

Analyzing Discourse in Progress: A Cross-Disciplinary Approach

(Pragmatics, Discourse Analysis, and Text Genetics)

This panel aims at questioning the relationship between Pragmatics, Discourse Analysis and Text Genetics, through 5 studies of discourse in progress.

The triple approach to discourse that we propose here enlightens the way social and pragmatic constraints may determine discourse production.

In DA, discourse is defined through its relation with the different domains of social activity within which the discourse is produced. It is considered as a practice fixed in a social and historic context, which has social goals. Discourse as social (inter)action offers a wide range of research objects that interest both Pragmatics and Discourse Analyses (cf. van Dijk 1997): actions, aims and consequences of actions; context; and discourse strategies. However, while Discourse Analysis and Pragmatics succeed in describing and explaining these objects, they fail in providing a longitudinal glance able to point out the choice of discourse strategies and linguistic structures contributing to the pragmatic scope and the generic identity of the discourse, inasmuch as they work on discourse as a finished product.

What we call “discourse in progress” is the process of writing a text, process that implies different stages, and leads to a succession of drafts and modifications of the text. Recording and examining the drafts of the texts enables the statement and analysis of the modifications, adds, and so on, that contribute to the development of the text while signaling semantic or pragmatic hesitations. The interpretation of these hesitations is carried out by Discourse Analysis and Pragmatics.

The research presented is part of a project funded by the French National Research Agency. The project ECRITURES conducts a genetic analysis of drafts written by social workers. The hypotheses and results presented are also supported by a previous research on final versions of social reports assessing the family situation of endangered children (Cislaru et al. 2008, for instance). Claire Doquet’s previous work in Genetic Linguistics has also inspired us.

The study is based on a corpus of drafts (manuscript and computer word processing). The objective is, according to Biber's et alii (2002 [1998]: 269) definition of corpus-based studies, to describe the linguistics features of a group of texts, in connection with their constraints. The question of the "speech genre" is central to this study. We define the genre, following Bakhtin (1986: 60), as a relatively stable type of utterances shaped by the sphere of human activity determining and hosting the text production.

"Each separate utterance is individual, of course, but each sphere in which language is used develops its own *relatively stable types* of these utterances. These we may call speech genres. The wealth and diversity of speech genres are boundless because the various possibilities of human activity are inexhaustible, and because each sphere of activity contains an entire repertoire of speech genres that differentiate and grow as the particular sphere develops and becomes more complex." (Bakhtin 1986: 60)

We will question in this panel two similar speech genres: social reports on children at risk and school inspector's reports. The first corpus consists of drafts of social reports on children at risk evaluating their family situation; the second one consists of reports evaluating the work of school teachers. In both cases, we are dealing with a professional discourse, two assessing genres related to specific spheres of activity: on the one side, social action and child protection, on the other side, work evaluation.

The social reports aim at assessing a situation in terms of risks for the child, and, on the basis of this evaluation, recommend (or not) to foster/take into care the child. From this point of view, the social reports are typically argumentative texts. The linguistic means, as well as the semiotic markers, are all argumentatively oriented and take part in the argumentative process, understood here in a general sense.

The corpus of teaching reports consists of local school inspectorate evaluation: the inspector, a superior, observes and evaluates a subordinate; the report may have a positive or negative impact on the career of the teacher whose work is assessed. From the point of view of the pragmatic features, it differs from the social reports.

The corpus of social reports needs a more detailed presentation of their discourse scene:

- Collective writing. Several authors write and revise the text. The body of the report is written by social workers, and the conclusion is written by the section head of the

child protection institution. Authorship is then to be understood as a collective responsibility which implies collective norms of writing and assessing.

- An official addressee, the judge, who asks for the report.
- An unofficial addressee, the family (since the 2002 law), who may ask to access the report

This complexity generates some paradoxical constraints:

- Social workers have to inform and alert the judge without cutting off from families. On the one hand, the social workers must describe the situation of the child the most precisely ever; some judges even provide writing norms and expertise (cf *Guide Pratique pour la protection de l'enfance* Huyette & Desloges 2003 [1997]). On the other hand, the social workers should protect the child and the family and avoid hurting them in the text.
- Besides, social workers have to be neutral and objective while assessing a situation that necessarily provokes emotion and worries the social worker.

Another complexity is about the data to be exposed and exploited for evaluation and argumentation. Thus, social workers collect “field” data, while visiting the family/child, or during meetings with the parents. They must afterwards summarize what the family, the child, or other professionals (such as psychologists, teachers) told them, which evidently brings about some reported speech.

Put together, the two complexities make of these writings hybrid texts, made of fragments and heterogeneity. How do social workers manage to produce coherent and argumentative texts in such conditions?

The social reports’ corpus examined here has been collected in a service that takes into care and/or foster children at risk in their families. The service produces two types of reports: preliminary reports (for internal use) and commitment reports (addressed to the judge and exploiting the preliminary reports’ contents). The latter may be consulted by the family and used during the debate on trial.

Presentation of the corpus from a genetic point of view

I won’t tell a lot about the school inspector’s reports here: in this special case, the data result from real-time writing process, recorded by video software, which permits a chronological

analysis of the rewriting operations and of the pauses. This methodological aspect will be detailed by Claire and Julie in their presentation.

As concerning the social reports, some comments would be useful, inasmuch as two types of corpora are being analyzed:

- Manuscript drafts of social reports. Changes can be made throughout the whole writing process: i) on the handwritten draft during the writing process itself; ii) on the finished handwritten draft (different colours or typo are generally used and allow us to sometimes consider the modifications as posterior to the writing itself); iii) on the typed document when the writer is checking through the draft. Some 10 to 12 reports have been watched.
- Computer processed periodically saved drafts of social reports. These documents show the textual development of the social reports, from a first schematic or short version to a last complete report. Fragments of text are added or deleted from one version to another, but generally, the text augments from version 1 to version 20, for instance. Each report has between 12 and 40 drafts.

Corpus treatment:

The computer processed and periodically saved drafts of social reports have been aligned with the software tool called MkAlign. The alignment is made chronologically two-by-two versions, but all the versions of one report may be contrasted in a longitudinal perspective (DIAPO), and early drafts may be contrasted with the last ones (1 to 24, 4 to 8, and so on).

The successive drafts of these writings are analyzed with the tools of Text Genetics, Discourse Analysis, Textometrics and Pragmatics.

At the Pragmatics and Text Genetics/Genetic Linguistics interface, we study the re-writing operations at work (substitution, deletion, insertion, replacement) and propose a fine-grained description of the linguistic structures subject to these operations. Text Genetics designed 30 years ago a series of minimal substitution operations aiming at describing the writing process. The four types of substitutions are:

- replacement: $A \rightarrow B$
- insertion: $AB \rightarrow ACB$

- deletion: $A \rightarrow \bar{A}$

- displacement: $AX \rightarrow XA$.

Some of these operations concern grammar or spelling revision, yet a great number of modifications is about the meaning and the pragmatic scope of the text.

What does it look like on the different drafts?

- Crossing-out, erasures, insertions, etc. on manuscript drafts
- Different colours on the computer processed drafts of social reports; the alignment software use these colours in order to code the different types of substitution operations.

One may also distinguish between the reading version and the writing version: the first kind of modifications occur during the “proofreading” of the text (on manuscript drafts, they do not appear in the line, but above, below, on margins, on a separate sheet, etc.), the second kind of modifications occur during the writing process itself.

Changes can affect subordinating and coordinating conjunctions, adverbs, nouns, adjectives, determiners, verbs, parts of sentences, and paragraphs. As a consequence of the changes, the argument can be enhanced or weakened. In the example on the slide, the child’s situation at school is described in two coordinated sentences in the first draft, and in two juxtaposed sentences each starting a new line in the second draft (*He has well integrated with the school peer and is very appreciated by his mates*). This modification may emphasize the two positive assertions and the overall positive appreciation of the child by the writer, which is what the writer wants to advocate.

Ex 3.

Ainsi, début avril, il a été constaté une régression sur le plan scolaire du fait d'une grande fatigue certainement due à ses problèmes de santé de début d'année.

Il est très bien intégré au collectif scolaire et est très apprécié de ses camarades.

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In a more general perspective, examining these changes and text modifications shows how the evaluation of family situations or teaching practices is shaped throughout the writing process.

General presentation of the study

Our investigations cover and articulate two aspects. On the one side, at the Pragmatics and Discourse Analysis interface, we bring to light the impact that discursive, social and cognitive constraints exert on written production, for instance, on social reports aiming at assessing the family situation of potentially at risk children. We then verify the way these constraints may concern other genres, school inspector's reports, and attempt to show the way writing strategies vary according to the different corpora and writers (social workers, inspectors, expert authors).

Different results have been obtained and will be reported: the impact of the generic constraints on the re-writing process, the progressive construction of the discourse's argumentative line, the role of the repeated segments in the construction of text genre, and so on. From complementary perspectives, the 5 papers intend to outline the constraints that interfere with the writing process of the reports in connection with their pragmatic scope. Some papers deal with specific discourse structuring enabling a successful argumentation or negotiating the place of the writer and the child or family; these are mainly features that reveal the writer's discourse strategies, inasmuch as they are adapted to concrete situations described by the reports. Some other papers deal with discourse routines, which signal a professional writing and recall the institutional frame.

Throughout the panel, the holistic approach at the conjunction of the interfaces, where transversal analyses work together, brings out pragmatic objects such as subjectivity, genres, scenario, text type and structure, discourse routines, discussed jointly with speech and pragmatic acts.

The results presented in this panel are issued from studies on a sample corpus. They help us formulate some hypotheses to be verified during the next stages of the project on a more complete corpus, which is now being collected by a writing process logging and analyzing tool called Inputlog. This tool records all the modifications occurring through the writing process. The categorized data will be qualitatively and quantitatively analyzed, using textometric tools, for instance. One of the aims of the first stages of the project is to develop new methodologies in applying pragmatics and textometric tools to the study of discourse in progress.

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