

Content Analysis and Other analytical Methods: A General comparative Review

تحليل المحتوى والمناهج التحليلية الأخرى: عرض عام مقارن

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Abstract (English)

Research methods serve as the main knowledge base in both natural and human scientific research. These methods are categorized into various types, according to different indicators, particularly in media and communication science; such as field research (audience research) and analytical research, each of which employs methods of the same nature. Focusing on analytical methods, our literature review revealed a plethora of comparable methods, including Thematic, Meta-analysis, Linguistic, Textual, Documentary, Discursive, Semiological, and Conversational analyses. Engaging in discussions with students and colleagues, we explored the distinctions among these methods. This paper provides a concise comparative overview of content analysis alongside several analytical methods.

Keywords: Research methods; Content analysis; Analytical methods; Comparison.

ملخص باللغة العربية

تعتبر مناهج البحث قاعدة معرفية رئيسة في البحوث العلمية. وتصنف هذه المناهج إلى عدة أنواع وفقا لمؤشرات مختلفة، لا سيما في البحوث التحليلية والتي قد تستعمل مناهج من نفس الطبيعة. من خلال التركيز على المناهج التحليلية، كشفت مراجعة الأدبيات المتخصصة عن عدد كبير من المناهج المماثلة، بما في ذلك التحليل الموضوعاتي والتجميحي واللغوي والنصي والوثائقي والخطابي والسيميولوجي والمحادثة. ومن خلال المشاركة في المناقشات مع الطلبة والأساتذة، استكشفتنا الفروق بين تحليل المحتوى وهذه المناهج. تقدم هذه الورقة نظرة عامة مقارنة موجزة لتحليل المحتوى إلى جانب العديد من المناهج التحليلية.

كلمات مفتاحية: مناهج البحث؛ تحليل المحتوى؛ المناهج التحليلية؛ المقارنة.

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1. Introduction

Scientific research methods are the main generator of knowledge, whether used in natural or human scientific research. These research methods can be classified into several types according to different indicators, including those that classify them - especially in information and communication sciences- into field research (audience research) and analytical research, each of which uses methods of the same nature.

In the case of analytical research, students wishing to analysis materials of different nature (media, educational, political, religious, administrative, advertising..) are often asked which analytical

approach is most appropriate for their research, especially about the competence of some common analytical methods in a particular discipline (media content analysis, for example) to analyze a political or religious discourse, administrative document, electronic content... Because sometimes what matters to them is the use of the method, they are used to.

It is noticeable that they are usually confronted with two proposals, the first of which is traditional that adheres literally to the field of original/initial use of the method, but links the nature of the terms used in the title of the work to the method to be used; for example, if the title of the work includes the word discourse, this requires the use of the discourse analysis method. The second proposal is more pragmatic in nature and is in line with contemporary uses of all methods, which almost intersect in their quantitative, qualitative and interdisciplinary dimensions.

This necessitated some clarification through a general review of the analytical methods available in the specialized literature, to clarify what we expected that there were a large number of similar methods to content analysis, and some of them were discussed with some students and colleagues about the differences between them and about which is more appropriate for some of their research projects.

The most important of these analytic methods explored were the following: Thematic, Meta-analysis, Linguistic, Textual, Documentary, Discursive, Semiological, Rhetorical, Ethnographic/Narrative, Conversational, Interactionist, and frame analysis.

The following will be a comparative presentation between the different analytical methods, the reference of which will be the analysis of "media" content compared with the rest of the analyses of linguistic, social and psychological origins, in order to justify a new classification process based on a general content analysis with different procedures.

As a prelude to this comparative presentation, we will define the axis of this work : content analysis.

2. Definition of content analysis

Given the importance of the word "analysis" in the concept of "content analysis", it is worthwhile to begin by defining it, by observing its linguistic origin, which goes back to the Greek word (Análysi/ανάλυση), consisting of "Aná" ("above" or "completely") and "lysi" ("decomposition", "rupture"): analysis then means observing something that decomposes completely or disintegrates into its smallest components. However, this decomposition is not in the literal and obvious sense, but

it is aimed at the idea of a comprehensive and accurate review, whether of an object, material or subject, taking into account even the smallest of its details (Equipo editorial Etecé, 2021). In "Lisan Al-Arab" dictionary (radical: Analyse) (Ibn Manzoor, 1997), the analysis comes in several meanings, including "minimization" and "opening and unravelling the node". These linguistic meanings are similar to the two terminological meanings: disassembly or study (Delliou, 2022, pp. 88-89).

Thus, the concept of "content analysis" can be defined as the deconstructive study of communication materials (letters, texts or discourses) by following a set of interpretive procedures, and based on sometimes quantitative measurement techniques (statistics: based on counting quantitative units), and sometimes qualitative (based on classifying and analyzing qualitative categories). It aims to prepare and process relevant data in the same circumstances in which those communication materials occurred, or the circumstances that may occur for later use.

It is a definition that summarizes many of the previous definitions of many scholars such as "Berelson, Laswell, Kerlinger, Barden, Krippendorff...". The oldest of which -when content analysis was limited to the quantitative dimension- was the definition of "Berelson" (1952, p. 18): It is "a research technique aimed at the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the apparent content of communication".

3. General comparative review: Content analysis versus other analytical methods

The specialized literature consulted, especially those used in this work, indicates that content analysis shares its limitations with the mentioned analytical methods in the introduction. In order to compare it with them, the focus of each one will be determined, with the epistemological background, original field of use, nature of the original analytical material, procedures and elements defined in a comprehensive table.

However, before that, it is worth mentioning an important matter related to the subject of comparison. Some scholar considers the content analysis approach to be quantitative in origin and that its qualitative formula is considered a diagnosis of some qualitative analytical methods with literary and social origins - non-media - mentioned above, that is, the qualitative content analysis is equal to it (equivalent) (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 16).

If considered distinct from them, the difference between content analysis and similar analyses can be summarized as follows.

3.1. Methods of analysis and types of analysis

First, it is necessary to distinguish between *types of methods of analysis and types of analysis*. The latter are mainly divided into two types depending on the nature of quantitative and qualitative data: quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis. In addition to other types classified according to other indicators (field of research, its categories, scope...), the most important of which are: theoretical/applied, structural/formal, comprehensive/partial... analyses. Thus, it can be said that analytical types are one of the applied procedures of analytical methods, noting that any analysis of any kind uses an analytical descriptive network consisting of several elements, but with different labels: categories, units, guides, tools, elements, meanings, groups... qualitative and/or quantitative (see Table 1).

3.2. Thematic analysis and content analysis

In the context of the previous observation, we refer to the relationship of *thematic analysis* to content analysis. Thematic analysis is one of the most common types of analysis contained in specialized literature, especially those related to psychology. It is usually considered a qualitative analysis and one of the most important of these, and may even be considered synonymous with qualitative content analysis –QCA- (Kuckartz, 2019, pp. 181-197), while content analysis can be considered a quantitative and/or qualitative analysis method. Therefore, they share some dimensions of the qualitative data analysis process, with content analysis distinguished from thematic analysis by the fact that the former is a method and not just an analytical type, as it may combine the quantity of analysis and its quality in its applied procedures. The dimensions of its comparison with thematic analysis apply to all methods of analysis with qualitative dimensions, as the epistemological background of the two types of analysis is different: rational positivism versus constructivism/interpretative.

3.3. Meta-analysis and content analysis

About the relationship of *meta-analysis* to content analysis, the reviewer of the specialized literature finds several definitions of meta-analysis (meta-analysis, gathered analysis, second-level analysis...) that is usually topped by the famous definition of the first to use this name -"Glass" (1976, p. 3)- in the literature of the humanities (among teachers) : meta-analysis refers to "the statistical analysis of a large collection of analysis results from individual studies for the purpose of integrating their findings". Glass called it on the same page "*Analysis of analyses*".

Based on this last label (analysis of analyses), it can be said that content analysis and meta-analysis are not of the same nature in terms of the analytical level "macro and micro", as the meta-analysis is of a macro-type so that its analysis can include several research that used the content analysis method or other scientific analysis methods. In contrast, it can be argued that they share that their respective beginnings were quantitative before, at different periods, they expanded to include qualitative practices.

3.4. Documentary analysis and content analysis

Documentary/document analysis can be defined as a process aimed at representing the content of documents in a different form from the original in order to facilitate access to them or locate them in a subsequent study. It differs fundamentally from content analysis in that the documenter often works on documents/texts –in their non-exhaustive concept of oral communications, images and videos-, while the content analyst works on all types of communicative messages. Documentary analysis is mainly conducted by categorization and thematic indexing in library science in particular, while thematic categorical analysis is only one of the methods of content analysis. The goal of documentary analysis is to intensively represent information to be stored and accessed, while content analysis attempts to reach conclusions or interpretations in a given reality through communicative messaging (Delliou, 2022, p. 184).

In contrast, there are those who believe that documentary analysis in its broad sense includes not only content analysis, but also analysis of the structure or design of the text and how the elements work, often as part of a larger context (historical and cultural), while content analysis shares its epistemological origins with documentary analysis, which in both cases leads to quantify the analysis results.

On the other hand, documentary analysis -due to its linguistic dimension- has a functional relationship with discourse analysis because the content of documents is in fact speeches recorded in a specific medium. Therefore, the methodology used in discourse analysis can be considered a starting point and a pillar for identifying the primary and secondary aspects in the text of any document (Delliou, 2022, p. 187).

3.5 Linguistic analysis and content analysis

Linguistic analysis, according to "de Saussure" (1980) and "Bardin" (1996) (Abela, 2001, p. 9), attempts to describe the rules of language functioning through the analysis of signs – or practices in the case of social analysis of language –, while content analysis (C.A.) is concerned with linguistic and non-linguistic practices and their apparent and latent meanings. However, C.A. coincides –in its

qualitative form— with linguistic analysis —originally qualitative— by virtue of their interpretive premises. Noting that linguistic analysis is sometimes called the *linguistic analysis of texts*, and it is mentioned among what some scholars call the *Method of convergent linguistic approaches*, which is characterized by its lack of methodological rigor (Marchese, 2020, p. 177). It includes the so-called textual analysis and discourse analysis, which will be compared successively with content analysis in the two following topics.

3.6. Textual analysis and content analysis

The main difference between content analysis and *textual analysis* is that content analysis can also be performed on non-textual material. In addition, its analysis may go beyond the content of the text itself to items that lie outside it and enrich its meaning. Textual analysis is a research methodology, with a positivist epistemological background, that involves exploring the content of written text as empirical data by extracting the main topics and statistics from which they emerge. That is, textual analysis requires dividing the text into its component parts in order to read closely and reach conclusions about its context, core themes, and the intentions of its author. In this context, Fürsich (2014, p. 3) believes that the appropriate goal of text analysis is not to reveal the “true” and “only” meaning -even if it is hidden- of the text, but rather to provide a variety of possible readings of the material that it is analyzed. Rather than finding hidden meanings, the task is to understand what cultural and ideological assumptions were made at a specific time -with its social and cultural context- that allowed a text to be considered acceptable, common, and even shared.

It is a method used in many academic disciplines, including cultural, literary, religious studies (analysis of religious textbooks), anthropology, sociology, and others. While pointing out that some scholars sometimes use the concept of textual analysis to indicate that unwritten text types can also be dealt with a television program, a movie, a magazine, a T-shirt, a piece of furniture or decoration... (Dearing, 2023, p. vii; McKee, 2001, pp. 138-149), so it meets with content analysis, and may even contain it if we consider the opinion of some textual analysis specialists such as McKee (Aneri, 2020, p. 173), who estimates that textual analysis can include more specific methodological branches such as content analysis, semiotics, interactive analysis, and rhetorical criticism.

3.7. Discourse analysis and content analysis

Discourse analysis refers mainly to the act of conversation and to the structural processes of the interactions that occur in it. It is involved with content analysis in the final search for the meaning of the text but differs from it in that it tends to rely on flexible hermeneutic theoretical methods compared to content analysis -quantitative, of course - with the strict methodology that distinguishes it. Therefore, the discourse analysis framework tends to be malleable for most of the quantitative content analysis methods available.

For his part, "Maingueneau" (2012, pp. 6-7) considers discourse analysis a method that is close to content analysis -or overlapping with-, while being distinguished from it by analyzing linguistic structures and giving priority to identifying indicators expressing representations or social and historical conditions. It should be noted here that some scholars consider discourse analysis inclusive of content analysis, conversation analysis, critical discourse analysis, interactive analysis and semiological analysis, all of which are branches of discourse analysis, which can study the data of these analytical methods corpus: official speeches, interviews, messages, media reports, photos, advertisements... (Hayes, 2023, p. 616). This is in contrast to those who believe, according to the broad meaning given above, to the content analysis by Krippendorff (2004, p.16) that the latter includes discourse analysis and other analyses.

It can also be said that the most important differences between content analysis (CA) and discourse analysis (DA) are represented in the fact that CA traditionally deals with written media texts in a quantitative approach, before its field of use includes other types of texts and in both quantitative and qualitative approaches. As for discourse analysis, its approach originally includes various types of texts and only a qualitative/interpretative approach with a semiotic theoretical background. The two analyses also differ in terms of data collection tools (form and content categories versus strategies and analysis frameworks...).

Some scholars highlight other differences: 1. discourse analysis (DA) deals mainly with the meanings of discourse, while content analysis (CA) focuses on the content of the text (Caregnato & Mutti, 2006, p. 684). Discourse analysis cognitively aims to build reality, while CA aims to find a "good" or "appropriate" way to study reality by focusing on knowing the ideas spread in texts instead of focusing on building reality from textual and non-textual components (Gheyle & Jacobs, 2017, p. 6).

On the other hand, Laramée and Vallé, (2001, p. 265) believe that discourse analysis, unlike content analysis, seems to be effective for types of well-structured discourses, where the production framework is clear as in political and religious discourse... However, as soon as we are moving away from a very specific type of discourse, the method lacks rigor and must borrow from other approaches.

3.8. Conversational analysis and content analysis

It is not possible to talk about discourse analysis without going through the so-called *conversational analysis* that arose with the studies of Sacks and others in the second half of the sixties of the last century, where Sachs believed, under the influence of his teachers Goffman and Garfinkel, that the contents of public and daily activities are suitable for research topics in sociology. This analysis is mainly concerned with the most important rules for dialogue management: the phrases to start and end the dialogue, when it is appropriate to speak or listen... It is not only limited to the verbal aspects of human interaction, but is also concerned with semi-linguistic elements such as gestures, laughter,

silence, pauses... and with the relationship of these elements to social structures (Castillo, 2021, p. 1). This is not surprising because it is considered a qualitative/interpretative research method with sociological origins before it is also used in other disciplines such as linguistics, anthropology and psychology.

Therefore, it is sometimes confused with discourse analysis, both belong to sociolinguistics, but Hayes (2023, p. 619) argue that they have two different approaches; while discourse analysis explores the overall social meanings of discourse, conversational analysis works at the behavioral level and is concerned with how to manage conversational exchange and how to organize its interactions rather than looking for broader social implications.

Among those who narrow the meaning of discourse analysis and separate it from conversation analysis are Levinson (1983, pp. 286-288) and Wooffitt (2005, pp. 01, 85), who consider them to be methodological approaches that differ in terms of their theoretical backgrounds, especially in terms of the type of data studied: the diversity of discourse analysis data (texts, events, things, processes...) versus the focus of conversation analysis on natural-routine and non-argumentative audiovisual conversations.

3.9. Semiological analysis and content analysis

Semiological analysis is concerned with the meanings of texts in the same way as content analysis, but differs from it in that the final unit of analysis is the sign, through which it mainly aims to construct the text rather than to analyze it, while adopting a complete descriptive and interpretive device of the meaning of the texts. As for the possible differences between semiological analysis and discourse analysis mentioned above, one of the considerations that are useful in determining these differences is to know: Will the signs that we analyze be of a linguistic or semantic nature? As already mentioned, discourse analysis studies meanings and connotations in general, whatever their nature (written, gestural, oral, audiovisual, spatial, etc.) and not only linguistic ones, but its analysis also includes the relationship of signs to their social and non-linguistic contexts. The same applies to many references that employ the term "semiology" to study more general topics (linguistic and non-linguistic), as opposed to those that use the term "semiotics" to study linguistic/philosophical topics in particular.

However, if only linguistic signs are selected, a Language-oriented Discursive Analysis (ADL) will be carried out, and if another type of analytical material is selected, a Semiotic Discourse Analysis (ADS)

will be carried out, or what some scholars (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1998) prefer to call Discourse Semiology.

In the case of media analysis materials, we may be faced with two situations: interest in analyzing texts in the traditional sense: editorials, opinion columns, headlines, news reports... (I.e. ADL), or with semiotic products such as photographs, cartoons or TV series... (I.e. ADS) (Santander, 2011, p. 214).

To clarify the most important commonalities and intersections between the aforementioned methods of analysis, the following is a tabular summary of its most important features:

Table (1) Comparison of the most important analytical methods

Analytical method	Epistemological background	Original Field of Use	Nature of the original analytical material	Nature of the analytical procedures	Types of the analysis elements
Content analysis	Positivism	Information and communication sciences	Media materials	Quantitative and then Quantitative and qualitative	Categories (form, content/ factual, thematic...)
Thematic analysis	Constructivism /Hermeneutics (Interpretative)	Psychology	Topics and ideas	Qualitative	Categories (Topics and ideas)
Meta-analysis	Positivism	Education sciences	Previous research	Quantitative then Quantitative and qualitative	Guide (General Information + Characteristics of the Study)
Linguistic analysis	Constructivism /Hermeneutics (Interpretative)	Linguistics	Texts	Qualitative	Items (words...)
Textual analysis	Positivism	Culture and literature, originating from/it's/ Greek mythology	Texts	Quantitative then qualitative	Open Categories (Patterns)

Documentary analysis	Positivism	Library science/ Librarianship	documents	Quantitative and then Quantitative and qualitative	Processes (summarization, indexing, characterization...)
Discourse analysis	Constructivism /Hermeneutics (Interpretative)	Linguistics	Discourses/ Speeches	Qualitative	Tools (theses, context, actors, evidence pathways...)
Semiological analysis	Constructivism /Hermeneutics (Interpretative)	Linguistics	Texts	Qualitative	Categories (Linguistic, Denotative, Connotative/Synthetic, Iconic...)
Conversational analysis	Pragmatic background (e.g. Goffman)	Sociology	Dialogues	Qualitative Basically	Groups/ Dialogic elements (linguistic and semi-linguistic)

Source: Author

Finally, it should be noted - commenting on the previous table and the content mentioned before- that most analytical methods are qualitative or have become quantitative – qualitative. The same is true for their analytical analysis, which has become "multimedia" or "multi-support" –in librarian expression-, and that their different origins did not prevent their use in different disciplines, and the analysis of their contents through similar analytical descriptive grids, but with different elements: categories, units, manuals, tools, processes, grids, matrices... qualitative and/or quantitative. For example, the similarity between some content analysis "categories" and some discourse analysis "tools": topics/theses, personalities/actors, methods of persuasion/evidence pathways...

Also, the mentioned types of analytical methods cannot be considered exhaustive, because the specialized literature mentions other types of qualitative analyses that cannot be mentioned and compared to content analysis because of their lack of popularity, such as: "*Frame analysis*", and "*Vignette analysis*", in the field of nursing in particular (Hayes, 2023, pp. 620-623), *information analysis* (transforming collected and analyzed information into knowledge in order to make strategic decisions in the economic, political, military and security fields), *interactional analysis* (analyzing interpersonal interaction), psychoanalysis...

4. Conclusion: some prospects for the mixed use of analytical methods

All these analytical methods, which are predominantly of a qualitative nature, can be combined/mixed and therefore we may have, for example, *discourse content analysis*, when

hermeneutic/interpretative theoretical frameworks are adopted jointly with content analysis or semiological analysis of discourses, especially when the analyst decides to combine the structural semiological framework with interstructural interpretations of the discourse.

That is, all these methods can be combined and mixed, when the theoretical background is the same. Thus, when it is sociology that deals with linguistic analysis, a new analysis method called *sociolinguistics* (linguistics or linguistic sociology) can be used, which is concerned with studying the relationships between linguistic and social structures, in the same way as analyzing sociological content that emphasizes the relationship between social contexts and the meaning of the text, or analyzing sociological discourse in social interaction that occurs in the "conversational act" (Abela, 2000, p. 10).

Cognitive interdisciplinarity, and the expansion of the key concepts meanings (text, document, talk, discourse...) of some analytical methods to include all types of analysis materials (texts, images, audio and audiovisual clips), deepen and expand this mixed method orientation. That is one of the things that made me more and more inclined towards considering the concept of content analysis - which has become quantitative and qualitative necessarily - to include all types of quantitative, qualitative and mixed analytical methods, while leaving the peculiarities of applied analysis to the nature of the objectives of the study with its theoretical background and the characteristics of its analytical research material.

In this case, I am not a precursor to mixing items— here under the name of "general" content analysis—, there are those who consider one of the aforementioned analytical methods (discourse analysis) to include content analysis, conversation analysis, critical discourse analysis, interactive analysis, and semiological analysis, as all branches of discourse analysis that can study the data of all their corpus (Hayes, 2023, p. 616). It seems that content analysis in a large sense (quantitative/qualitative) with or without "general" (adjective) is more important to be inclusive of discourse analysis and other analytical methods (see: Krippendorff, 2004, p. 16).

Finally, it can be argued that the possibility of combining various method analyses may allow the mixed use of certain elements of analysis, such as the use of some discourse analysis tools within the categories of content analysis, or the creation of new analytical elements in any of the analytical methods cited above. This is in addition to the practical use (in previous research) of discourse analysis method in research dealing with media texts and the content analysis method in research on political and religious discourse...

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