The Role of the Repeated Segments in the Construction and the Stabilisation of the Discourse

This communication deals with the role of the repeated segments (RS) in drafts of social reports on children at risk: how do the RS contribute to build and stabilize the discourse structure and its semantic and pragmatic unity?

Repeated segments correspond to units in sequence that are recurrently associated in a text or a corpus: *his/her anger, his/her decision, in the group, (s)he can/could say*, etc. They consist of at least two units (two words); however their length may be increased.

In order for repeated segments to gain the *repeatedness* /repetition status, they must occur at least two times in a text or a corpus.

We study the evolution of the RS through the re-writing process and the impact of the re-writing operations (displacement, deletion, insertion, replacement) on the written discourse routine.

Repeated segments represent ready-to-speak units (that are somewhat different from collocations); kinds of discourse routines that characterize either a studied language or a type of discourse. We are here mainly concerned with the particularities of a certain type of discourse, the social reports. The early presence of the RS in the drafts might signal a formatted discourse type, corresponding to a strongly constrained professional discourse. At first glance, our drafts of social reports do not seem to really correspond to such a discourse type. For instance, the longest RS recorded by the machine contain 11 forms. There are few of them that emerge beginning with the first two versions of a report, as most of them appear not earlier than version 4 - 6.

However, such a general observation exclusively gives an insight into the writing practices within a vocation/profession, and does not permit to access the pragmatic adjustments during the writing process, if any. A qualitative analysis, based on a structural and semantic description and classification of the RS, is necessary.

From an interpretive point of view, we distinguish in our corpus the following types of RS:

- The « waffle » (double speech) RS determined by the genre or the topic of the discourse (*être en/be in, can+speech verb*)

- The RS-genre clichés related to a type of cognitive activity: analysis, evaluation (*nous avons/we have, nous pensons/we think*)

- The RS representing structural clichés in French (*de la, lieu de, part de, une fois, quant à, en effet*); some of them may acquire a discursive value in our corpus, like *en lien avec*.

- The RS representing individual discourse habits (*ce dernier/cette dernière,* etc.)

Categories 1 to 3 reveal discursive, social and cognitive constraints that determine the configuration of discourse in social reports: assessing the family situation of potentially at risk children implies a constant negotiation between description, evaluation, and argumentation/recommendation. We will examine the possessive RS (*her family, his placement, their future*, etc.) that represent rather structural clichés that have a contextual value (type 3). These RS point out some topical specificities of the social discourse, concerning the representation and the role of the relationship (with the family, friends, social workers, etc.), and the place of the child, which explains our selection for this presentation.

Possessive RS characteristics

These are two-fold constructions containing a possessive determiner (*sa, son, ses*; *leur(s)* being less frequent) and a noun, accompanied or not by an expansion. It is worth mentioning that in French the possessive labels the gender of the object possessed, and not the one of the possessor.

Possessive RS "compete against" prepositional constructions in "de GN / of Noun phrase" indicating a possessive relation: *the behavior of the child, the fostering of the child*, and so on. Yet, the two constructions differ in more than one way.

Example 1: the possessive RS, unlike the "of X" constructions, focus on the possessor (the possessor is considered salient) and not on the object of the possession.

Example 2: The choice of the possessive determiner is also significant. Definite of demonstrative RS like *the/this behavior of the child* are generally used in a plural form (*ces comportements -> these acts*) and is generally descriptive (semantic point of view) and/or anaphorical (textual point of view). *His behavior* (*son comportement*) is used in a singular form and seems to sum up a series of descriptions; the possessive construction is the end point of a discursive sequence that allows generalization: *these acts worry us* → *his behavior is worrying*.

Example 3: the use of the possessive determiner is not neutral from a pragmatic point of view. The possibility to alternate a definite, demonstrative or possessive determiner opens various argumentative positions. Example 2 only partly illustrates this phenomenon. Thus, using a 3rd person possessive somehow associates to the possessor (the child, the family) the possessed objects. Therefore, in French, the fostering may be seen as an action of the protective services (*notre placement de l'enfant*) or as a "feature" of the child (*son placement*).

Methodology

The results presented here are base on the study of 4 series of drafts (this represents about 90-100 drafts per total). The possessive RS segments have been extracted from a complete list of repeated segments provided by two software: Lexico 3 and Le Trammeur (both developed by our research team). (DIAPO EXTRAIT LISTE)

The threshold of frequency was 2; we wanted it very low, regarding the volume of the corpus. Then we have used Beyond Compare in order to compare the lists of RS of each draft and identify the changes that eventually concern RS. (DIAPO)

The possessive RS

General presentation and aims/objectives

Possessive RS are denominative expressions that identify various entities (persons, situations, objects) through the narrated story. But their most important feature is the capacity to relate/connect people and objects, children and parents, etc.

From an interpretive point of view (discourse analysis), the following questions may be formulated:

- Which is the possessor's position and identity (the child? the family? the society?);
- Which are the referential domains concerned by the possessive RS (family, abuse, social life, etc.) and thus point out the domains that are presented as directly related to the main possessor
- Which are the stages of the text where the possessive RS are mostly used (is this the introduction, family history, analysis, conclusion, etc.)

From a longitudinal point of view (text genetics), the aim is

- To follow up the evolution of the possessive RS through the text's versions and propose hypotheses concerning the way possessive relations interfere with the writing process of this discourse genre.

The present study provides some preliminary results that are mainly qualitative and need a quantitative analysis on much more corpora. As mentioned in the panel introduction, we are now collecting a representative corpus of drafts.

Question 1, Table 1; Results

Data: We use the frame of the semantic roles theory (Fillmore 1962, etc.) and its terminology in order to identify the discourse focus (the possessor's position and identity).

An overview of the drafts shows that the possessive RS put the child (or children) in the focus of the discourse:

- the child is mainly the subject or even the agent of the possession (*his/her decision, emotion,* etc.)
- s/he is also the possessor in more than 90% of cases.

Discussion: However, these data do not mean that the child is the actor of the situation. Fostering is a current action in the described situations, it is perpetrated by the social authorities and the child is the patient/beneficiary (it depends on how one axiologically evaluates this practice). Thus, the child is initially and fundamentally in a passive position at a global level. The discourse of the reports tends then to resituate the child and give her/him the means of becoming a social actor (the agent position, for instance). This is one of the reasons why the evolution of the possessive RS through the writing process might be interesting for the pragmatic analysis: chronologically, is the active position of the child present already in the first drafts? Is there any quantitative or qualitative longitudinal evolution?

Question 2, Table 2; Results

*Data***:** The referential domains concerned by the possessive RS point out the entities that are directly associated to the child (inasmuch as the child is dominantly the focus of these RS).

These entities are family (eventually, fostering family) and family members; other relationships (social worker, educator); personal situation and experience (fostering, schooling, apprenticeship or internship, etc.); a situation diagnostic or history (problems, difficulties, social unrest, distress, abuse); emotions (worry, indignation); willing (agentivity, subjective genitive: choice, project, opinion, willing, demand); personal characterization (capacity, age); objects (cell phone, money)

Structures figées	*A son égard, à son détriment*	
	? (L'exercice de) son autorité	

	parentale	

Discussion

The referential domains covered by the possessive RS are very different. In fact, one may distinguish at least three large types:

- The relational RS, and among these, i) the creation of new relationships (with the social worker, the educator) and ii) the preexisting relationships (with members of the family).
- The descriptive RS, that inform the addressee of the social report about the child's nature/temper (emotions, willing); these RS are probably the most focused on the child.
- The immediately evaluative RS, which characterize the situation through dedicated institutional terms (diagnostic, history, etc.).
- It is possible to add a specific type, the institutional RS, containing names referring to the institution (educator, fostering, etc.)

There are some frequency differences through the reports' sections, as the study of 2 complete collections of drafts show.

In 1.1., for the sections: judge's expectations, family environment, taking into care, personal history, schooling:

The possessive RS (red line) are mostly used in sections like taking into care and personal history.

The relational RS (green line) are mostly used – no surprise here – in the section about family environment.

The descriptive RS (blue line) are mostly used in the sections concerning the family and the taking into care, with also sensible increase for "schooling" section.

In 2.1., for the sections acquaintance, explanation (of the fostering decision), observation, evolution, leisure activity, plan, health, and schooling:

The possessive RS (red line) are mostly used in the sections leisure and schooling.

The relational RS (green line) are mostly used in the section leisure

The descriptive RS (blue line) are mostly used in the sections evolution and leisure-plan.

Longitudinal study

The longitudinal study of the possessive RS shows that some discourse-schema and routines are present very early – since the first drafts – in social reports. Generic constrains seem to be very strong all through the re-writing process. This feature confirms the status of professional genre of these reports, but also points out ready-to-interpret strategies that sustain the pragmatic value of the discourse.

However, only some of the possessive constructions are used since the first versions of the text. The study of the specificities for the possessive determiners shows that they are generally under-represented in the first 3-4 versions; this means that proportionally to the text volume and considering their frequency in the last drafts of the text, they were expected to be more numerous through versions 1 to 4.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
ses	1 (-5)	4 (-4)	6 (-3)	6 (-3)	19	26	34	41	41	42	42	47	51	51	51	51
son	8 (-4)	12 (-4)	17 (-3)	18 (-3)	51	64	81	78	78	78	78	80	84	85	85	85
sa	4 (-4)	9 (-3)	13 (-2)	15	32	42	56	57	57	59	59	59	60	60	60	60

The possessive RS that appear since the first version of the 3 examined reports are:

Son accueil (taking into care)

Son placement (fostering)

(vivre chez) son père (father)

Sa famille (d'accueil) ((foster) family)

Sa scolarité (schooling)

Ses enfants (children)

Sometimes combined with prépositions or expansions

+

maintenir son accueil du jeune au moment de son orientation au (appears once in each version)

Total: 19/259

These RS show a less agentive child, *son accueil & son placement (his taking into care / fostering)* underlining his/her passive role, and most of the other RS of this list insisting on the relational aspect (family, father). Yet the child remains globally central to the discourse concern, inasmuch as s/he is the possessor.

Some of the RS emerge in the 2nd version, but most of them are used since the 5-6 draft only, which corresponds, in our corpus, to the middle or the third stage of the writing process.

RS emerge between the 6th and 9th versions and then stabilize, for the longest of them, at 1 unit per draft. The (This) schema shows up the same tendency for stabilization, but it also shows that the evolution of the RS through the text drafts is not necessarily augmentative: frequency may increase, and then reduce, before stabilization. The RS are subject to rewriting operations, where for instance "*ses parents*" disappears and "*son domicile*" is introduced; subsequently "*ses sentiments*" is added, or simply the development of the text implies the use of new RS [données dossier 5 aligné sur 24 versions]. Between draft 14 and draft 24,

Deleted	Added
Ses attentes, ses demandes, sa famille, sa famille Sa place sur le groupe, sa scolarité	Son père Son bien-être Son vécu antérieur, ses relations complexes avec sa famille, sa place d'unique garçon Ses colères Sa difficulté, son envie de rester, ses sentiments

Transformed : se parents → à son domicile

On the next schema we may see the general movement of possessive RS, rising and falling (fluctuating) at the beginning, stabilizing more or less around drafts 8-9.

Data: Through re-writing drafts, other possessors, like members of the family, do not lose their position, on the contrary. What we can observe in this other collection of drafts, it is the increase, in the last drafts, of RS focused on a member of the family as the possessor (follow the green line). One may wonder whether this functioning is connected to the search of an explanation for child's difficulties or it is simply an overgrowth of the father's situation description (which finally comes to explain child's situation, in fact, and contributes to the global text argumentation). Besides, a group of RS, which we may define as "institutional", inasmuch as it is all about educators, fostering, etc., is significantly present since the first draft, and increases its frequency in the last drafts (follow the blue line). The descriptive RS concerning the child's emotions and willing are rather constant through the rewriting process. The institutional constraints and the specialized discourse may be the reason of such uses. However, one may question the place of the child contrasted with the place of the institution in these social writings.

Conclusion

To sum it up in one sentence: the discourse of the social reports is focused on the child, BUT this focus is constantly negotiated against a focus on the family (in some drafts, we could note deletions of RS either centered on the parents or identifying the parents, like "*son père*") and a focus on the institution and its connection with the child (the possessive determiner being able to design new relationships → the discourse here influences and modifies the world).

This discourse is constrained by the writing conditions and the nature of the social practice and intervention.

Among the perspectives, the study of the possessive RS should be contrasted with the study of the definite and demonstrative RS on the one side, with the prepositional possessive phrases on the other side, inasmuch as the structural choice through the writing and rewriting processes may reveal pragmatic aims and/or effects.

And, of course, a network of data issued from the different studies presented in this panel would provide more relevant answers. For instance, the next presentation will interestingly highlight the case of "*ses difficulties*", which has a low relative frequency through drafts 6 and 8 out of 16.