

PROGRESSION ANALYSIS (PA): INVESTIGATING WRITING STRATEGIES IN THE WORKPLACE

DANIEL PERRIN

University of Berne

Abstract. Progression Analysis (PA) is a computer-based method for research on writing in the workplace. As a multilevel-analysis, PA focuses (1) on the situation of the writing process, (2) on the movement of writing throughout the growing text, and (3) on consciously applied strategies. In this chapter, the innovative procedures of PA are presented on behalf of a pedagogically motivated case study out of a national research project.

Keywords: Writing in the workplace, non-intrusiveness, writing strategies, movement of writing, repertoire of writing strategies, revisions, S-notation, newswriter.

INTRODUCTION

What do journalists do exactly when they write – and copy each other? What do they want to achieve, and what do they really achieve? These are the central questions of a national research project that investigates the working strategies of Swiss journalists under changing technical, economical and institutional conditions. Hundreds of professionals from all around Switzerland have been interviewed (Blum, Bonfadell, Marr, & Wyss, 2001), forty have been observed in case studies (Perrin, 2001c). To establish the relationship among workplace, writing strategies and text product, a non-intrusive methodology had to be developed. We called it Progression Analysis (Perrin, 1999a).

Progression Analysis (PA) is based on S-notation (Kollberg, 1998; Severinson Eklundh & Kollberg, 1996, in this volume) and records the writing process on three levels – *i.e.* as writing situation (in Section 1), as writing progression (in Section 2) and as the application of a repertoire of writing strategies (in Section 3).

1. THE MACRO LEVEL OF PA: STANDARDIZED INTERVIEW AND COOPERATIVE OBSERVATION

The writing process is influenced by the working instrument (Van Waes & Schellens, 2001), as well as by the writer's acculturation and experience, by the aims the writer

D. Perrin (2001). Progression analysis (PA): Investigating writing strategies in the workplace. In: G. Rijlaarsdam (Series ed.) & T. Olive & C. M. Levy (Vol. eds.), Studies in Writing: Volume 10: Contemporary Tools and Techniques for Studying Writing, p. 105-117.

© 2002 Kluwer Academic Publishers. Printed in the Netherlands

tries to achieve and the constraints she/he submits to, by the people the writer is living and working with and by the texts the writer produces and reads (Hayes, 1996; Perrin, 1997a). PA records such influences with standardized interviews and cooperative observation at work and presents them in the Portrait of the Relational Framework.¹

To give an example of such a Portrait, we focus on PK, foreign desk editor at the 'Schweizerische Depeschagentur' SDA (Swiss News Agency). PK gets source texts from other news agencies, processes them and transmits the new text first to the 'desk,' where colleagues check the daily output and send it out to newspapers, radio and TV. There, PK's text serves as basis for new texts again. So what we read, hear or see in the media has been shaped and reshaped in a chain of workplaces. More information can be found on the production chain in Häusermann (2001b), on reproductive writing in journalism in Häusermann (2001a: 49) and on reproductive writing in general in Jakobs (2001)

When PK is writing, time is running against him. He has two hours in the evening to review and summarize the daily events in a crisis area. The writing process presented here starts at 4 p.m. with the cross reading of source texts from other agencies, and it ends at 6:10 p.m., ten minutes after the deadline.² At noon, the agency SDA had sent a circular to its customers announcing the availability of the text for 6:00 p.m. PK has overrun the deadline by the same amount of time that one supply agency also overran it. During writing breaks, PK always checks if the last evening summary has arrived. Usually the 'Deutsche Presse-Agentur' DPA (German Press Agency) delivers it to the SDA before 5 p.m..

On the one hand, the time available for writing is given and limited. This also applies to the given text space: The finished article has to contain 450 words. The lead is supposed to consist of exactly five lines.³ On the other hand, the office is quite spacious: The desk is broad, well illuminated and almost empty. Paper, pens and markers are ready to be used, the laser printer works. Nevertheless, PK who 'has learned to write only by writing on the computer'⁴ restricts his workspace to the screen:

PK receives four source texts on the screen right at the beginning of his work. Additionally, his own text and the delayed DPA text are also shown on the screen. Thus,

1 This chapter focuses on the innovative aspects of Progression Analysis; the classical implications of interviews and observation are not to be discussed here. On the discussion of observation and interviews in research into writing processes, see Van der Geest, (1996: 11) or Eigler (1996: 999). On the items investigated in the underlying research project, see Perrin (2001c).

2 The deadline is the last submission date agreed on. The writer who exceeds his own deadline in the chain of journalistic production forces colleagues on the next production level to make up time, because the last date, the transmission to the reader, is unalterable in most cases. On deadlines in journalistic production, see Bell (1991: 152).

3 The lead is the first paragraph of the journalistic text. It is often emphasized by typographical means. In SDA texts, it has to outline the central ideas and raise the reader's desire to read it; standard length is five lines on the screen. PK and some of his colleagues take great pains to write a 'beautiful' lead of exactly five lines.

4 After a good decade at university, it took PK one year to write his diploma dissertation and another one to complete his thesis. With the first computer, his writer's block was broken, he says today. Working at the SDA, PK used a computer right from the beginning.

up to six buffers are opened and stacked at the same time. By pressing a button PK moves the buffer he needs to the front, and switches from one window to other, among his own text and the source texts. Due to the small screen, PK is forced to scroll, too, which means that he has to move up and down in the text currently visible (backgrounded area in Figure 1). As soon as these movements lead to changes in PK's new text, they are tracked on the next level of PA.

2. THE MESO LEVEL OF PA: S-NOTATION, LOGGING, AND PROGRESSION DIAGRAM

What happens with the text on the screen during writing? As the very basic structures of what we call writing progression, we can distinguish two actions: insertion and deletion of text. These two actions constitute the revisions. Preceding every revision, there is a break, an interruption in the course of continuous writing.

2.1. *S-notation*

To depict these steps in a standardized way, S-notation was developed (Severinson Eklundh & Kollberg, in this volume). Everywhere the writer interrupts his flow of writing to delete something in the text or insert something at another place, S-notation puts the break symbol | in the text. Deleted parts stand in [square brackets], later insertions in {pointed brackets}. Indices, small numbers show the order of steps. They are written at the bottom of the break symbol as $|_n$ and on both sides on top of the brackets as $^n[]^n$ or $^n\{ \}^n$. In S-notation we can record the order of revisions in PK's writing process in a very compact way:

- (a) In Kürze soll $^4[en]^4 |_5 ^1\{nun\}^1 |_2$ das Parlament $^5\{,\}^5 |_6 ^3\{in\}$ dem die Sozialisten die Mehrheit haben, $\}^3 |_4$ aufgelöst $^2[$ und eine Übergangsregierung ernannt werden $^2]_3 ^6\{ werden\}^6 |_7$.

Literal translation:

- (a') In brief shall $^4[-ENDING]^4 |_5 ^1\{now\}^1 |_2$ the parliament $^5\{,\}^5 |_6 ^3\{in\}$ which the socialists the majority have, $\}^3 |_4$ resolved $^2[$ and a transitional government appointed be $^2]_3 ^6\{ be\}^6 |_7$.

Yet what exactly does PK do, step by step? First, he copies an AFP sentence into his own text: 'In Kürze sollen das Parlament aufgelöst und eine Übergangsregierung ernannt werden'. (Soon, the parliament shall be resolved and a transitional government shall be appointed.) After copying, PK puts a nun (now) after 'In Kürze sollen' and turns to other parts of the text for the moment. He revises the sentence much later again, this time more radically. He drops the second part und eine 'Übergangsregierung ernannt werden,' deletes the plural ending 'en after soll' and adds the subordinate clause 'in dem die Sozialisten die Mehrheit haben after Parlament.' As a result, this sentence is shown on his screen: 'In Kürze soll nun das Parlament in dem die Sozialisten die Mehrheit haben, aufgelöst.' (The parliament, in which the socialists have a majority, shall soon [missing: be] resolved now.) Rearranging the text causes grammatical incorrectness for the moment. In a final round, PK corrects it putting a comma after 'Parlament' and adding the missing 'werden' (be). So all the changes a text has undergone during the process of its writing are recorded.⁵

Yet this is still not enough to depict intertextual text production, to describe the writing processes, in which the writer copies passages from sources. Here it is useful to know the origin of the inserted passages. For this reason, copied passages of text are underlined in extended S-notation. When there is more than one source text used, each source is given a different font:⁶

- (b) In Kürze soll ⁴{en}⁴ ¹{nun}¹ ²{das Parlament}⁵ ⁵{,}⁵ ⁶{in dem die Sozialisten die Mehrheit haben,}³ ⁴{aufgelöst}² [und eine Übergangsregierung ernannt werden]² ⁶{werden}⁶ ⁷.

This way, we are able to describe precisely a whole sequence of revisions without awkwardly showing each intermediate product, step by step.⁷

2.2. Progression diagram

But S-notation requires some reading practice, especially in more complex writing processes, when the writer has made several attempts to revise and rearrange the text.

6 The extension of S-Notation to mark the text source is not part of the standard of Severinson Eklundh-Kollberg (ibidem). In the underlying project, sources have been encoded manually after the recording of the writing process. In actual data collections, the tracing software encodes sources of copy-paste-steps automatically.

7 The computer can register and record data for S-Notation and Progression diagrams automatically. To make this happen, the text programs have to be extended by logging modules. We are developing these modules together with the producers of software used for writing and editing by the people investigated. The software for analysing and visualising the steps of the writing processes consists of Excel-modules and of 'Trace-it,' which generates S-Notation from the logfile. Trace-it was developed as a student project at the Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm. It is based on S-Notation (Nilsson & Kollberg, 1994; Severinson Eklundh & Kollberg, 1996; and Kollberg & Severinson Eklundh, in this volume).

Contemporary Tools and Techniques for Studying
Writing

Olive, T.; Levy, C.M. (Eds.)

2002, IX, 163 p., Softcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-0106-2