

Hermeneutic Content Analysis: a method of textual analysis

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ABSTRACT: *This paper aims to show a purpose for analysis method Hermeneutic Content Analysis. That analysis makes possible to analyse content from several knowledge fields, as Business Marketing. For that, firstly, the paper shows hermeneutic and its basic concepts and how to apply them. Secondly, it is shown the Qualitative Content Analysis and its steps for analysing a text. Finally, the last part of paper shows that Hermeneutic Content Analysis is a joining of Hermeneutic and Qualitative Content Analysis. It is necessary to bring together the two analysis methods (mixed methods), so Qualitative Content Analysis describes the data, whereas Hermeneutic interprets and reflects these data.*

KEYWORDS: *Qualitative Content Analysis, Hermeneutic, textual analysis, interpretation, reflection*

I. Introduction

The Business Marketing constantly requires content analysis for decision-making and evaluation of market, as reports, scientific papers, journals articles, and so on. Therefore, we propose a method for qualitatively analysing content from several sources. The Hermeneutic Content Analysis is an innovative analysis method. It brings together Hermeneutic and Qualitative Content Analysis joining the principles of content analysis as coding, categorization, systematization and interpretation with understanding and reflection.

That analysis method is important for taking into account interpretation and understanding as important elements in analysis and reflection of content and textual elements. That method makes possible to find textual indicators that go unnoticed in a mere descriptive analysis. Thereby, it is important to go beyond of a descriptive content analysis. We put the question: what does the Hermeneutic Content Analysis contribute for textual material analysis?

To answer that question, that paper aims to show the Hermeneutic Content Analysis through Hermeneutics as art of understanding, basic concepts of Hermeneutics, and emergence, development and steps of Qualitative Content Analysis. That paper has as theoretical foundations the Hermeneutic Content Analysis (HCA) as mixed methods [4], the Hermeneutic principles from Danner [7], Rittelmeyer and Parmentier [13], and, finally, Qualitative Content Analysis from Schreier [14].

The Hermeneutic Content Analysis constitutes a circular movement of analysis, interpretation and understanding of a text covering Hermeneutic and Qualitative Content Analysis. The Hermeneutic is art of interpretation of understanding a text in a circular movement involving both subjective and objective sides. The Qualitative Content Analysis is a method for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative data through of coding and categorization, and has as features description and interpretation of material. According to Bergman [4], the HCA may be defined as a mixed method, and consists of Hermeneutic Analysis and Qualitative Content Analysis. Therefore, the HCA is constituted of two methods conducted by systematization, coding, categorization, interpretation, understanding and reflection.

II. Hermeneutic

The constitutive elements of Hermeneutic are: art of understanding and basic concepts of hermeneutic. These elements show the meaning of hermeneutic beyond notion of interpretation. The concepts as understanding, objective spirit and hermeneutic circle show hermeneutic as art of interpretation of

understanding a text happening in a circular movement that involves both subjective and objective sides. These elements in a constant circular movement open new perspectives for the research.

2.1. Hermeneutic as art of understanding

The definition of hermeneutic investigation came from the Greek word *ermeneuein*, that is, art as manifest, interpreted, explained and exposed, according to Hans-Georg Gadamer, a representative of Philosophical Hermeneutic.

According to Danner [7], the word hermeneutic means three things: statements (expression), interpretation (explication) and translation (interpretation). They are basic subjacent meanings to be taken into account in a hermeneutic analysis. Then, on the one hand, “if I express a situation, I want other people understand it”, on the other hand, “the spoken situation is to be understood by other people, so that people interprets and understands” [7].

Hermeneutic, in this way, has the same meaning of *Hermes*, the

messenger of God that sends to the mortal people no proclamation, no any sharing, but basically explains the divine commandments. It basically applies to the meaning of *ermeneia*, the ‘statement of thoughts’ in which the very phrase is an ambiguous statement and consists of expression, explication, interpretation and translation. [7]

Hermeneutic is, then, originally the *interpretation of sense of text*, according to Rittelmeyer and Parmentier [13]. The questions for studying a text are: what do authors *believe*? What do authors say or write? What does text mean? In which reality are authors situated socially and historically? What *motivates* the authors for certain observations, formulations, rules in text?

However, Hermeneutic should pay attention to endeavors of understanding. The interpretation of a text, for instance, also involves the understanding on the author and his/her historical context. Diemer (apud Danner [7]) provides the following definition: “Hermeneutic is a theoretical (philosophical) discipline that investigates the understanding of phenomenon and its elements, structures, types, etc., as well as its preexistent context”.

According to Danner [7], unlike that many think, hermeneutic is more than an art of interpretation, hermeneutic is an *art of interpretation* of understanding. The term “art” resonates with associations that conceal the true sense and, in this case, “art” is understood much more reserved, that is, before of Greek concept *techné*. Hermeneutic is *hermeneutike techné*. It represents skill and knowledge, that is, development of a skill.

If hermeneutic is *art of interpretation of understanding*, so ask yourself, what may be interpreted and understood somehow? Danner [7] puts the question. Hermeneutic is frequently reduced to *interpretation of text*, though it is an important and vast field. Nevertheless, the understanding of hermeneutic meaning doesn’t reduce only to texts. Instead, we can say in advance we always use hermeneutic approach when we deal with people and human products, in a broad sense, claims Danner [7]. According to Rittelmeyer [12], the hermeneutic investigations don’t reflect currently only texts, but they deal with a broader way with phenomenons of lifeworld, to the extent that these phenomenons show us enigmatic.

2.2. Basic Concepts of Hermeneutic

According to Danner [7] in his text *Hermeneutik*, there are four concepts of hermeneutic: *understanding*, *responsibility of understanding*, *hermeneutic circle* and *rules of hermeneutic*. These concepts are complementarities each other during the hermeneutic investigation.

a) Understanding

The central concept of hermeneutic is the “understanding”. According to Danner [7], we understand how other people talk to each other, read posters, listen to music or attend a lecture. We constantly understand the gestures of other people, their words, an advertising, a music, a spiritual context. However, the gesture is not accurately “understood”, but only “explained” through of bodily movements of arm and hand, of muscle strength and energy expenditure.

There is a distinction between “to explain” (*erklären*) and “to understand” (*verstehen*). According to Dilthey (apud Danner [7]), *Understanding* is not a immediate, unreflective process, like explanation, but *Understanding* must be reflected in its structure, performance and complexity. It is a reflection process, and not a immediate form. The distinction between “explanation” and “understanding” is an attempt of definition to maintain two separate questions, so, the word “understanding” colloquially has a lot of operations. In a hermeneutic sense, “understanding” is a technical term. “Understanding” and “explanation” are schematically distinguished of colloquial use and differentiated each other.

Understanding is the recognition of something as human something: all sounds I recognize like words and their meanings are detected. Nonetheless, *explanation* is due of causes that derive of a condition of a principle, for instance, explanation of fall of a stone.

Understanding can distinguish the following *structural* elements:

1. We identify a thing, a true sensorial operation.
2. We recognize that or this like human thing.
3. We reflexively understand its importance, the meaning of human being. All process in an unit we call

Understanding.

Danner finally points out the hermeneutic concept *Understanding* is directed to human (intellectual) specifically on actions, linguistic structures and not-linguistic entities. Furthermore, what was identified in sensorial action is perceived as important, it is reflected and, so, understood creating a meaning.

b) Responsibility of understanding

Understanding is understanding of “objective spirit”. This is the common denominator of a cultural field determined historically and where comes from each topic of “objective spirit”, that is, it’s common the sum of common features of given sense that could cause the mutual understanding as reasonable as possible. The senses are really given to us like individual, but historically and socio-culturally conditioned, not *a-priori* as some “absolute” senses.

The responsibility of hermeneutic understanding may be seen between two extremities: on the one hand, subjectivity (avoidable) determined by random arbitrariness and simple self-awareness, and is seen purely a psychological level, on the other hand, generality, any statement is accessible in all moments in view of scientific ideal. Both options are conducted by hermeneutic. [7]

Thus, the meaning is based on communion of “objective spirit”, that is historically and culturally conditioned and subjectivity .

c) Hermeneutic Circle

If the *Larger Understanding* happens, then the recurrent movement happens manifesting of recurrent way. It is a type of circular movement, and, therefore, is called of hermeneutic circle. The movement of circle is evident, but, at the same time, it is nor a closed circular movement neither a spiral movement, strictly speaking. Because the movements don’t remain the same, instead of it, they will be revised and increased.

The various hermeneutic approaches try to deal with that problem, each approach in your own way. For Schleiermacher, the situation of author should be restored by psychological and grammatical reconstruction; for Dilthey, it is the possibility of appropriate understanding in interpretation generosity; and, according to Gadamer, the problem emerges from zero, because the interpreter still has to understand of different way due to his/her special hermeneutic situation. On the one hand, Hermeneutic Distinction emerges from “coherent essence” of a predetermined “text”, and, on the other hand, emerges from objectivity of author.

The hermeneutic distinction happens in movement of hermeneutic circle. However, that can not be detected only with proximity of early opinion and meaning of text. The increase of understanding doesn’t act in a straight as a progressive steps, but in a circular way. That movement is called *hermeneutic circle*. From methodic approach view, it is important to maintain the circular structure in mind, so interpretation requires both objective and subjective sides.

d) Hermeneutic Rules

Danner [7] provides some rules for understanding of a text:

- a) *preliminary interpretation*: to consider the publication of text (first or second version), to have your own opinion about the text, and to write on general sense of text (first impression);
- b) *interpretation of immanent text*: to search for the meaning of words and grammatical relations, to observe the logic of text, to observe contradictions;
- c) *coordinated interpretation*: to observe the context of text; to observe affirmations and negations of hypothesis.

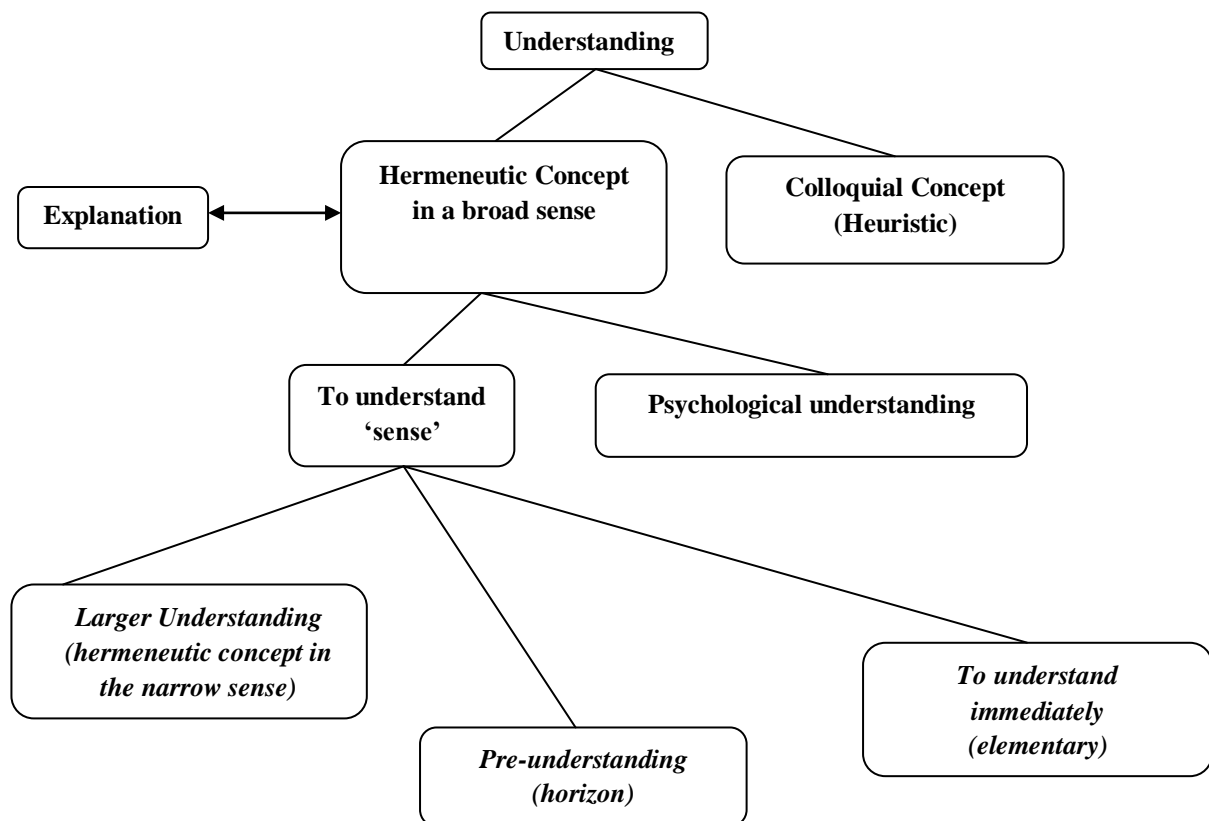
It is worth to stand out these rules are not normative and categorical, and the understanding of author will guide the paths of text understanding.

For scientific works, Danner [7] points out even instructions of work more practical could be given for beyond of hermeneutic rules in order to help in interpretation of text.

- (1) Make sure of reading all text;
- (2) Study the text sentence-by-sentence, impression after impression; so, to perform the explanation of contradictions at least;
- (3) Read the text again as a whole;
- (4) Consult secondary literature, possibly a similar text from the same author;
- (5) Bring some reflections from general text;
- (6) Create a sketch for all text;
- (7) Make a draft for each part of text, as private formulation of explanation;
- (8) Read again the text.

These are only some hints despite containing a rigorous scheme. Nevertheless, these instructions show hermeneutic analysis is not made from a fast reading.

Fig. 1 – Demarcation and Differentiation of Understanding [07]



III. Qualitative Content Analysis

Qualitative content analysis is a method for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative data. This is done by assigning successive parts of the material to the categories of a coding frame. This frame is at the heart of the method, and it contains all those aspects that feature in the description and interpretation of the material. That is the explanations given by Margrit Schreier in her text *Qualitative Content Analysis*, and that chapter is the reference that I use for understanding of Content Analysis. We also use the chapter *Coding and content analysis* of Louis Cohen, Lawrence Manion and Keith Morrison [6], and the terms *categories, categorization, codes and coding* from *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*. [3, 5]

According to Schreier [14], three features characterize the Qualitative Content Analysis: reduction of data, systematization and flexibility. Unlike other qualitative data analysis methods, qualitative content analysis helps with reducing the amount of material. That method requires researcher to focus on selected aspects of meaning, that is, aspects relate to the general question of research. Therefore, researcher may have 100 categories and subcategories. Nonetheless, the categories are limited by conditions of handling of researcher. And the categories are defined for any particular passage and taken to higher level of abstraction.

The second fundamental feature of qualitative content analysis is that it is highly systematic.

To start with, the method requires the examination of every single part of the material that is in any way relevant to the research question. In this way, the method counteracts the danger of looking at the material only through the lens of one's assumptions and expectations. The method is also systematic in that it requires a certain sequence of steps, regardless of the exact research question and material. As is often the case in qualitative research, this may be an iterative process, going through some of these steps repeatedly, modifying the coding frame in the process. But the steps and their sequence remain the same. The method is also systematic in that it requires coding (i.e. assigning segments of the material to the categories of the coding frame) to be carried out twice (double coding), at least for parts of the material. This is a test of the quality of the category definitions: they should be so clear and unambiguous that the second coding yields results that are very similar to those of the first coding. [14]

The third key feature of qualitative content analysis is its flexibility. That sort of analysis combines approaches of concepts, coding and categories creation. At the same time, a part of categories should always be data-driven. The categories are certified if they in fact match the data – or, in other words, that the coding frame provides a valid description of the material.

According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison [6], that analysis is constituted of description and interpretation that conducts systematic, qualitative or quantitative descriptions, so that it contributes to reinterpret the messages and to achieve to a understanding level of meanings beyond of common reading.

Therefore, qualitative content analysis is appropriate for a broad range of material, as visual or verbal materials, self-generated (through interviews, focus group, etc.) or other sources (sites, journals, magazines, blogs, letters, papers, etc). Due to its inherent flexibility, the method has been applied in several disciplines, as education, business, psychology, sociology, literature, communication, fields of health.

According to Schreier, the method has its limit for applying of qualitative content analysis, so its focus consists on description. However, the researcher that searches a critical analysis, discourse analysis or reflexive analysis, it would be interesting to use another analysis method as support.

3.1. Steps of Qualitative Content Analysis

Qualitative Content Analysis as method has its steps for research. It is divided into eight steps: 1. To decide on a research question; 2. To select material; 3. To build a coding frame; 4. Segmentation; 5. Trial coding; to evaluate and to modify the coding frame; 7. Main analysis; 8. To present and interpret the findings.

First and second steps: first, to decide a research questions, and, then, to select the material to be analysed.

Third step: it consists of construction of coding frame and divides into four steps: a) material selection; b) structuring and generating of categories; c) defining of categories; d) revising and expanding the coding frame.

Fourth step: next step after structuring the coding frame is *segmentation*. That step involves the dividing of material into units in such a way that each unit fills exactly in a (sub) category of coding frame.

These coding units are those parts of the material that can be interpreted in a meaningful way with respect to the subcategories, and their size can vary from an entire book to a single word. This definition shows that segmentation is in fact closely related to developing the coding frame and meeting the requirement of mutual exclusiveness. The size of segments or units should be chosen so as to match the definition of the categories. [14]

The dividing of material into units of coding requires a criterion that specifies where one units ends and another one begins. There are two such types of criteria: formal and thematic. The formal criteria are composed from inherent structure of material, and they can be words, sentences and paragraphs in a text. In a qualitative research, the thematic criterion is more useful, so it involves the search of topic changes, and one unit essentially corresponds to a theme. What constitutes a theme can vary with coding frame and main categories. So, the thematic criteria often provide a better fit with coding frame.

Fifth and sixth steps: the following steps form the pilot phase of coding frame. In that phase, the coding frame is tried out on part of the material. It is crucial for recognizing and modification of any shortcomings in the frame before main analysis is performed. The pilot phase consists of following steps: selection and preparation of material, trial coding, evaluation and modification of coding frame.

The selection and preparing of material contain all types and sources of data of material. Furthermore, the material should also be selected so that the majority in coding frame can be applied during trial coding.

In trial coding, the categories of coding frame are applied to material during two rounds of coding, following the same process that will be applied during the main coding.

The *evaluation and modifying of coding frame* involve analysis of results of coding in trial in terms of consistency and validity. In other words, the greater the consistency between the two phases of coding, the greater the quality of coding frame. Therefore it's important to identify the coding units attributed to different categories during the two *rounds*. That exam of inconsistencies normally will show subcategories are difficult to use, and they are use as synonyms presenting overlaps among categories. The definitions of these subcategories should be revised, rules of decision must be added, if necessary.

Other criterion for evaluating of coding frame is validity, that is, the extent in which the categories properly describe the material and the concepts that make part of research question.

If only some modifications are made in frame after the trial coding, the frame coding can be now used for the main analysis. Unlike, it can be better for performing a second trial coding before going to the next step.

Seventh step: here is the *main analysis* of Qualitative Content Analysis. It is composed with all material coded. "It is important to keep in mind that the coding frame can no longer be modified at this stage. Therefore it is crucial that the frame is sufficiently reliable and valid before entering this phase". [14]

A first step in main analysis is to divide the remaining part of the material into coding units. The next step is coded by assigning these units to the categories in coding frame. "Because the frame has already been evaluated and revised, it is now no longer necessary to double-code each unit. The exact amount of material to be double-coded at this stage depends on the results of the pilot phase".

The lower the coding consistency and the validity of the first version of the frame, and the more changes were made as a result of the pilot coding, the more the material should be double-coded during the main analysis phase. If only few

changes were made following the pilot coding, double-coding approximately one-third of the material during the main analysis is sufficient. This, however, is only a rule of thumb. [14]

According to Schreier [14], the results of main coding should be again inserted into a coding sheet. The final meaning of a unit is obvious for those parts of material that were coded only once and for those parts that were double-coded, so the two rounds of coding agree. Any coding inconsistencies need to be discussed and resolved.

Researchers who are working on their own should try to keep track of their reasons for interpreting the unit differently each time and arrive at a final meaning in this way. If an inconsistency cannot be resolved, it can be useful to bring in a third person who is also familiar with the research. [14]

In the final step of main analysis, the coding results should be prepared so that they are appropriate for answering the research question.

Eighth step: the last steps consists of *presenting of results*. Here involves the presenting of coding frame with passages of analysed texts. It can be realized by continuous passages or main passages with tables containing the text, or in adding with numbers. The results can also make use of starting point for greater development of data, analysis of results of qualitative content analysis for standards and occurrences of selected categories [14]. It involves to go beyond of individual units of coding and categories for relations among categories.

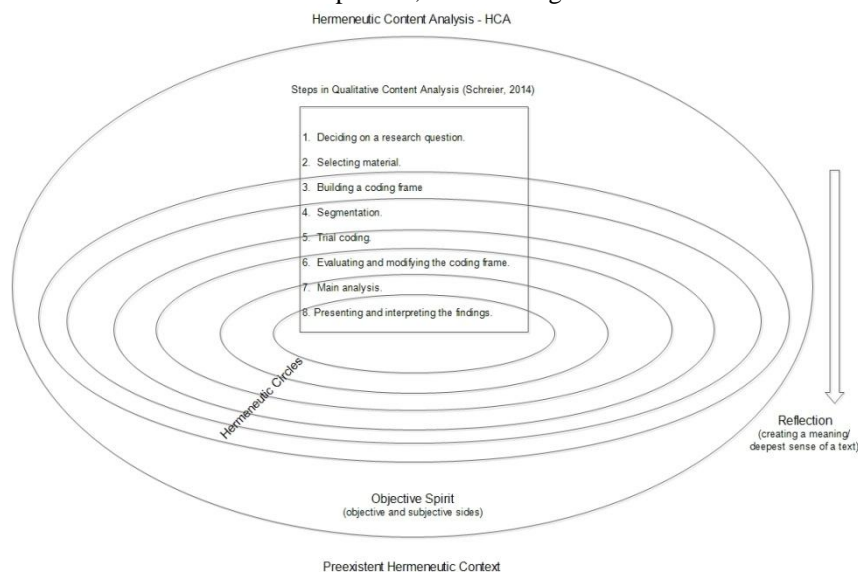
The qualitative content analysis as method for analysing visual images or verbal sources is shown as flexible alternative for several fields of knowledge. It is an interesting method for developing content so that the essence of purposed topic for analysis is interpreted and detailed for its understanding.

However, qualitative content analysis has its limits, because its focus consists on description. If researcher is looking for a critical and reflexive analysis would be interesting to use another analysis method as support. Therefore, we suggest the hermeneutic analysis for understanding and reflection composing the Hermeneutic Content Analysis.

IV. Conclusion

The Hermeneutic Content Analysis (HCA) goes beyond the description of Qualitative Content Analysis. The HCA also involves description, but considers understanding and reflection of material. The main responsibility of HCA consists of understanding of sense of analysed material. [15, 16]

The Hermeneutic makes possible to understand the sense and the deepest sense of a text. Whereas Qualitative Content Analysis is a method of systematic description of qualitative data. The joining of both methods makes possible understanding, objective spirit and hermeneutic circle with reduction of data, systematization and flexibility. These elements of HCA open new horizons for research involving theory, action, reflection and lifeworld. To illustrate the HCA process, see the image below:



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