Quantitative or Qualitative Content Analysis? Experiences from a cross-cultural comparison of female students' attitudes to shoe fashions in Germany, Poland and Russia

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The study of apparel and its meanings is of interest to linguists, in that it can help throw light on what different human communication codes have in common and what is unique to natural spoken/written language. However, it is also the case that we can only get at the meanings of apparel items by using natural language as a descriptive metalanguage.

Although some early work on apparel meanings made use of free text response (e.g. Stone 1962), much of the recent research in the field has been carried out in an experimental Likert-scale-led paradigm (cf. Davis & Lennon 1988). The ethnomethodological free-text approach is arguably more valuable, however, because it can provide much richer data than the experimental approach: it taps into the actual attitudes and perceptions of the informants rather than having them agree or disagree with the researchers' set of attitudes (cf. Golliher 1987). It was thus a variant of this data type that we selected for our study.

Since much of the previous research on apparel meanings had been carried out in the USA, we wanted to examine the possibility of cross-cultural differences within Europe. In order to do this, we obtained a corpus of compositions from advanced students of English in three European locations: Greifswald (Germany), Łódź (Poland), and Volgograd (Russia). The students were asked to respond to three general stimulus questions, including one on shoes. It is this question that we consider here.

Our initial aim was to analyse these sets of compositions quantitatively using Lancaster's USAS software for content analysis (Wilson & Rayson 1993; Rayson & Wilson 1996), in order determine which concepts predominated and how they differed between groups. However, our initial quantitative results revealed relatively little detailed information about the students' classifications and schemata. To study these, we thus had to fall back on a form of "qualitative content analysis" (Kracauer 1952) based around communicative-functional language analysis (cf. Boeck 1981).

In this paper, we will describe the results of our analysis, and will also explore some of the issues that are encountered in analysing free-text questionnaire responses such as these. We will address the relative merits of quantitative and qualitative content analysis and also look at some of the problems of operationalizing a qualitative content analysis.

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