Book review

Reviewed by: *Geert Jacobs, Ghent University*

For the past two decades or so, Daniel Perrin has been one of the leading figures in a small but increasingly influential network of researchers who call for the systematic language-oriented study of news production processes: no analysis of media discourse, it is argued, can be complete without a thorough consideration of the contextual dynamics in which it has emerged. Perrin's *Linguistics of Newswriting* is now the first book-length introduction to this field. It is both deeply theoretical and overwhelmingly empirical. The book's scope is ambitious, from the "ins" of gaining access to the "outs" of feeding back to the practitioners. This unique combination of breadth and depth makes *The Linguistics of Newswriting* essential reading for all scholars, students and practitioners interested in how the news or any other form of professional discourse is made. (On a personal note, Perrin's book is so elegantly written, sharply focused and innovatively structured that he has single-handedly reconciled me with the monograph genre.)

The challenge

The Linguistics of Newswriting is divided into five parts, which more or less correspond to the stages of scholarly research (though not all of them are traditionally included in this type of books). Part A introduces the main theoretical background, outlining key concepts like newswriting and applied linguistics. Media linguistics is introduced as a subdiscipline of applied linguistics, one that is focused on language use in the media. It is a subdiscipline guided by theory, as it is using data from media to answer research questions raised by linguistics, as well as a subdiscipline by practice, clarifying problems of the media business with linguistic tools.

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Interestingly, this part is called "the Challenge", as Perrin identifies research into newswriting as a gap in linguistically-based approaches to the analysis of professional language use. Drawing on a wide range of data from the "Idée Suisse" project, where Perrin's team investigated language norms and practices of the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation (SRG), the book sets out to translate experienced practitioners' tacit knowledge into so-called mid-range theories about what works under which conditions, or – more specifically - how the editorial teams of the station's daily television news programmes Tagesschau, Téléjournal and 10 Vor 10 combine routines and creativity to establish social relevance on time. (Perrin says he prefers talking about mid-range theories because he wants to steer away from the grand theories representing a highly abstract form of knowledge.)

SRG is represented in the four linguistic regions of Switzerland (French, German, Italian and Romansch) and its official programming mandate is therefore to promote public understanding (abbreviated throughout the book as PPU). As a result, Perrin's newsroom ethnography is focused on issues of language policy as well as media management, production and reflection in a company caught between public service demands and market forces: the book sets out to unravel how, in specific cases and amidst contradictory expectations and diverging practices, individual journalists succeed in finding emergent solutions to overcome this conflict. Clearly, PPU can be considered a complex situated activity taking place throughout the media organization. It constitutes the nexus of a network of institutional patterns of studio interaction driven by national and international newsflows as well as by the station's own news broadcasting times. But there's more: Perrin also aims at making this newly found knowledge about journalistic expertise explicit in the form of recommendations. This is called knowledge transformation and it is a key objective in *The Linguistics of Newswriting*. Investigating newswriting to identify good practices only makes sense if stakeholders are interested in the resulting knowledge, says Perrin.

The Idée Suisse data come in the form of what is called "case stories" (and not case studies) as they represent the results of the research process and they are narratives, following a dramaturgy of raising and resolving suspense as well as oriented towards comprehensibility and attractiveness for a professional and not strictly academic readership. Each case is represented in a nine-step story pattern, zooming in on newswriting as part of a broader dynamics of text production, and working in rich points where micro decisions trigger macro change and spelling out the use of source materials, which is variously conceptualized as intertextuality or – brilliantly out of the box, vintage Perrin I would say - as a chain of economic value production.

Procedure

Part B, Procedure, is about the Idée Suisse triangulating methodology. Perrin feels strongly about the need to integrate media linguistics and journalism studies. (His razor-sharp account of the difference and the complementarity of the two disciplines on pp. 47-48 will inspire anyone who wants to try and bridge the gap between the two.) Perrin

feels equally strongly about the need to conduct transdisciplinary research, i.e. to facilitate collaboration between scientific and non-scientific disciplines (and not, as Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002, defined it, to initiate a dialogue between two scientific disciplines, "which may lead to a development of both through a process of each internally appropriating the logic of the other as a resource for its own development", p. 206). He goes on to explain how linguistics, writing research and journalism studies see newswriting differently and how the three leave a one-million-dollar gap to be closed by the book and by research to come: to find out what journalists actually do when they write, or – more scholarly - to examine editorial strategies, routines and procedures both as cognitive and social activities. In order to do this, Perrin argues we need to combine micro and macro levels, product and process perspectives, theory and practice. His is a multi-layered toolbox including version analysis, progression analysis, variation analysis and metadiscourse analysis.

These are some of the most memorable pages of the book, with Perrin explicating ethnographic saturation in his cycle of data collection and validity as well as reliability in his analysis in a language that is both eloquent and crystal clear. The paragraphs about his choice for field studies (and not laboratory experiments) and for single case study (at the expense of statistical representation) provide the perfect basis for classroom discussions. And while the use of footnotes is somewhat unevenly divided across the various chapters of the book, Perrin's use of bibliographic references is remarkably selective and efficient at the same time.

Solution

Part C is called Solution and it presents the results of the Idée Suisse project. Perrin shows how newswriting takes place across four increasingly complex environments: interpersonal environments (referring to oral negotiations like editorial storyboard meetings or the interaction between the journalist and the cutter), intersituative environments (bridging situations of production and reception), intertextual environments (originating from source materials) and intermodal environments (combining signs from different systems, including of course writing and video footage). In negotiating these environments, journalists engage with a wide range of agents (newswriting as social activity), they are involved in different tasks (cutting, translating, proofreading) and with different tools (software, hardware, internet, archive) right from the input interface of comprehending the assignment (taking orders, observing deadlines) to the output interface of implementing the product (including stage directions).

We have now arrived in the dark hearts of the newsroom and *The Linguistics of Newswriting* is the first book to present such a complete model of its linguistic dimensions. The model also includes a functions frame: newswriting takes place across various functions of language use, including a referential function (explaining what is news), a cognitive function for the reader (connect it to the audience's previous knowledge), an interactive function (balancing stakeholders' goals) and a social

function (translating between linguistic communities). Perrin adds that journalists are active in the following activity fields: finding sources, limiting the topic, taking position, staging the story and establishing relevance in an effort to contribute to public discourse. The structures frame, finally, demonstrates that newswriting involves phonological, lexical, syntactic and textual choices. Surely, this is not the definitive model, but it is definitely more definitive than anything we have seen so far.

Consequence and dissemination

Getting back to the question of what journalists actually do when they write, Perrin introduces the overarching concept of the "medialinguistic mindset", the journalists' robust awareness of the frames and activity fields listed above and their relations. Part D, Consequence, looks at how to shape this medialinguistic mindset as a precondition, goal and consequence of knowledge transformation. In this part, Perrin refers to a series of cases to show how his research architecture gradually expanded: from ethnography (leaving the researcher with the problem of generalization) to include, first, grounded theory (raising doubts about how to implement the research), then transdisciplinary action research (including theorizing issues) and finally realist social theory (leaving researchers with the problem of explaining change). Some of the empirically grounded good practice models are perhaps less than fully transparent (including the writing helix), but there can be no doubt that Perrin is to be commended for experimenting with an unprecendented mix of complementary research frameworks (including progression analysis) and the case stories presented here are invariably rich in detail.

In Part E, at last, the focus is on dissemination, with Perrin reconsidering the empirical basis of his knowledge transformation efforts: how to set up, maintain and disclose the data available through corpora, for example. These, and many others, are key questions for a book that sets such great store by feeding back knowledge to the practitioners. That is why it is good to see that Perrin has made a wide range of training materials available on www.news-writing.net. This is one more way in which *The Linguistics of Newswriting* should be considered a groundbreaking project, one that will inspire future research efforts in the field of newswriting, and beyond.

Reference

Chiapello, E,. & Fairclough, N. (2002), Understanding the new management ideology: a transdisciplinary contribution from critical discourse analysis and new sociology of capitalism, *Discourse & Society*, 13 (2): 185-208.doi:10.1177/0957926502013002406