obviously still hungry. His friend's mother says, 'You can take some more if you like.'

In the next step in context-free interpretations one has to make sure that every other situation in which a speech act could occur naturally would be structurally similar to the concrete example that one has formulated so far. If this is the case then one tries to identify the essential characteristics of the type of situation connected to a speech act.

In the case of the speech act 'You can take some more if you like' mainly two conditions have to be met in order for the speech act to be appropriate: a person saying 'You can take some more if you like' (a) has to be sure that whoever is addressed actually wants some more. The speech act is *not giving information*, it is, rather, *interpreting someone's behaviour as an expression of an unuttered wish*. In order for such an interpretation of someone's behaviour not to be inadequate (b) there have to be

specific reasons why the person addressed does not dare to express their wish for more themselves. In the example above the mother for instance has reason to assume that the boy is too shy to ask for more because he is at someone else's house for the first time.

From this context-free interpretation it becomes clear now that the woman in the above formulated example telling her husband that he can take some more is actually insinuating that her husband, like a child, would like some more but dare not ask. And as she is talking to a grown-up man and there are no specific reasons why her husband might not dare to ask for more, she is further implying that he is not able to express his wishes in a grown-up manner. So, to summarize, she is infantilizing her husband.

The example should illustrate that beyond the obvious meaning of a text sequence a text also has a latent level of meaning, which is revealed only if one analyses a text context-free before taking into account its context. The differentiation between a context-free meaning of a text sequence and its meaning in a specific situation enables interpreters to detect a latent level of meaning which would be overlooked if a text were explained through the context.

The essential operation that objective hermeneutics uses to arrive at the latent level of meaning is to sketch out contexts in which the text sequences one is about to analyse could appear naturally as a well-formed utterance. It is important here to note that the formulation of contexts should take absolutely no notice of the contexts in which the speech acts were actually spoken. On the contrary, it is absolutely vital only to consider whether, in the diverse contexts one has tried to creatively sketch out, a speech act could occur naturally or not. If one tries to look for contexts close to the factual context of a text there is a great risk that the latent meaning structure of a text sequence is overlooked.

Our example shows quite clearly that a scientific interpretation does not necessarily conform to the self-understanding of the actors. We may assume that the woman in our example would not agree with the thesis of her

'infantilizing her husband'. This is a simple implication of the concept of latent meaning. The dynamic of infantilizing, reconstructed in only one utterance, is not in the consciousness of the actor. The outcomes of an interpretation can therefore be rather disturbing for the actors.

Take the Literal Meaning of a Text Seriously

Just like the exclusion of the context, the second principle of objective hermeneutics interpretations – to take seriously the literal meaning of a text – forces an interpreter to concentrate strictly on the text in interpretations. While the exclusion of the context serves to eliminate attempts to clarify the meaning of a text by using context information, the obligation to focus on the literal meaning of a text demands from an interpreter not to clarify the text itself by smoothing out expressions that seem to suggest that a person wanted to say something different from what they actually said.

The most prominent interpretative approach which is based on the principle of taking seriously the literal meaning of a text is the 'parapraxis' ('Freudian slip'). Here, the tension between what somebody intentionally wanted to say and the literal meaning of what was actually said is quite obvious. If, for example, an assistant wants to toast his boss by saying '*Ich fordere Sie auf, auf das Wohl unseres Chefs anzustoßen*' (Let us drink a toast to the health of our boss), but he says actually '*Ich fordere Sie auf, auf das Wohl unseres Chefs aufzustoßen*' (Let us burp to the health of our boss) (Freud, 2001c [1915–16]: 32), the mistake is obvious to everyone as well as the rough meaning of the mistake. The positive and complimentary action (*anstoßen* = to drink a toast) is substituted by a negative and discourteous action (*aufstoßen* = to burp). The slip of the tongue of the assistant shows an ambivalent attitude towards his boss; a tension between acknowledgement and disregard.

The example of parapraxis helps one to understand the difference between scientific and everyday interpretation. It seems to be

quite clear that the everyday attitude is not interested in the literal meaning. If not completely disregarded, the literal meaning is treated like a joke and the potential serious implications of the utterance are neutralized by laughter. But the laughter itself shows that the disinterest is not a function of cognition – if there were no idea of the literal meaning, there would be no reason to laugh – but a function of the pragmatic of everyday social exchange.

The scientific interest in the literal meaning is in sharp contrast to the action attitude of social exchange. The researcher becomes a ‘disinterested observer’ (Schutz, 1971: 36ff.). This change of perspective is of crucial importance for objective hermeneutics text analysis. The difficulty is not located on the level of knowledge or cognition. It lies in the ability to look at interaction in a different way, to find and to allow such interpretations that everyday or common-sense attitudes would consider inadequate.

Objective hermeneutics interpretations basically focus on what was said and not on what somebody might have wanted to say. This also applies to text sequences in which there does not appear to be such a great gap between the latent and the manifest meaning of an utterance as in parapraxes. Metaphorically speaking, objective hermeneutics treats every text sequence which shows a difference between intention and literal expression as a Freudian slip by never trying to normalize expressions to make them more familiar and therefore easier to interpret. Instead an interpretation always has to be grounded in the literal meaning of a text.

Of course the principle to take seriously the literal meaning of a text is not relevant all the time. Very often the literal meaning of a text does not raise the question whether a person wanted to say something different or not. If a chairperson opens a meeting by saying ‘I would like to welcome everybody to this meeting’, there is no difference between intention and speech. Only if the chairperson opens the session by saying ‘I would like to close the meeting’ (yet another famous example of a Freudian slip; Freud, 2001c [1915–16]: 34)

does the question of the meaning of this difference occur. When this question arises the second principle of objective hermeneutics interpretation becomes important. It reminds the interpreter to stick to the meaning of the text instead of focusing on what someone might have wanted to say intentionally. Only if this is done can a latent and a manifest level of meaning be systematically differentiated and used in case reconstructions, so the main aim of objective hermeneutics interpretations, the reconstruction of the ‘latent meaning structures’ in texts, can be achieved.

There is another reason why interpretations should strictly be based on the literal meaning of a text. It makes sure that interpretations are done in accordance with a fundamental scientific standard: only the text provides a solid database in which interpretations can be criticized and controlled by others while the accuracy of assumptions about what someone possibly wanted to say cannot be checked.

Focusing on the literal meaning of a text therefore solves a problem the interpretative methods that rely on subjective impressions about the meaning of texts are confronted with. While subjective reactions are not always absolutely comprehensible the literal meaning of a text is determined by grammatical rules und the rules of speech acts. This is one reason for the ‘objective’ character of objective hermeneutics interpretations.

That of course does not mean to say that the intuitive impressions people have when reading texts are without value. Without intuition no interpretation and no discovery would be possible. What objective hermeneutics merely claims is that only when an interpretation can be unfolded stringently from a database, which is the same for everyone, can an interpretation be said to be intersubjectively comprehensible.

Sequentiality

In the praxis of text interpretation the principle of sequentiality merely demands the text to be analysed line by line (Flick, 2006: 335). The principle of sequentiality is deeply rooted in the methodology of objective hermeneutics. It marks a great difference to

qualitative research methods, which search through texts for certain recurring elements.

The main argument according to the constitutive theory of objective hermeneutics for the necessity to interpret a text sequentially is that structures generally unfold in a process of reproduction. In a certain sense objective hermeneutics does not distinguish between structures and processes but claims that structures only exist in the form of their process of reproduction.

Now this process is sequential by nature because the reproduction of a structure occurs in time as a constant choice of options, which are opened up by social rules. At every moment in every situation structures are confronted with possible alternatives of action. It is impossible in the social world not to make choices. The specific characteristic of a specific structure lies in the pattern of its choices.

The term 'sequentiality' therefore does not refer to a mere chronological order of sequences. It points out that structures in the social world are in a constant process of having to choose actions from given alternatives which then again open up new alternatives from which again one has to be chosen and so on.

Oevermann uses the example of greetings again to illustrate the sequential nature of social behaviour (see above). Imagine someone greeting another person on the street with a friendly 'hello'. The person greeted has exactly two possibilities: they can either say 'hello' as well or say nothing at all. The second option cannot be seen as a refusal of a choice but it is the choice to express that one is not interested in an interaction with the greeting person. Neutral social behaviour is thus impossible.

The sequentiality of greeting situations can be generalized. At every moment, even when someone is not interacting with another person, choices have to be made as to how a situation should continue and whatever choice someone makes has a certain meaning determined by social rules. In this ongoing process structures reproduce themselves by a certain systematic of the choices they make.

From this pivotal idea of an identity between structures and their sequential process of reproduction the methodical principle to

interpret texts sequentially can be easily inferred. The sequentiality of interpretations simply follows the sequential process of the reproduction of structures by a line-by-line analysis. The reproduction of a structure cannot show itself in an isolated text sequence. It is instead necessary to follow the choices 'producing' a text. Only if a systematic in a series of choices is identified can one say that a structure was successfully reconstructed.

The principle of sequentiality has pragmatic implications for doing interpretations that need to be sketched out.

First, it raises the question of where to start an interpretation. This question can be answered easily. Although Oevermann recommends commencing at the beginning of a protocol, it is possible to start interpreting a text at whatever sequence one likes. What the principle of sequentiality merely demands is that wherever one starts with an interpretation one has to continue the interpretation with whatever sequence follows. Only then can a full cycle of reproduction be reconstructed.

It is strictly not allowed to 'jump' in the text in order to verify hypotheses, because this would contain the risk of looking only for those sequences that fit one's hypotheses. Especially if an interpretation comes across sequences that are difficult to interpret because their meaning is hard to reconstruct, the principle of sequentiality has to be followed. While avoiding sequences that cannot be smoothly integrated in an interpretation can easily lead to self-fulfilling interpretations, a stubborn sequential interpretation forces the interpreter to ground an interpretation in the text.

To follow the sequential order of texts is, according to experience, especially difficult for interpreters who are not familiar with objective hermeneutics. It may be very tempting to take a look how a text continues or what was said before the sequence one is currently interpreting.

Just like the other principles explained above, the principle of sequentiality forces the interpreter to follow the dynamic of the text itself instead of explaining certain features of texts by referring to other parts of the text or knowledge about the context.

Another pragmatic consequence of the principle of sequentiality is that it makes it necessary to consider how to relate interpretations of following text sequences to each other. In objective hermeneutics the results of interpretations of preceding sequences form what is called the 'inner context' of interpretations. While knowledge about the 'outside' context first has to be strictly excluded, the 'inner context' of interpretations always has to be taken into account. The reason is of course that a meaning of a single text sequence has to be considered as a part of the reproduction process of a structure, which means that it needs to be seen in its sequential position.

Extensivity

The principle of extensivity is probably the most striking characteristic of objective hermeneutics interpretations for someone who is not familiar with the method. Hypotheses about the structure of a case are formulated on small text segments which are analysed in extreme detail. The interpretation goes into depth more than into breadth. Therefore in most research contexts it is impossible to analyse the entire text (the *whole* interview, the *whole* interaction, etc.). This approach frequently provokes the following two objections: (1) As interpretations focus only on small parts of texts it is criticized that objective hermeneutics does not do justice to its database. This objection implies that an interpretation of a text should consider the text as a whole. (2) The meticulous and in-depth analysis even of expressions that seem to be of secondary importance is often confronted with the criticism that objective hermeneutics disproportionately attaches importance to negligible parts of texts instead of concentrating on statements that are seemingly more important in a text with regard to their content.

Concerning the first objection, the theoretical justification of objective hermeneutics for analysing small text segments extensively instead of interpreting whole texts is grounded in the idea that small fragments of a text

always also represent something general of social reality. This idea conforms to the concept of 'totality' which points to the fact that isolated phenomena do not exist in social reality because every utterance is generated by a case structure. So the principle of extensivity is based on the assumption that every segment of a text is characterized by the dialectic of particularity and generality. The particular features of a case structure can be identified as such only against the background of general social phenomena. Even seemingly insignificant text segments point to a social reality beyond the text.

The methodology of objective hermeneutics picks up on this dialectic of particularity and generality by claiming that one cannot act 'outside' of the social world with its rules that attach meaning to every social act. It is, in other words, impossible to act meaninglessly. The meaning of every particular social act protocolled in a text sequence is determined by general social rules.

Insofar as objective hermeneutics is interested not only in the particularity of cases, but also in something general about social reality that expresses itself through the particularity of cases – and there is no other way to capture general social reality than in the form of particular cases – then it is true to say that the particular structure of a case can be reconstructed in every part of a protocol. Because, if interpretations are not restricted to reconstructing the particular meaning of utterances in their specific situations but aim at reaching out for the general structural patterns that are present on the latent level of meaning in every text sequence, then, at least in principle, it does not matter where one starts with an interpretation. Just as the 'habitus' of a person is not limited to certain activities but is a 'modus operandi' that shows itself in every activity the person is engaged in, so does a structure express itself in every text segment. This does not mean of course that in practice there are no prominent text segments to start an interpretation. But wherever one starts with an interpretation one can rely on the fact that it is always the same structure underlying the text.

The second objection concerning the principle of extensivity, that the in-depth analysis of even the seemingly most insignificant text fragments is an unnecessary and uneconomic approach, can be answered with two different arguments.

The first argument corresponds to the importance the text is given through the principle to take seriously the literal meaning as a means to establish a database that allows interpretations that are intersubjectively comprehensible. An interpreter who ignores certain text fragments because of their apparent insignificance will damage his database. In contrast, when every part of a text is included in an interpretation the interpreter has little chance of deforming the meaning of a text by projecting his or her pre-established beliefs about a case. So just like the other principles explained above, the principle of extensivity tries to make sure that interpretations are grounded in the text itself and not in subjective conceptions about a case. Pragmatically this demands that it is forbidden to skip words or even paralinguistic elements, but that one takes one's time to analyze every element of a text patiently. According to experience it can be very costly to rush over seemingly insignificant parts of texts because they can change the meaning of a text sequence dramatically.

This leads us to the second argument justifying the principle of extensivity. While in everyday conversations it is necessary to pay particular attention to the most important information someone is providing with an utterance, an interpretation that is concerned with latent meaning structures has to disengage itself from this everyday perspective. Now to focus on seemingly insignificant elements of a text means to analyse meaningful elements that are not under the conscious control of a speaker. Normally, excluding the case of a Freudian slip, a speaker is fully aware of what the main statement is that he or she wants to make with an utterance. In contrast it is impossible for speakers to overlook the meaningful implications of the more unremarkable parts of their expressions. Consequently, the latent level of meaning can often be more easily detected in the parts of

a text that gain the least attention in everyday conversations. By claiming that every text element is worth analysing, objective hermeneutics therefore systematically accentuates the level of latent meaning in a text.

LIMITATIONS

As we have seen, objective hermeneutics is a pronounced method of text interpretation (see more generally Willig, Chapter 10, this volume). In principle it can be applied to any inquiry focusing on records of interactions as a database. And since in nearly all qualitative research records of interaction are used as data, there is a high potential of methodical combinations in which objective hermeneutics can be used as an additional research instrument.

As a method specializing in text interpretation, objective hermeneutics has not developed a method of fieldwork and of collecting data. Every new research project has to find its own strategy of gaining access to the field and to the data. Objective hermeneutics does not provide methodical rules that instruct inexperienced colleagues on how to organize fieldwork and to collect data. This lack of rules and techniques of research organization is due to the concept of an open, non-standardized process of research, which has to be newly adjusted for every research question.⁶ Even such simple questions like 'how many cases should I examine?', 'how many sequences should be considered?', etc., cannot be answered in general. From the standpoint of an inexperienced researcher planning a research project this lack will, of course, be considered as a deficiency. The researcher will therefore need to get advice from more experienced researchers, look for cooperation in a research group or inform him- or herself by reading empirical studies that are similar to his or her own research interest.

Another limitation concerns the strong bias on language analysis. There is no doubt that Oevermann claims the fundamental possibility to analyse any type of record of action: pictures, photographs, videos, etc. Since meaning structures find their expression in

every form of symbolic representation, language is only one type of representation among others. This assumption implies that there is no research context in the field of reconstruction of meaning that necessitates extralinguistic data. The reconstruction of a case structure is always possible in restricting it to its linguistic articulation. Even if we follow this methodological position, we can claim that the analysis of extralinguistic data could be at least helpful. Although many researchers in objective hermeneutics have analysed such data (especially photographs and pictures), there is not yet a clear instruction or guidance on 'how to do' so. The principles of interpretation outlined in this chapter cannot be applied one-to-one to extralinguistic analysis. It is an important desideratum of further methodical development. Especially, the application of objective hermeneutics for the analysis of videos needs to be methodically developed because video protocols currently play a vital role in the discovery of new fields and approaches in qualitative inquiry.

Finally we want to stress the special character of insights generated by objective hermeneutics. We pointed out that objective hermeneutics is not interested in the description of social reality. We should keep in mind that inquiries that aim at collecting social facts or producing inside descriptions of social contexts cannot benefit from objective hermeneutics. The mere gathering of information about social reality is not the concern of this method.

Objective hermeneutics is not limited to special objects or topics of research. It can be applied to any formation of the social world. It is also not bound in a strict sense to sociology. It can be applied in historical, psychological, educational (and so on) contexts of research as well. The limitation of this method does not lie in the object. It lies in the questions that this method poses, in the answers it can give and the theoretical constructs that can be derived from the empirical analysis. As mentioned above, a special interest and capacity of objective hermeneutics lies in the reconstruction of tensions and contradictions of manifest and latent meaning. This may be seen as a limitation of the

method. If, for example, we are interested in the topics that families talk about and if we only want to note and to collect these topics, or if we are only interested in the contents of professional ethics, objective hermeneutics is obviously the wrong method. Only if we are interested in latent dimensions of family interaction or if we are interested in unconscious motives of professional work and its tacit ethics is objective hermeneutics a suitable empirical method.

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NOTES

1. The website of AG Objektive Hermeneutik (<http://www.agoh.de/cms/>) gives an insight into the various fields of inquiry of objective hermeneutics.
2. *The World as Text (Die Welt als Text)* is the title of a prominent book in German on the method of objective hermeneutics, edited by Detlef Garz and Klaus Kraimer in 1994 (Suhrkamp).
3. In clear contrast to the concept of group consensus, as is often associated with hermeneutics (see e.g. Willis, 2007: 302).
4. This means that the question 'What is the case?' cannot be answered by merely pointing at concrete subjects. By way of illustration see Silverman (2005: 126).
5. I thank Thomas Wenzl for suggesting this example.
6. According to Oevermann, the praxis of interpretation is an 'art' (*Kunstlehre* – Reichertz, 2004).

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