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**Volume 10**

Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Parliamentary Discourse

Edited by Paul Bayley

University of Bologna

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John Benjamins Publishing Company
Amsterdam/Philadelphia
Introduction
The whys and wherefores of analysing parliamentary discourse

Paul Bayley

It is well-known what happens on these occasions. The simplest and most obvious conclusion is rejected as unworthy of such experts in wisdom as these ingenious hoary old men, and an obscure alternative is warmly debated and then rejected; finally, a most far-fetched and marvellously improper conclusion is found and unanimously accepted. Robert Graves, Count Belisarius

1. Premise

This volume brings together a number of different studies of the language of representative assemblies, or parliaments, and thus it deals with the question of special discourse communities working within specific political institutions. Parliaments are institutions which are dedicated to talk; members of parliament debate legislative proposals and scrutinise the work of governments through questioning; they may also be the sites where governments explain and justify their policies. Parliamentary talk is a sub-genre of political language and represents its most formal and institutionalised variety.

The volume does not attempt to make an exhaustive and definitive statement or description of the nature of parliamentary discourse, and given the fact that this is a collection of papers looking at specific instances of parliamentary sittings, such an aim would be arduous. Indeed, one may ask whether it would be feasible at all to make a definitive statement since there are many forms of representative assembly – at a local level, a national level and also a supranational level. Moreover, parliamentary talk may take place in different institutional contexts: in a full sitting in the chamber (where talk may tend
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... to be adversarial), in committee (where it may be cooperative) and, informally, in the corridors (where it may be based on threats and promises). To limit the field of study, what shall be examined here is the language of national parliaments in full sitting. However, it should not be forgotten that national parliaments are ubiquitous—they can be found in dictatorships and democracies, one-party states and pluralistic liberal democracies, plutocracies and theocracies—and take on many forms and carry out various political functions. Nine out of ten countries have elected deliberative assemblies of one kind or another (Norton 1993:4). Moreover, they are obviously sensitive to institutional-political and socio-cultural variations, or to political culture in general. And so to be more precise, these studies will be circumscribed, with perhaps one exception, to the analysis of national parliaments in western democracies.

But even having circumscribed the domain in this way, it is not easy to identify a “typical parliament”. Indeed it could be said that the “typical parliament” is the exception and not the rule. For example, it could be said that a parliament is an assembly that is elected by universal suffrage; that, once elected, it assembles under its own initiative; that participation in elections is freely open to political parties, movements and individuals; that its functions include that of legislation and scrutiny of the workings of the executive. However, even though the first three sets of criteria might be satisfied in many cases—taking as given the fact that not all chambers, or not all members of legislative chambers, are directly elected (see the House of Lords in the United Kingdom or the Bundesrat in Germany)—national parliaments in western democracies may be of different kinds. So I shall begin this introduction by briefly summarising how parliaments may differ.

In the first place, western democracies have different constitutional frameworks. Each nation may be classified as a unitary state (like France and Great Britain), as a regionalist state (like Italy and Spain) or as a federal state (like the United States and Germany), and in each case powers, and consequently parliamentary functions, are distributed differently. Moreover, to make the picture more complex, very few ‘pure’ models exist and all of them are subject to evolution over time. Britain is classified as a unitary state but it gives more autonomy to local authorities than France does and, besides, with the process of devolution, it has introduced an element of regionalism into its constitutional framework. Italy is a regionalist state but it has not allowed much autonomy to its regional structures, even though reforms are currently under discussion. The United States is a federal nation and yet the power of the single States declined over the twentieth century and throughout its history the problems of federalism have been frequently been the cause of contention.

Federalist states are typically organised through a written constitution which endows parliament with enumerated powers (even though there is, in many federal states, a centralising tendency for them to acquire ‘implied powers’). Unitary states on the other hand tend to give complete sovereignty to parliament, even though many require qualified majorities for particular forms of legislation. However, some unitary states, such as those belonging to the European Union, have ceded some of their sovereignty to supranational bodies and as a consequence a considerable amount of their legislative activity is imposed from above. And so a major difference between parliaments, which may be reflected in the linguistic dimension in a banal way, is that the scope of the questions that may be the subject of parliamentary talk varies from institution to institution.

The second variable regards the balance of powers between the legislative and the executive branches of government; parliaments may exist with systems that are presidential (for example, the USA), semi-presidential (France), or parliamentary (Italy). In presidential systems the legislative and the executive branches are elected independently, are endowed with independent powers, and members of one branch cannot simultaneously be members of the other; the executive is not formally accountable to the legislature and it does not have the power to dissolve it (Heywood 2001:179–181). In parliamentary systems, on the other hand, governments are formed by parliament; members of the government are drawn largely from parliament; government relies on the confidence of parliament and may be removed by it if it loses this confidence; on the other hand governments may have the power to dissolve parliaments (Heywood 2000:172–174). Once again, these features are typical of parliamentary systems but they are not universally so. For example, in the Italian system, governments cannot dissolve parliaments, even though there have been occasions when they have wanted to, because heads of states have jealously guarded this prerogative, while in constitutional monarchies, like Spain and the United Kingdom, the power of dissolution is exercised, de facto if not de jure, by the head of government. These differences will be reflected in parliamentary language because in parliamentary systems debate is generally constructed in terms of a conflict between government and opposition while in presidential systems this may not necessarily be the case. For example, a President of the United States may have to face the opposition of Congress, even when his party has the majority. Representatives, and to a greater extent Senators, may be more interested in upholding state or local interests than party interests.
Thirdly, parliaments differ according to their overall role within the framework of policy-making and this variable may be independent of the two above-mentioned considerations. Parliaments have been categorised as either policy making, policy influencing or executive dominated institutions (Norton 1984, 1994). The first, rather rare, are autonomous from the executive and have an active role in forming policy; an example could be the U. S. Congress. This may be a result of the U. S. presidential system which foresees a clear separation of powers, but not necessarily since counter examples may abound. For example, Mexico has a presidential system and an independently elected parliament which has, however, for most of its history, acted in support of an executive which was controlled by one party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional, for a full 71 years. Most parliaments can be classified in one of the latter two categories. Policy influencing parliaments, like the Italian one, may exert authority over the executive while executive-dominated Parliaments, like the French, act as a rubber stamp for executive policy making. The difference between the last two may be rather hard to define. For example, both the British and the Italian parliaments are sovereign institutions and yet the Italian parliament may more effectively influence policy because the system of alliances that has held executives together since the Second World War has made policy making subject to negotiation and mediation, whereas in Great Britain most governments have been controlled by a single party and thus have been able to impose their will on parliaments.

Systems of representation, moreover, vary considerably; they may be proportional or based on simple majorities, single or double ballot, and they may or may not foresee representative quotas. Electors may vote for parties or for individuals; the nation may be divided into constituencies or it may not. The elected may be considered as "trustees", "delegates" or holders of a "mandate", either from a political party or from a geographical region. Systems of representation may be designed to guarantee governability or to provide maximum representativity. In the latter case, electors may feel greater empathy with the institution while in the former the elector-elected relationship may be more distant. Similarly, proportional systems may allow for the election of parties occupying the extreme ends of the political spectrum, while majority systems tend to produce two-party parliaments. Clearly, ideas of representation and the design of electoral systems may determine what kind of language is acceptable or not in any given parliament.

Moreover, even though the architecture of parliamentary systems is designed with particular objectives in mind, the language of constitutional law is notoriously indeterminate and the institutions themselves are sensitive to cultural variations and thus evolve over time. For example, the current relationship between the President of the United States and Congress was not foreseen by the founding fathers, neither was the system of universal suffrage for choosing Representatives and Senators. Similarly, India's national, or "union" parliamentary structure and its electoral system were designed largely along the lines of the House of Commons and yet the two institutions certainly do not reflect one another either from the point of view of governability or from that of representativity. So, as well as institutional models as variables, it is also necessary to take into consideration differences in political culture.

Political culture is determined by long-term orientation to government and by general beliefs, symbols and values. Political culture can interact with systems of representation, and with the rules and regulations of specific parliaments to create institutional practices that may seem surprising. For example, partly because of political culture and partly because of its electoral system, Britain has been a two party system for a long time, a system dominated by the alternation of two parties in government and opposition. Two party systems elected by simple majority systems tend to produce a political mainstream (even though individual parties, like the British Labour party, may contain a broad variety of political orientations) and to exclude parties at the political 'extremes' and it might be hypothesised that this kind of political hegemony would result in a rather low level of conflict. However, the House of Commons is typified by "adversarial" politics in which the role of the opposition is generally to oppose, at all costs. This could be a result of the rules and regulations of the House which allow the government to set the agenda, which exclude the opposition from presenting its own legislative proposals and which limit the capacity of the opposition to have its proposals for amendments discussed. In practice, the House of Commons is dominated by the government.

The Italian parliament, on the other hand, from the inception of the Republic and the constitution of 1948 up to the beginning of the 1990's, was characterised by a multi-party system elected by proportional representation, and the dominance of one governing party, the Democrazia Cristiana, supported by a constellation of allies, with the largest opposition party being the Partito Comunista Italiano. It would be feasible to imagine this as a potentially highly conflictual system, and in some ways it was. But Italian political culture was, and remains, fundamentally "consociationalist": power tends to be shared. Because governments do not have full control over the parliamentary agenda, because bills and amendments can be presented by practically any MP and even through popular petitions, because governments cannot always count on the loyalty of the majority alliance in divisions, and, finally, because parliamentary
committees have wide legislative powers and are not necessarily controlled by the governing majority. 90% of the legislation of this period was passed with an almost unanimous vote; the opposition was able to support the government, overtly or covertly, and at the same time negotiate its own amendments.\footnote{1}

The Italian electoral system was reformed between 1993 and 1995, with the introduction of majority voting for 75% of seats in the Camera dei Deputati. That the difference between Britain and Italy is a result of political culture can be demonstrated by the fact that these reforms have not reduced the number of parties represented in parliament. An illustration of the dissimilarity between the British and Italian system may be provided by what is arguably the most important function of parliament, approving the financial bill and thus distributing the year’s resources. In Britain, the finance bill, which cannot be amended in the upper house, is approved intact within a matter of days. In Italy, it occupies the agenda of both houses for a number of months and is usually amended quite radically during this procedure.

To sum up this first part then, parliaments are institutions that vary according to constitutional frameworks, their function within the political system as a whole, representativity and political culture. This volume will presents a series of analyses of parliamentary texts, or transcripts of parliamentary talk, which have the aim of investigating how parliamentary language in liberal democracies can be analysed from the point of view of functional linguistics, and whether such analysis can give us insights into political behaviour. In fact, the study of naturally occurring texts within the perspective of functional linguistics may have two objectives; data can be studied in order to verify the soundness of theoretical models and methodological approaches, or they can be studied in order to see what the theory can tell us about the texts. This volume attempts to balance these two different aims.

Of the following nine papers, six deal with comparisons between debates held in the national parliaments of members of the European Union – three constitutional monarchies (Britain, Spain and Sweden), one federal republic (Germany) and one parliamentary republic (Italy) – and in each of these cases, the House of Commons is one of the paragons. The three exceptions are, firstly, the paper by Carbò in which she draws on examples taken from Mexico, a presidential republic on the border of the northern and the southern part of the world, secondly, Miller’s paper on the 1998 impeachment debate in the U.S. House of Representatives, another presidential republic bordering on the former but located firmly in the northern part of the world, and finally Van Dijk’s paper on the “context” of parliamentary discourse which does, however, conclude with illustrative examples drawn from a House of Commons debate.

The debates analysed tend to represent the most dramatic aspects of parliamentary life – for example, war, European integration and thus the ceding of sovereignty, the impeachment of a President, and so on. Three possible weaknesses may be perceived in this general outline. First of all, a large proportion of parliamentary work is dedicated to matters of routine and to uncontroversial questions. It is not uncommon to witness speeches being made to a practically empty chamber. By concentrating on matters of fundamental national interest, we may be misrepresenting parliamentary discourse as a whole, even though I would argue that while controversial and conflictual debate may not be the most frequent feature of parliamentary discourse, it might be said to represent its quintessence. Secondly, rather than dealing with parliamentary discourse in its complete sense, the analyses are based on official transcripts. These may be inaccurate and even if they are accurate, they lack a fundamental dimension of parliamentary discourse – it spokenness (Slembrouck 1992); they also lack (even though transcripts often try to represent it) that background of jeers, heckles and applause that contribute to the context of a parliamentary debate. Thirdly, the selection of debates may be seen to be eurocentric, perhaps anglocentric. This could possibly be justified by the fact that the British parliament is widely considered to be the “mother of parliaments”, although Iceland could stake a valid claim for this honour. Alternatively, it could be argued that, with the exception of the papers on the USA and Mexico, it has permitted the comparison of similar institutions – parliaments working within parliamentary systems of government in a European framework. Or, finally, it could be suggested that a volume published in English but covering various linguistic communities is all the more comprehensible if English is one of the major languages in the spotlight. But the point that I would like to make is that the papers offer models and methodological frameworks for analysis that can, mutatis mutandis, be applied to other parliamentary realities.

2. Language and institutions

There has been a considerable amount of interest, over the last few decades, in the study of how language functions within specific institutional contexts and how in many ways linguistic practices have come to define institutions, on the one hand, and how the institutions have defined discourse practices on the other. The two broad institutional areas which most closely intersect with parliamentary discourse – law and politics – have been the subject of a number of linguistic studies. Both politics and law are broad macro categories; studies
on political language may include investigations into very different sub-genres such as electoral language, party political language, the language of diplomacy and international relations, the language of social conflict, the language of parliament, and so on. Similarly, studies in law and language could include such different activities as lawyer-client discourse, legislative language, judicial discourse, and so on.

Linguistics has not been the only discipline to investigate the relationship between language and politics, or language and law, but similar interest has been shown within political science and jurisprudence – and in the latter case it is not easy, in some of the literature, to draw a line between linguistic analysis and legal studies (see, for example, Goodrich 1987; Schauer 1993 and Douzinas, Warrington, & McVeigh 1993). The interdisciplinary interest in the law/language or the politics/language interface should be hardly surprising since we cannot imagine either politics or law – as they are today – without language. The activities of a politician, which may include things such as seeking consensus, elaborating policy, negotiating and mediating in conflicts, representing interests and opposing the policy of others, are all fundamentally linguistic activities. Similarly, the activities of the various legal professions – formulating laws or contracts, constructing arguments for or against a given position, mediating disputes, interpreting laws or other legal documents – are intrinsically reflected in and shaped by linguistic practices.

Of these two areas, parliamentary discourse can be most clearly positioned within the category of political language, of which there is a considerable literature, dating back to the classics. For recent book-length linguistic studies on politics, in the strictest sense, mention could be made of Rossini Favretti (1980), Atkinson (1984), Chilton (1985), Bolletieri Bosinelli (1985), Geis (1987) Wodak (1989), Fairclough (1989), Wilson (1990), Bayley and Miller (1993), Miller and Vasta (1997), Blommaert and Bulcaen (1998), Chilton, Ilyin and Mey (1998), Fairclough (2000). Depending on how broadly we were to define politics, a complete list of books and articles that could be fitted into this category would be very long indeed. Volumes in which political scientists have tackled language-related questions include Edelman (1964, 1977), Shapiro (1984), and Merelman (1993).

However, we cannot say that there is such a thing as 'the language of politics' any more than we can claim that there exists 'the language of law'. They are both composite discourse types which include a number of subsets, or specific functional varieties and politics in particular, because of its ubiquity, assumes a very large number of forms. For example, if it is true that one of the most important arenas for political socialisation is the family, even informal conversation around the meal table could be considered as a type of political discourse. This volume seeks to examine one of these varieties – parliamentary discourse(s) – in a cross-cultural perspective. The activity of parliaments is, or can be seen as, linguistic activity, and while we may question the centrality of the role of parliamentary interventions in the decision making process (many legislatures, as we have already seen, tend to ratify decisions taken elsewhere), parliament is the site where government and opposition go 'on the record', where justification and criticism of legislative initiatives is made, where interests are articulated and represented, and where politicians are judged by their peers, their party hierarchies and, perhaps to a lesser extent and indirectly via the media, by their electors. These processes are at the heart of western democracies.

But notwithstanding the interest that has been shown in political language, there have been few studies on the language of parliament, and this despite the fact that all parliamentary discourse becomes an official document and is freely available, either through print or, over the last few years, on the internet. There are of course some exceptions; first of all mention should be given to two book-length publications: Carbò's two volume study covering 30 years of Mexican parliamentary discourse (1996) and Wodak and Van Dijk's book (2000) investigating discourses on ethnicity and immigration in six European parliaments. Wilson dedicates a section of his book on political language (1990) to parliamentary questions. In 1992, Carbò published an article on interruptions in parliamentary discourse and Selmrouch published an influential article on how transcripts of parliamentary reports are produced. Crystal's The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language (1995) dedicates a small section to questions in parliament, largely drawn from Wilson (1990), as an example of social variation in English. Other articles in the same field, published in journals or collections include Miller (1997, 1999), Bayley (1998, 1999), Ilie (1999, 2000, 2001), Antaki and Leudar (2001) and Harris (2001). Finally, the Journal of Language and Politics has recently dedicated an issue to parliamentary language (see Chilton 2003).

3. Why study parliamentary language?

I prefaced this brief review of the literature by saying that little attention had been paid to the language of parliament in the literature, yet it might be said that the list I have set out is more than sufficient; indeed, there is a certain amount of scepticism towards parliaments and their activities. The talk of
members of deliberative assemblies is, moreover, frequently the butt of jokes, and this may be an old tradition, as the epigraph to this chapter suggests. Norton (1993: 207) reports that opinion polls taken in 1989 and 1991 in Great Britain indicated that 43% of citizens had "not very much" confidence in parliament. Similar trends can be observed in other nations. For example, the website for the National Centre for Education Statistics publishes two polls which indicate that in 1996 39% of the sample had "very little" confidence in Congress while 41% had "some". Two years later these figures were 20% and 48% respectively, while those who had a "great deal" of confidence were 3.4% and 10%. A poll conducted in Italy in 2003 by Abacus indicated that 46% of a sample of Italians had no confidence in the Senato della Repubblica and 51% had no confidence in the Camera dei Deputati while in the same poll 85% of the same sample declared that they did have confidence in the appointed Presidente della Repubblica.

Even the major media seem to pay little regard to parliamentary discourse. It is true that many newspapers publish a digest of parliament and that, for example, in Britain the BBC has a specialist Parliamentary Channel and in Italy the RAI provides a similar service both on radio and on satellite links, and that debates on important or 'newsworthy' issues are reported; but they are not necessarily accurate, they tend to focus on the more spectacular events of parliamentary life, and they often pay more attention to the discourse that takes place on the margins of parliament, such as the extra-parliamentary forms of persuasion that may take place in the corridors or lobbies, rather than the debate itself (Bayley 1998).

This may be a sound professional judgment on how journalists should represent political processes. For example, in some parliamentary systems, the British one for instance, it is unlikely that the rhetoric of an MP has ever switched a vote from one side to the other. As newspaper discourse suggests, persuading and convincing MPs probably take place through private discourse lying outside of public scrutiny. But there is nonetheless some tension between this apparent indifference towards parliamentary talk and one of the most deeply rooted beliefs of western democracies – the value of elected parliaments and universal franchise.²

However, as Norton argues (1993: 2–3), no sooner had parliaments reached their golden age in the nineteenth century than their importance began to wane. There are probably two major reasons for their apparent decline. Firstly, the site of political decision-making shifted from parliament to government, especially since, in many nations, the strength of parties has allowed governments to be sure of their parliamentary majorities, and consequently parlia-

ment has become marginalised. It is, however, important not to generalise; parties in the USA are not so central to the behaviour of members of Congress as they are in many European countries. They owe their election to local, and not national, party structures and their constituents are likely to judge them on the basis of their voting record on single issues and not on their loyalty to a party. In Britain, the great expansion of the electorate after the 1867 Reform Act caused the rise of mass-membership parties and the consequent decline in the freedom of action of individual elected members. Obviously a broad generalisation needs to take into account specific historical circumstances and particular institutional arrangements. Indeed, as Hobsbawm reminds us, in twentieth century Europe democratically elected assemblies did not have a good track record and

the only European countries with adequate democratic political institutions that functioned without a break during the inter-war period were Britain, Finland (only just), the Irish Free State, Sweden and Switzerland.

(Hobsbawn 1994: 111)

In the United States the shift of power from the legislature to the executive had causes and dynamics related to the separation of powers enacted by the constitution, probably culminating in the New Deal era, that merit individual attention. This list could continue at some length.

Secondly, the arena for political debate has shifted in the last fifty years from Parliament to the mass media, which have arguably become the principal organ for the communication of political ideas. Consensus for or against a particular policy proposal is sought through the mass media and parliamentary dialectic has only a limited persuasive function, perhaps a merely symbolic one. The media are the site at which many political issues are primarily aired, and at which political consensus is sought. Compare the contemporary role of television to mid-20th century Britain when in the infancy of television from 1944 to 1956, the BBC and later ITN were not allowed to cover questions that were to be debated in Parliament within the next fourteen days for fear that television might take on the role as an alternative forum for political debate; during these years there were very few televised political interviews and discussions, and until 1959 electoral campaigns for the Commons were not covered by television news. Moreover, television cameras were not admitted to the House of Commons until 1989 (Seymour-Ure 1996: 179–200). At the end of the century, however, the number of arenas for political debate had expanded exponentially.

So we might question whether parliamentary debating, which is a form of public discourse, readily available to those that wish to consult it but probably
consulted by very few, can be said to draw on and contribute to wider discourse practices or to ideology. However, I would argue that, although parliamentary discourse is institutionally the prerogative of a limited number of speakers and does not constitute a mass-consumed text-type, political debate does not take place in a void. There are mediating structures between MPs and society as a whole, and each politician has his or her interests to serve in the form of party organisations, constituents, pressure groups, etc. Political ideas, moreover, are circulated in the media as a result of the reciprocal interdependency of politicians and journalists. As in all forms of discourse, “every text […] makes its meanings against the background of other texts”, different social interests and competing discourses (Lemke 1982: 159).

Moreover, even though the decision-making role of Parliaments may have declined, they do have a number of important functions – not least that of representation – which are not necessarily directly involved with legislation. Asking questions of ministers for example is not a legislative activity but a calling to account of the government in the name of party, constituency or other interests. Similarly, when a Minister makes a statement to Parliament, he or she may be promoting or defending the interests of a part of government policy, say foreign policy, but not legislating. The US Congress even has a judicial function in the case of impeachment. Bagehot (1867) listed five functions of the British parliament: elective, expressive, teaching, informing and legislative. Packenham (1970), attempting to identify universal functions, listed eleven which may be compressed, following Norton (1993:7), into three: first, the legitimation of law-making; second, the recruitment, socialisation and training of politicians; and, finally, making decisions or influencing opinion. Thus the discourse of parliament may serve to provide a formal stamp of approval to legislation, an arena in which politicians are judged by their peers, and a site of party loyalty and the authority of governments seem to be the most decisive factors – but it does provide the semantic as well as the symbolic framework within which important social and political questions can be represented. It

stakes out the boundaries which demarcate which meanings can and cannot be made at the symbolic centre of representative democracies.

4. Characteristics of parliamentary language

So, what characterises parliamentary language? Van Dijk argues that parliamentary discourse does not have any exclusive linguistic features, but that instead it may have a number of prototypical non-exclusive features (2000:47) and of course he is right, even though certain of what might be called its epiphenomena, such as its peculiar turn-taking procedures and the authorised terms of address that are associated with it, do seem to be typical of this discourse model. However, only the most “frozen” functional varieties of language – such as the language of air-traffic control, of playing bridge, or, to a lesser extent of legislation – are characterised by strong linguistic constraints. Most functional varieties are characterised not by the exclusivity of the linguistic choices that typify them but by the high probability of the occurrence of particular features which combine in texts in distinctive ways. Indeed, I would venture to suggest that most people would be able to identify and classify as such a recording of a parliamentary intervention, in much the same way that they would be able to identify a recording of a sermon as part of a religious ceremony or a recording of a lesson as part of educational processes. Thus it might be argued that particular combinations of certain features involving various levels of linguistic and discursive analysis, such as some phonological features (see Moosmüller 1989), interaction strategies, intervention length, terms of address, metadiscursive and argumentative lexis, direct and indirect quotation, explicit expressions of belief and opinion, epistemic modality tending towards certainty rather than probability, and complex structures of subordination favouring conditionals and concessives, give parliamentary language its distinctive and recognisable flavour. These are of course linguistic features that are common to many functional varieties, but it is the way that these features are combined, probabilistically, which leads to the definition of a register.

In order to better present these features, it would be necessary to begin with an analysis of the context of parliamentary debating, since most linguists of a functional orientation agree that language is determined by the context in which it is produced. However, since Van Dijk in this volume tackles precisely this question, I shall merely consider a rather unsystematic series of non-linguistic variables that may contribute towards shaping the discourse of MPs and which might prove to be fundamental factors in the definition of an
ethnography of parliaments. On this point see also Van Dijk (2000: 45–78). I shall draw my examples from the two parliaments I am most familiar with – the House of Commons and the Italian Camera dei Deputati.

In the first place it should be said that although on a cross-cultural level parliaments fulfil broadly similar functions, they are sensitive to the context of culture and history in the widest sense. This would involve a number of linguistic and non-linguistic variables such as: the general rules of politeness, tolerance of aggressive linguistic behaviour, preferences towards abstract or concrete political language, concepts of irony and humour, etc. in a given culture (see Ilie and Bevitori in this volume); the form of political representation – parliaments elected by systems of proportional representation are more likely to host voices from outside the political mainstream, or outside the paradigms of dominant discourse, than assemblies elected on first-past-the-post systems; constitutional arrangements on the separation of power – parliaments which are totally independent of the executive are likely to have discourse patterns which differ from those in which legislative and executive power are closely intertwined; the strength of political parties – political systems with strong centralised party organisations are likely to produce different discourse from systems characterised by weak party structures. Other variables may include procedural question such as the extent to which filibustering is tolerated, or the extent to which the government of the day controls the parliamentary agenda. It can thus be hypothesised that the social and institutional norms and, perhaps above all, the history of a given culture will determine to some extent the kind of language that can be used in parliament.

Secondly, parliamentary discourse is ritualised and rule-bound; it is governed by tradition, rules and regulations and new Members are required to respect them. Naturally the rituals and rules observed change from nation to nation but they will all determine particular linguistic choices. For example, in the House of Commons, MPs are not allowed to read from a prepared text, but they may use notes. They are not permitted to directly address their colleagues, but only the chair. This means that, while the frequency of the first person pronoun is very high, the frequency of you is extremely low for spoken discourse. In fact, with the exception of you being used to address the Speaker of the House, any other instances of its are embedded in direct quotations, invented indirect discourse, or are used in rhetorical structures of apostrophe. These are of course by no means universal features of parliamentary discourse. In Italy, for example, reading from a written text is not just permitted but common practice; direct address is permitted and an Italian MP may address the chair of the House (Signor Presidente), the whole house (Signor Presidente, onorevoli colleghi), a part of the house (voi della maggioranza attuale) or a single member, and in which case he or she may choose between a variety of address terms – the honorific, the polite personal pronoun Lei, the informal pronoun tu, and even surname. This is illustrated in the following example drawn from a debate held on November 27th 2002 in which two MPs, the first a member of the Democratici di Sinistra and the second of the Lega Nord Padania, in which the former accuses the latter of dealing more with procedure than with substance, who replies with a charge, or rather an insinuation, of inconsistency:

(1) PIERO RUZZANTE. Vediamo come voti oggi!
ALESSANDRO CE. Ruzzante, intervieni sul doppio voto e via dicendo: questo è il tuo campo d’azione. Su questi argomenti, qualche volta, ti vorrei sentire nel merito.
PIERO RUZZANTE. Vediamo se sei coerente.

(Camera dei Deputati. 27.11.2002)

RUZZANTE. Let’s see how you [informal address term] vote today!
CE. Ruzzante, you intervene on the question of the double vote and things like that: that’s your field of action. Now and then, I’d like to hear your opinion on the substantive issues.
PIERO RUZZANTE. Let’s see if you’re consistent.

Note the use of surname as address form and the use of the informal tu form in what was an aggressive, although vacuous exchange. Such use of language would not be authorised in the House of Commons.

However, MPs in both countries generally refer to each other by a system of honorifics which, in the House of Commons, may denote status (the right honourable and learned gentleman), gender (the right honourable lady) and political allegiance (my honourable friend) and an individual MP is identified not by name but by the constituency he or she represents. In the Italian parliament, the address term is more simply onorevole, plus surname. This does cause some difficulty in translation, not least because of the differences in the constitutional frameworks of parliaments and the different status of MPs in terms of representativity as outlined in the first section of this chapter. MPs in the House of Commons may interrupt one another, but only with the consent of the speaker who is holding the floor, by using the prescribed non-linguistic gestures (standing up) or by uttering a ritual request (will the honourable gentleman give way?). Responses to such attempts to gain the floor are almost as equally ritualistic (see Bevitori in this volume); for example they often invoke the question of the lack of time, or the need to ‘make progress’ as a justifica-
tion for not giving way. In the Camera dei Deputati, an MP may ask the chair permission to interrupt on a point of order, or he or she may interrupt without permission, and such interruptions may be ignored or they may be answered.

In the House of Commons, questions put to Ministers in the time allocated to this activity of parliamentary control of the executive are constructed in a particular form. For example, Hansard reports them as indirect questions (If she will make a statement on the implications for her Department's spending plans of the pre-Budget statement), while on the floor of the House the question will normally be indicated by its number on the order paper (Number one). The first question in Prime Minister's question time is invariably vacuous (If she will list his official engagements for Wednesday 19 December) in order to leave space for an unpredictable supplementary question. In the Camera dei Deputati, the practice of questioning a minister follows a rather similar, but not identical procedure; the chair introduces the question by number (l'onorevole X ha facoltà di illustrare la sua interrogazione n. 3-02021- “The honourable [Deputy] X has the right to illustrate his/her question”), the questioner is permitted to illustrate the question, after which the chair introduces the minister (il ministro dell'economia, onorevole Y ha facoltà di rispondere – “The Minister of the Economy, the honourable [Deputy] Y, has the right to respond”) who responds, while the questioner has the right to reply (l'onorevole X ha facoltà di replicare – “The honourable [Deputy] X has the right to reply”), thus having the last word. Question time is typical of parliamentary systems of government rather than Presidential systems.

Moreover, for the very reason that parliaments are governed by complex rules and regulations, in moments of tension the procedures themselves may be the cause of conflict and the object of discussion. For example, parliamentary chairs are often called on to decide whether a point of order, a classical strategy to get the floor, is a legitimate one or not. On the 10th February 2003, the following exchange between the speaker of the House of Commons and MP Tom Dalyell, the "father of the House", took place over the question of whether Dalyell was authorised to intervene on a point of order and to raise the question of the threatened war against Iraq rather than proceeding with the "business of the day".

(2) Mr. Dalyell: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker.
Mr. Speaker: Order. Unless it is a new matter, I say to the Father of the House—
Mr. Dalyell: You mentioned the business of the day, Mr. Speaker. The business of the day is trivial compared to the question of peace and war. [Hon. Members: “Oh.”] All right, the business of the day may be important in Northern Ireland for a time, but—
Mr. Speaker: Order. Please be seated while I am standing. That is not a matter for the Chair.
Mr. Dalyell: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker.
Mr. Speaker: Order.
Mr. Dalyell: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker.
Mr. Speaker: Order. I tell the hon. Gentleman to resume his seat.
Mr. Dalyell rose—
Mr. Speaker: Order. I am instructing the hon. Gentleman to resume his seat. I have been very—
Mr. Dalyell rose—
Mr. Speaker: Order. Please be seated. I am instructing the hon. Gentleman to resume his seat.
Mr. Dalyell rose—
Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has tested the patience of the Chair. He must be seated.
Mr. Dalyell rose—
Mr. Speaker: Order. I tell the Father of the House to resume his seat. I do not want—
Mr. Gummer: Sit down, Tam.
Mr. Dalyell: No.
Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is treading on very dangerous ground.
Mr. Dalyell: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker.
Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must resume his seat.
Mr. Dalyell: I insist on the parliamentary right to put a point of order—
Mr. Speaker: Order. I insist on my rights as the Speaker, and I tell the hon. Gentleman to resume his seat. He must—
Mr. Dalyell: I insist on putting my point of order. In matters of peace and war, the House of Commons—
Mr. Speaker: Order. I say to the hon. Gentleman that I am in the situation, very reluctantly, that I shall have to tell the hon. Gentleman to withdraw.
Mr. Dalyell: I do not wish to cause you embarrassment, Mr. Speaker—
Mr. Speaker: Order. We now come to the main business—
Mr. Dalyell: If that is what you wish—
Mr. Speaker: Order. The Clerk will now proceed to read the Orders of the Day.
Mr. Dalyell: The House of Commons is—
Mr. Speaker: Order.

(House of Commons. 10.2.1992)
In the following extract from the transcript of the *Camera dei Deputati* of the 10th October 2002, an opposition MP, speaking in an extremely contentious debate concerning a bill which would allow defendants in criminal trials to object to being tried in a particular court in front of a particular judge on the grounds of “legitimate suspicion”, threatens to behave non-collaboratively – that is he threatens to open hostilities – if the procedure for submitting and discussing amendments and sub-amendments is not carried out in a certain fashion. This is an example of how parliamentary opposition can be made not on the basis of argument but on the basis of a procedural gambit, and this strategy seems more frequent in the *Camera* than in the *Commons*.

(3) MARCO BOATO. È una materia delicata sul piano procedurale. Se questo non avvenisse, ci troveremmo di fronte alla possibilità, da parte dei relatori – cosa che non hanno fatto ma potrebbero farlo –, di presentare la sera prima un maxiemendamento e la mattina successiva una serie di subemendamenti a se stessi, i quali sistematicamente falciderebbero i nostri subemendamenti presentati alle 7,40 di questa mattina, dopo aver lavorato tutta la notte. Questo non è concepibile. Difatti, possiamo risolvere questo problema collaborativamente, prima di aprire un conflitto – in caso contrario apriamo un conflitto – con l’assenso del presidente della Commissione, intendendo riferiti i nostri due subemendamenti con i numeri citati al nuovo testo presentato questa mattina. Ciò risolve proceduralmente la questione.

Se non la risolvesse, si aprirebbe un conflitto politico di proporzioni non irrilevanti, perché si ostruirebbe la strada agli emendamenti dell’opposizione. Non sta avvenendo questo e mi auguro che non avvenga.

(Camera dei Deputati. 10.10.2002)

BOATO. This [the procedure and the timing of tabling amendments] is a tricky question from the procedural point of view. If it didn’t happen, then we’d be faced with the possibility of the rapporteurs – something they haven’t done yet, but they could – presenting on one evening a major amendment and the following morning a series of sub-amendments to it, which would systematically wipe out our sub-amendments presented at 7.40 this morning, after having worked the whole night. This is inconceivable. In point of fact we can resolve this problem in a collaborative way, before starting a conflict – otherwise we’ll start a conflict – with the agreement of the Chair of the Committee, taking as given our two sub-amendments with the numbers cited on the new draft presented this morning. This would resolve the problem from a procedural point.

If it weren’t resolved, a political conflict of no little significance would begin because the amendments of the opposition would be blocked. This is not happening and I hope it doesn’t.

Procedures, moreover, may be formally respected and yet at the same time be flouted by MPs in order to reiterate a concept and to hold the floor, as in the following example drawn from a debate held in the *Camera dei Deputati* on February 26th 2003 to discuss a proposal to reduce employers’ contributions to the national pension scheme for newly hired staff, during which 17 opposition MPs – with a few minor variations – repeated the same intervention. The example below reproduces the first three; there are minor variations between them but I shall translate just the first.

(4) PRESIDENTE. Ha chiesto di parlare per dichiarazione di voto, a titolo personale, l’onorevole Nigra. Ne ha facoltà.

ALBERTO NIGRA. Signor Presidente, onorevoli colleghi, il principio della decontribuzione che sta per essere approvato produce un danno gravissimo al nostro paese, ai suoi cittadini, ai lavoratori e alle lavoratrici. La decontribuzione – com’è noto – fa saltare i conti pubblici, inquina il mercato del lavoro e assicura, in prospettiva, pensioni da fame ai nuovi occupati. Mette in ginocchio la previdenza pubblica rispetto alle assicurazioni private che, peraltro, non tutti, si potranno permettere. Onorevoli colleghi, fermateteci un momento! Per qualche promessa elettorale non togliete la speranza di un futuro sereno alle nuove generazioni (*Applausi dei deputati del gruppo dei Democratici di sinistra-l’Ulivo*)!

PRESIDENTE. Ha chiesto di parlare per dichiarazione di voto, a titolo personale, l’onorevole Lettieri. Ne ha facoltà.

MARIO LETTIERI. Signor Presidente, la norma relativa alla decontribuzione, che si sta per approvare, produce un danno gravissimo ai lavoratori ed alle lavoratrici e sicuramente non giova al paese. Infatti, la decontribuzione fa saltare i conti pubblici e inquina il mercato del lavoro. Si promettono pensioni da fame ai nuovi occupati e, in prospettiva, si mette in ginocchio la previdenza pubblica rispetto alle assicurazioni private che, peraltro, non tutti, si potranno permettere. Colleghi, non approvate questa norma! Essa toglierebbe la speranza di un futuro sereno alle nostre nuove generazioni: ai nostri giovani ed ai nostri ragazzi.

PRESIDENTE. Ha chiesto di parlare per dichiarazione di voto, a titolo personale, l’onorevole Reduzzi. Ne ha facoltà.

GIULIANA REDUZZI. Signor Presidente, onorevoli colleghi, il principio della decontribuzione produce un danno gravissimo al nostro paese, ai suoi cittadini, ai lavoratori ed alle lavoratrici. La riduzione dei contributi
fa saltare i conti pubblici, inquina il mercato del lavoro, promette pensioni da fame ai nuovi occupati e, in prospettiva, mette in ginocchio la previdenza pubblica a favore delle assicurazioni private, che non tutti si potranno permettere. Onorevoli colleghi, non togliamo la speranza di un futuro sereno alle nuove generazioni (Applausi dei deputati del gruppo della Margherita, DL-‘Ulivo – Applausi polemici del deputato Ascierto)! (Camera dei Deputati, 26.2.2003)

PRESIDENT. The Honourable [Deputy] Nigra has asked to speak in order to explain his vote, in a personal capacity [i.e. not as a representative of a parliamentary group]. He has the right to do so.

NIGRA. Mr. President, Honourable colleagues, the principle of reducing [employers’ pension] contributions which is about to be approved will result in serious damage to our country, to its citizens and to its workers. Contribution reduction, as is well known, ruins the public spending balance, has a deleterious effect on the labour market and guarantees, in the future, starvation-level pensions for new employees. It will cripple the public pension system in favour of the private system which, by the way, not everyone can afford. Honourable colleagues, for the sake of some electoral promise, let’s not deprive the new generations of the hopes of a secure future.

Procedural rules also determine the formal staging structures, or schemata (Van Dijk 2000:69) of parliamentary discourse. They vary from nation to nation but they determine the activity of parliaments at any given moment. Thus, in the House of Commons a bill will be presented in a number of ‘readings’, each with its own formal structures. The first reading is a formality in which the bill is presented without debate or discussion. In the second reading the Speaker of the House will invite a member of the government – the majority of bills discussed in the Commons are government bills – to present the bill, which is done in a formulaic manner (I beg to move . . .). The presenter of the bill will then argue the grounds of the legislation and this intervention will be followed by that of a member of the opposition. Other interventions considering the principles of the bill will follow, alternating between government and opposition parties and, depending on the number of MPs wishing to address the question at hand and the time allocated to the debate, they are frequently limited to a period of ten minutes. Thus Ministers and frontbench opposition MPs, who are allocated more time, will organise their interventions in a different fashion to backbenchers. At the conclusion of the debate, a vote, or division, is held and MPs walk through either the “Aye” lobby or the “No” lobby. The bill then goes to the Committee Stage, the Report Stage and returns to the whole House for a third reading during which no amendments can be presented. The most substantial debate takes place during the second reading.

In the Camera dei Deputati, government bills (disegni di legge) do not predominate over non-government bills (proposte di legge) as they do in the Commons. The normal procedure is as follows. The bill is presented to the House in a similar way to the first reading in the Commons. However, before being discussed in the whole House it goes to Committee where amendments are submitted. The Committee selects a rapporteur from among its members who has the duty to present the bill to the whole House. A member of the government may reply and then interventions are made on behalf of the various parliamentary groups. Amendments are voted on individually, which interrupts the continuity of the debate as a whole. Once all the amendments have been voted upon, the parliamentary groups and, if they wish, individual MPs may make an intervention explaining the reason for their vote (dichiarazioni di voto) and finally the whole bill is subject to a division.

A further point, which may seem obvious but in fact is not, is that parliamentary discourse is fundamentally adversarial. However obvious this may seem, it needs some qualification. First of all, in many parliaments, such as the U.S. Congress, many proposals are voted on in a bipartisan fashion. Moreover, all parliaments deal with a considerable amount of routine business for which there is no fundamental political issue at stake. Most parliaments will share consensual values and MPs will at times be cooperative with one another across party lines – politics is characterised by both conflict and cooperation. Besides, some parliaments, such as those of the member states of the E. U., have to approve legislation originating from a supranational body and their power of discretion regarding the bill is practically zero. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, as was observed in the premise to this introduction, the political culture of some nations is consociationalist, and decisions are reached through mediation rather than opposition. For example, in the Italian parliament, at least until 1994, parliamentary interventions may have seemed to be confrontational but, on a closer examination of the extremely complex language that was typical of this era, they would often contain vague, blurred and encrypted messages indicating possible points of mediation or convergence (and sometimes convergenze parallele – “parallel convergences”) addressed to both allies and opposition.

An example of the way in which MPs can behave cooperatively is provided by the following example drawn from the debate in the Camera dei Deputati held on March 25th 2002 to ratify the Nice Treaty in which the opposition
MP, Gerardo Bianco of the Partito Popolare Italiano, replies to the “rapporteur” of the bill, Gustavo Selva of Alleanza Nazionale who had opened the debate, by complimenting him not only on the quality of his intervention and his “exquisite framing of the question” but also on his “excellent report” presented in committee which “exempts” parliament from its duty to examine the details of the Treaty:


BIANCO. Mr. President, Madam Undersecretary, first of all I would like to give credit to the rapporteur, Chairman Selva, for his exquisite framing of the issue. I would say that he covered the most significant points, the most important that concern the Nice Treaty. However, besides this report, steeped as it is in pro-European passion, I would like to mention his excellent report presented to the Committee which tackled the question in detail. To a certain extent, this exempts Parliament from having to return to the specific questions of the Nice Treaty.

Similar interventions, however, may carry a sting in the tail, as the following may illustrate. The British Shadow Foreign Secretary responds to the Foreign Secretary in a debate held on February 26th 2003 on a motion which rather blandly aimed at reinforcing the UN Security Council’s famous resolution 1441 (2002) in the following terms:

(6) Mr. Michael Ancram (Devizes): The Opposition support this motion. In many ways, it is a rerun of the debate in this House on 25 November last year, in which we also supported the Government motion. This motion poses no new questions or challenges. We have therefore tabled no amendment. (House of Commons. 26.2.2003)

This can most certainly be seen as an example of cooperation and yet it may be interpreted in another way; both the government and the opposition were certainly aware that in this particular debate a large number of Labour MPs would vote against the government motion and so it is possible to interpret this inter-

vention of the Shadow Foreign Secretary as fulfilling one of the functions of an opposition: demonstrating that it is capable of substituting the government.

However, on most occasions, independently of how allegiances are drawn up in different parliaments, MPs clearly speak either for or against a given motion, and they do so explicitly.7

(7) Mr. Tim Collins (Westmorland and Lonsdale): [...] I support the amendments, and I hope that they will be passed. (House of Commons. 15.1.1998)

They tend to do so using expressions of certainty:

(8) Mr. Tim Collins (Westmorland and Lonsdale): The result of the extension of qualified majority voting provided by the Bill will be a less democratic Europe. Decisions will be taken away from national Parliaments, and will be made by institutions that, at best, lack comprehensibility and, at worst, lack any form of accountability. The great purpose for which the European Community was originally created was to expand a zone of peace and co-operation across Europe. This measure will block the expansion of the European Union, and will be an impediment to competitiveness of European countries and European businesses across global markets; (House of Commons. 15.1.1998)

or passion:

(9) Mr. Paddy Ashdown (Yeovil): [...] I agree that the Bill involves a shift of sovereignty – one that I recommend to the British people and in which I passionately believe – but the House does not have the right to give away sovereignty that it does not possess. (House of Commons. 4.11.1992)

Opponents and their arguments are dismissed on the basis of their own (lack of) personal qualities:

(10) The Prime Minister (Mr. John Major): [...] So much for principle. The right honourable and learned gentleman has his principles adrift on a sea of expediency; (House of Commons. 4.11.1992)

their competence:

(11) Mr. John Smith (Monklands, East): [...] The right hon. Gentleman, just as appears to be the case today, appeared to be totally incapable of comprehending the disordered logic of his own case, which simply amounts to the bizarre claim that in order to opt in, Britain, somehow, has to opt out (House of Commons. 23.7.1993)
their consistency

(12) Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): [...] While the right hon. Gentleman is talking about cheap words, I remind him of his own words of 8 May 1997, when he said that he thought there was “no point in making theological decisions about subsequent Parliaments”. Does he recall those words and, almost a year to the day later, has he suddenly converted to a different way of theological thinking? (House of Commons. 30.4.1998)

their honesty:

(13) Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): [...] Given that the Maastricht treaty clearly stipulates that the president of the bank should serve for eight years and that the Prime Minister has caved in to a shorter term, did he actually have a straight face when he said in Brussels that he was "maintaining entirely the sanctity of the treaty"? (House of Commons. 5.5.1998)

And the soundness of their argumentation:

(14) The Prime Minister (Mr. John Major): [...] I would say what many business men would have said to my hon. Friend had he asked them, that he is talking nonsense. (House of Commons. 23.7.1993)

As I lie in this volume points out, argument in parliamentary debates does not necessarily follow the schemata of “ideal critical discussion” and insults, ad hominem arguments, and aggressive behaviour in general are common. However, many parliamentary interventions, especially long ones, are characterised by discourse structures such as claim (or counter-argument) followed by support for claim (or reason). Moreover, MPs are very explicit about what is being done in parliament – the construction of arguments – and this is realized through a very high frequency of meta-argumentative lexis, such as argument, issue, point, reason, agreement, verbs relating to cognitive processes such as believe, know, think, nouns referring to truth and knowledge such as view, opinion, doubt and truth, and so on.

Parliamentary discourse is composed of a sequence of monologues which are intertextually and contratextually interwoven as MPs respond to what has been said previously, not just in the House but elsewhere. It is thus multi-voiced. For example, in the final debate to be held in the House of Commons on the ratification of the Maastricht treaty (July 23rd 1993), the then Prime Minister John Major in his opening speech (which amounted to nearly 4,000 words, including interruptions from other MPs) makes reference to what he himself had said the previous day, to what the leader of the opposition had
Mr. Smith (Monklands): [...] The hon. Gentleman appears to have forgotten that they would be able to come back with the prospect not of three or four years in power, although that must be rather uncertain in the present situation, but with five years in power. Why do not they seize the advantage that they are being offered by the Opposition? What is troubling the Conservative party?

Sir Teddy Taylor (Southend, East): If the Maastricht treaty goes through, does the right hon. and learned Gentleman think that there will be many issues to talk about in general elections?

Mr. Smith: I think there will be quite a number of issues to discuss. If the hon. Gentleman asks his constituents, he will find that many of them would like to talk to him about the imposition of VAT on heating bills.

(House of Commons. 23.7.1993)

In the Camera dei Deputati these exchanges are less frequent and when they occur they tend to be aggressive. However, in comparison with the House of Commons, there are more frequent dialogic exchanges between the chair of the assembly and the current speaker, as in the following example drawn from a debate held on February 19th 2003:

FRANCESCO RUTELLI. Signor Presidente, questo dibattito si svolge mentre registriamo una delle più drammatiche divisioni tra Europa e Stati Uniti (Commenti dei deputati del gruppo della Lega nord Padania). La viviamo con sofferenza... (Una voce dai banchi della Margherita: «Silenzio!»). ALESSANDRO CÈ. Vaff... Avete fatto un casino prima!

PRESIDENTE. Onorevoli colleghi, cosa sta capitando? Onorevole Cè, onorevole Cè, la richiamo all’ordine. Qual è il problema?

ALESSANDRO CÈ. Chiedo di parlare.

PRESIDENTE. No, no, no. I can’t give you the floor now. Come and say what you want to the Presidency. I can see disorderly behaviour. I don’t understand what’s happening. I can hear indecorous shouting

CE. When we have the floor, the others interrupt us.

PRESIDENTE. No, no, no. I can’t give you the floor now. Come and say what you want to the Presidency. I can see disorderly behaviour. I don’t understand what’s happening. I can hear indecorous shouting

CE. When we have the floor, the others interrupt us.

PRESIDENTE. No, I’m sorry honourable Cè, when you [formal address term] were speaking, the President called the deputies of the centre-left to order twice, by ringing the bell.

CE. You [formal address term] can call us to order; not them.

PRESIDENTE. In any case, a sense of decency should prevail. Honourable Rutelli, I apologise, you [formal address term] may proceed.

RUTELLI. Thank you Mr. President; this debate is taking place (comments from deputies of the Northern League) [...]
and corpus linguistics. As many readers will probably be familiar with these traditions and since a full description of them would require volume-length treatments, my account of them will be very brief and, in consideration of the vast literature associated with each, it risks being grossly oversimplified. What I wish to do, however, is to point out that although the three traditions are often presented as incompatible, there are also ways in which they may complement one another.

5.1 Critical discourse analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) can be traced back to the end of the 1970s, in particular to British ‘critical linguistics’ (Fowler et al. 1979, and Kress & Hodge 1979) and French discourse analysis (Pêcheux 1982), although their methodologies are rather different from each other and from those of CDA today (for which see Fairclough 1995; Caldas Coulthard & Coulthard 1996; Van Dijk 1997a, 1997b). Stated very briefly, the aim of the early work in critical linguistics was to identify the social meanings that were expressed through lexis and syntax and to consider the role that language plays in creating and reinforcing ideologies. Its underlying presupposition was that linguistic choices relate to ideological positioning. French discourse analysis instead focussed on more abstract analysis of discursive formations and power.

For CDA (like other schools of functional linguistics), language is a form of social practice; “discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially shaped” (Fairclough & Wodak 1997: 258), while unlike other traditions, CDA is socially and politically committed and engaged; it is seen as intervening on behalf of oppressed groups and against dominating groups. It seeks to identify, moreover, linguistic change in terms of social change and posits the fundamentally linguistic or discursive nature of power relations; the link between text and society is mediated by ‘orders of discourse’ – the network of conventions that underlie and legitimise discourse practices. CDA is interdisciplinary and seeks to combine elements from diverse areas such as history, sociology, social psychology, semiotics and cultural studies as well as, of course, linguistics. For example, the work of Van Dijk emphasises the role of personal and social knowledge and belief and thus adds a cognitive element to CDA. Readings and interpretations of texts vary according to the cognitive schemata of individual hearers or readers which may be determined by factors such as class, gender, ethnicity, age, etc., and yet at the same time CDA claims to be able to identify ‘inherent meanings’ through systematic analysis. The analytical in-

struments that it uses include syntax, local and global semantics, pragmatics, argumentation structures, cognition and contextual modelling.

CDA has been criticised from a number of points of view. Miller (1993: 401–408), despite asserting her sympathy for the CDA project, argues that its attempt to combine many different research traditions is at times contradictory and has led to what she has called “model muddle” in particular as regards interpretation and multiple readings of texts. How is it possible, for example, to take on board the relativity and indeterminacy of Foucault and yet still to claim to be able to make authentic readings? Widdowson in an article published in 1998 and another in 2000 (in which he manages to criticise not only CDA but also systemic functional linguistics and corpus linguistics) makes a rather trenchant attack on CDA, accusing it of what amounts to intellectual dishonesty. The intentions of producers and consumers of texts, he says, “are vicariously inferred from the analysis itself, by reference to what the analyst assumes in advance to be the writer’s ideological position” (1998: 143). The main accusation is that CDA, being explicitly committed and engaged, is looking only for textual confirmation of a bias that is presumed to exist in a given text. The principal argument against this line of reasoning, which Carbó deals with in this volume, is that the analyst is necessarily a socially and politically positioned subject – the observer is part of the theory – and consequently a recognition of this contributes to greater transparency. De Beaugrande (2001) presents an articulated critique of Widdowson, arguing, inter alia, that language study over the last 25 years has been trying to come to grips with the relationship between language and ‘reality’, and not limiting itself to idealisations and abstractions, and that Widdowson puts three different traditions – critical discourse analysis, systemic functional linguistics and corpus linguistics – under the same umbrella and in so doing frequently misrepresents many of their fundamental precepts. A further implicit criticism of CDA has come from Martin who has recently argued that if discourse analysis is to enact social change, it will have to take into consideration discourse “that inspires, heartens; discourse that we like, that cheers us along” and not just that which we dislike (1999: 38). In other words, Martin argues that alongside critical discourse analysis, we need positive discourse analysis.

5.2 Systemic functional linguistics

Systemic functional linguistics (henceforth SFL) derives from and is generally associated with the work of Michael Halliday and, like CDA, it sees language as social practice but unlike CDA it seeks to present a unitary vision of the
systems, structures and functions of language, tolerating the fuzziness of categories that this inevitably implies. It fundamentally has two aspects. It is systemic, and this means that its grammar is based on the notion of choice and that any grammar can be represented as an open-ended and (extremely large) interlocking network of options. For the genesis of systemic theory, which is the major theoretical component of SFL, see Kress (Ed., 1976), Halliday and Martin (Eds., 1981) and Halliday and Fawcett (1987). Secondly, it is functional and the functional aspect is the one that interests us most in this volume since we are engaged in text analyses. SFL posits that the relationship between a language and the social functions that its serves is reflected in the internal organisation of the language. A grammar is thus not arbitrary but motivated and can be explained by the uses to which a language is put. Meanings, moreover, are created in and through language and not merely encoded by it.

Function in the SFL perspective, however, does not amount to an inventory of the things we do with language but with more general and abstract categories. Firstly language functions to interpret and to represent the world – real or imaginary – around us in terms of actions, actors, objects relationships of time and space, and so on. Secondly language has to express logical relationships such as 'and' and 'or'. Thirdly language expresses the participant roles and statuses of speakers and the way speakers act or try to act on others. Finally language has to do these three things at the same time, relating what is being said now to what has been said before as well as relating it to the context of situation in which it is being produced. Within SFL these functions of language are known as metafunctions and they are classified into the ideational (including experiential and logical), the interpersonal and the textual metafunctions and together they represent the basic semantic system of a language – our potential to make meanings.

These functions are intrinsic to language but are also related to the 'context of situation'; every text takes place in a recognisable social event and concerns a particular subject matter. This is known as the 'field of discourse' which is said to activate the ideational metafunction of language. Ideational meanings are 'realised' in the lexicogrammar (the system of wording) through the system of transitivity by and through which we can express actions, events, states and their participants as well as other notions such as time and space. Furthermore, any text involves Speakers and Adressees whose roles and statuses are reflected in or constructed by the interchange between them, expressing not only individual identity but also social roles based on varying degrees of power and solidarity. This is known as the 'tenor of discourse' and is realised in the grammatical systems of Mood and Modality. Finally texts are transmitted in a certain channel – they may be oral or spoken – and in a certain rhetorical mode, according to the intertextual tradition of that certain situation type. This is known as the 'mode of discourse' and is realised in the grammar, according to standard SFL thought, through and by the systems of Thematic and Information systems and by non-structural relationships of cohesion. These various meanings are realised contemporaneously and thus linguistic units are to be seen as multifunctional. For example, a non-functional descriptive unit such as a nominal group could be labelled at one and the same time an Actor in a process of doing, a Subject in the mood system realising the meanings indicative: positive, a Theme in thematic structure, representing the speaker's departure point, a Given element in the information system as well as a cohesive lexical tie, linking back in the text to other words in relationships of synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy or meronymy. In short, according to SFL, the context of situation, filtered through the context of culture, determines the text; ways of saying realise meanings which are determined by contexts and these levels combine to construct functional varieties of texts, or registers. For an account of the functional aspects of SFL see Kress (1976), Halliday (1978), Martin (1992) and Halliday (1994).

SFL theory has been applied in various different fields and work has been continued both in grammatical description and discourse analysis. It is not incompatible with CDA in as much as it claims to provide a model through which we can interpret texts. Indeed, many exponents of the CDA tradition, such as Fowler, Kress and Fairclough, have been influenced by SFL, and have included the term 'social semiotic' as one of the components of CDA. However, as Fowler has put it, the descriptive apparatus of SFL grammar "offers both more and less than is required" (1996:8). The grammatical detail of SFL is perceived as being too great; "critical linguistics gets a very high mileage out of a small selection of linguistic concepts such as transitivity and nominalisation" (ibid.) but at the same time CDA theorists argue that other methodologies are more suitable and, together with some concepts drawn from SFL, CDA makes use of speech-act theory, Gricean cooperative principles, pragmatics, conversation analysis, relevance theory, cognitive psychology and Foucault's discursive formation. In this volume, Van Dijk is particularly critical of one of the fundamental pillars of SFL – its model of context – which he sees as being an ill-assorted assembly of different concepts and as lacking what is seen as vital to CDA analysis, that is a cognitive component. Van Dijk, furthermore, argues that although the hypothesised hook-up between the contextual configuration, the semantic metafunctions and the grammatical systems (according to which, for example, the field activates the ideational metafunction which is realised in the grammar
through the system of transitivity) may work in some cases – for example the
tenor can be seen to relate to mood and modality – the correlations seem far
less clear in other cases, such as the relationship between the mode of discourse
and thematic and information systems. Questions of this kind have also been
raised within SFL itself (see Thompson 1999:101–124).

5.3 Corpus linguistics

Corpus linguistics is an empirical approach to the study of language based on
the computer assisted analysis of the actual patterns of language on the basis
of a “finite-sized body of machine-readable texts, sampled in order to be maxi-
mally representative of the language variety under consideration” (McEnery &
Wilson 1996:24). Its origins can be dated back to the 1960s, at a time when
Chomsky (1957, 1965) was asserting the irrelevance of corpus data for lin-
guistic inquiry, with the construction of the Survey of English Language, the
Brown corpus, the London-Lund corpus and the Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen
corpus, which were corpora amounting to between 500,000 and 1,000,000 running
words. But it was in the 1980s and 90s, with the ever-growing memory sizes and
operational speed of computers, improvements in scanning techniques and the
greater and greater availability of text through the internet, that corpus lin-
guistics definitively took off. In Great Britain in particular, two large-corpus
projects have been realised: the Bank of English – a corpus developed at the
University of Birmingham now amounting to over 400 million running words
which is constantly being up-dated and controlled via a monitor corpus – and
the British National Corpus – composed of 100 million running words, 10 mil-
lion of which of spoken language. There are also many other corpora which
claim to represent languages other than English – such as the COSMAS corpus
of almost 400 million running words of German developed by the Mannheim
Institut für Deutsche Sprache and the CORIS/CODIS corpus of 100 million
running words of written Italian developed at the University of Bologna.

The kind of linguistic information that a corpus can provide include data
on the relative frequencies of lexemes, their distributions across the corpus
and the patternings of collocation and colligation associated with lexemes,
and patterns of co-selection. Work on corpora has demonstrated that lan-
guage use is characterised by spectacular regularities of patterns; it highlights
the very routine constrained nature of much language behaviour, in contrast
to its creativity and individuality. The data it provides us with are not merely
quantitative but also qualitative. For example, corpus linguistics has shown us
that the meanings of words are not properties that can be found in dictionar-
ies but are highly sensitive to their immediate linguistic context. Thus while
the OED gives the following definition of the verb cause: “Be the cause of,
effect, bring about; occasion, produce; induce, make [. . .]”, findings from cor-
pora demonstrate that the thing caused is nearly always something presented
as undesirable. Conversely, the complement of the verb provide is nearly always
something desirable (Stubbs 1996:173–174), and many other findings of this
kind of semantic prosody have been provided by the analysis of corpora.

Perhaps the most important claim is that “corpus linguistics is finally rein-
stating observation, and on a scale previously not feasible” (De Beaugrande
2001:115) and I believe that it is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore.
For a basic bibliography of corpus linguistics, see Aijmer and Altenberg
(Eds., 1991), Aston (Ed., 2001), Baker, Francis, and Tognini Bonelli (Eds.,
1993), Biber, Conrad, and Reppen (1998), Hoey (Ed., 1993), Hunston and
(1998), Sinclair (1991), Stubbs (1996), Svartvik (Ed., 1992), and Tognini
Bonelli (2001).

But corpus linguistics has also raised some questions. Firstly there is no
general agreement on what the role of corpora should be vis-à-vis linguistic
theory. Should linguistic study be driven by a study of the data we find, in
other words should the procedures be bottom up and deductive? Or should
corpora be used for verifying descriptions, models and theories, following a
top down deductive approach? Sinclair’s position is that corpus findings can-
not be modelled onto existing theories of language and that we should always
start with the data and postpone “the use of [abstract categories] for as long
as possible” (1991:29). Indeed he argues that starting from theory is likely to
blinker the linguist. Corpus linguistics has alternatively been dubbed as data in
search of a theory, but this idea can be overturned. Berry, in fact, in describing
the relationship between SFL and discourse analysis, says “systemic theory (is)
currently an explanation in search of some facts while the facts of the Birm-
ingham discourse analysis (are) currently facts in search of an explanation”
(1987:41). The question here is, rather obviously, which should come first –
the data or the theory? Within mainstream corpus linguistics, there is no doubt
over this question and Tognini Bonelli (2001) has suggested an acronym for an
independent discipline within linguistics – CDL, or corpus driven linguistics.

Next we have the problem of corpus dimension, the question of size. On
this point Sinclair has been very clear. The larger the corpus the better. From
one point of view this claim is fully justified – especially if we are primar-
ily interested in lexicography. A small corpus simply does not give us enough
lexemes or enough instances of each to conduct sophisticated lexicographical
research. But the size question is also a claim for representativity – the more running words a corpus contains the more likely it is to represent a language. However, the claim may be too strong. Can 300 million words be said to be representative of a population or universe whose size nobody has been able to quantify? The definition of the dynamic, extremely varied, potentially infinite and continuously expanding ‘population’ of a language is in itself rather problematic. Moreover, to my knowledge no general corpus dedicates a sufficiently large collection of spoken language. The British National Corpus, made up of 100 million running words, contains some 4.5 million running words of unscripted conversation. Collecting this data, it must be admitted, is no mean feat, but it was drawn from recordings made by just 125 informants and makes up less than 5% of the whole corpus. The Bank of English seems to be steadily increasing its share of casual conversation, but I think that smaller and more specialised corpora can provide the degree of delicacy required to create an ethnographically sound definition of speech situation.

The last reservation on corpus linguistics concerns the nature of quantitative studies and the potential loss of the textual dimension of language that it necessarily involves. Within most functional linguistics it is taken for granted that we should study entire texts and not isolated examples; it is taken for granted that meanings are made over long stretches of text and across texts, and that to understand a text we need to know something about the context of situation, the social positioning of speakers, etc. In a very large corpus this aspect of textual analysis is difficult, if not impossible, to recover. The language we find in a concordance line is no longer discourse, it is a decontextualised abstraction. Meanings that seem to be apparently clear in a concordance line often turn out to be very different when we see it situated in its full context. When Sinclair argues that corpus data should be studied from the bottom up, he is making a claim for a qualitative study of language. However, as he concedes, there is a price to pay for dealing with large quantities: a qualitative study of language implies a considerable amount of insight into the texts themselves and the conditions of their creation, the intertextual network that they fall into. This is simply not possible with large corpora.

However, in dealing with parliamentary discourse, the tools of corpus linguistics can be very useful for the very simple reason that there is such a quantity of data available – most national parliaments produce approximately a thousand hours of talk in the course of a year, just by taking into consideration full sittings. Thus it is possible to construct small corpora of parliamentary language, which may be focused, say, on a given period of time or a given subject matter, on which hypotheses may be tested, comparisons made (across languages, between parliamentary corpora and large reference corpora, for example), without losing the textual dimension of linguistic analysis.

6. A brief overview of this volume

This book consists of, beyond this introduction, nine contributions by various authors all working in the field of language analysis with special attention to political language. The first two (Ilie and Bevitori) present comparative analyses of interactional norms of parliaments and how they may be breached. The following four (Vasta, Dibattista, Bayley, Bevitori and Zoni, and Bayley and San Vicente) are comparative analyses of debates on specific issues – discourse on war in Britain and Italy, and discourse on European integration in Britain, Germany, Italy and Spain. The final three (Miller, Carbò and Van Dijk,) deal with questions of methodology, although each illustrate their proposals with analyses of parliamentary texts.

The papers by Ilie and Bevitori both present comparative analysis of how the rules of parliaments impinge upon the discourse and how the rules themselves may be infringed. Ilie tackles the questions of insults in parliament in Sweden and Britain from a cognitive and rhetorical perspective. According to Ilie, “parliamentary insults fulfil different roles with regard to reinforcing certain beliefs and values, challenging others, as well as to imposing or rejecting certain norms and principles that regulate the practices for negotiating short- and long-term political goals”. The questions she poses include: what constitutes an insult in the two settings? How are insults sanctioned? What kind of insults are preferred or dispreferred? How is this related to the context of culture? In her analysis, Ilie illustrates how the type of insult most frequently used, the function of insults, and the responses to them are different in the two national contexts as a result of different historical, social and political traditions.

Bevitori considers the question of parliamentary interruptions in Britain, where under certain conditions they are authorised, and Italy, where they are not but where nonetheless they occur quite frequently. Referring to the systems of mood, modality and reference, she investigates how interaction by the “interruption device” is managed by the participants in the two parliaments. In the House of Commons, interruptions normally come in the form of questions, and in particular polar questions, but, as Bevitori points out, they are very often crypto-statements and may perform various discursive functions. An interesting feature of interruptions in the House of Commons is that, if
they are to be considered authorised, they require the consensus of the interrupted speaker. Since they are not authorised at all in the Italian parliament, this condition does not hold but, despite this, unauthorised interventions often give way to lengthy stretches of dialogue. Unlike British MPs, their Italian counterparts typically use imperatives or exclamatives to interrupt and the overall effect is more aggressive and often interruptions lead to the reciprocal exchange of insults. Furthermore, Italian MPs often invite interruptions by directly addressing another MP, behaviour which is sanctionable in Britain where all remarks must be addressed to the chair.

The contributions of Vasta and Dibattista also engage with comparative analyses of British and Italian debates, but rather than looking at particular forms of discursive behaviour they examine debates held on the same days in both countries to discuss major world crises – the 1998 Gulf crisis and the Kosovo war. Vasta, in a paper whose methodological framework combines discourse analysis, systemic functional linguistics and (small) corpus linguistics, analyses three debates which took place in the House of Commons, the Camera dei Deputati and the Senato della Repubblica on December 17th 1998 after the Anglo-American pre-emptive air strikes on Iraq on December 16th. The majority position in the House of Commons was in favour of the attack, while the two Italian chambers expressed an unfavourable (or at least ambivalent) opinion. After a lengthy analysis of a number of pivotal terms used in the debates, Vasta concludes that on the one hand some of the crucial legitimating terms used in one national context are absent in the other, while on the other hand some shared argumentative strategies appear to serve diametrically opposed purposes and construct different versions of reality.

Dibattista analyses a corpus of parliamentary debates held in the House of Commons and the Camera dei Deputati between January and June 1999, where possible selecting debates that were held on the same day. Like Vasta, Dibattista finds that “a number of linguistic resources are constantly employed in different ways in the two Houses, thus suggesting that different underlying meanings were at stake”. The principal differences that emerged suggest that much of the discourse in the Italian chamber seemed to satisfy an apparent need to legitimate military action while in the House of Commons the discourse appears to be “informative” (even though, of course, informative discourse need not be without persuasive ends). Among the many comparative examples provided in the paper, one seems to be particularly relevant; on the 24th March 1999, both the British deputy Prime Minister and the Italian Deputy Prime Minister took the floor of their respective chambers to inform MPs of an air strike carried out the previous day. The verbs used by John Prescott all represented action (attack, fly, operate) while those used by Sergio Mattearella were all verbal processes (summarise, inform, announce, etc.). It is quite possible to hypothesise that the differences between the two different discursive styles can be attributed not only to the geographical distance separating the site of war from the two countries, to different socio-cultural attitudes to war, but also to the institutional relationships between executive and legislative of the period, characterised in Britain by an secure parliamentary majority for the governing party (and in this particular case the backing of the opposition) while in Italy the government was sustained by a fragile and fractious alliance.

The papers by Bayley, Bevitori and Zoni, and Bayley and San Vicente are experiments in comparative small-corpus linguistics. The first of these, drawing on a sub-corpus of parliamentary debates on European integration held in Britain, Germany and Italy between 1992 and 1999 (which is part of a wider domain-specific multilingual corpus including a variety of text-types all related to the question of European integration), examines lexical choices related to the broad semantic area of danger and reaction to danger. The aim of the paper is, first of all, to compare the grammatical configurations of these terms in the three languages and the intensity of the lexical items that MPs privileged (and to compare the results to those in the press corpus). It was found that Italian MPs, despite the tendency of the Italian chambers to be highly conflictual, tended to select low-intensity words to express dangers and fears in comparison with British and German MPs. German MPs evoked dangers and fears more frequently than their counterparts from Britain and Italy. However, in comparison with the press, MPs in all countries were less forceful than journalists both in terms of the intensity of the lexical choices and their frequency. The second aim was to identify what MPs represented as the source of danger and the cause of fears. It emerged very clearly that in the House of Commons the external threat most frequently evoked was represented by the process of European integration itself, while in Germany and Italy it was the failure of this process. ‘Prosperity’ and ‘stability’ were endangered entities in all national parliaments, while ‘peace’ was under threat only in Germany and Italy.

The second of these two corpus analyses, drawing on the same corpus for its data but taking into consideration British and Spanish parliamentary talk, analyses the lexical choices related to ‘work’. Work is evidently a crucial concept for European parliaments, as evidenced not only by its high lexicalisation but also by the ideological orientations that seem to lie behind certain choices; for example work, in English, tends to represent the position of those who perform it (or wish to) while labour represents the position of those that use, or employ, it. Since this distinction is not so strong in Spanish – trabajo can suffice
for both — it seemed interesting to make a comparison between work-related lexemes, in a world in which the regulations of work are becoming ever-more globalised.

Miller, through an analysis the House of Representatives’ impeachment proceedings against President Clinton for perjury and obstruction of justice, handles the methodological question of appraisal systems, that is to say, the potential resources of speakers to express value orientations and to position themselves as subjects through language. The study of appraisal is part of an ongoing project within SFL which seeks to formulate a comprehensive map, notwithstanding the inevitable analytical ‘messiness’, of the way in which speakers express evaluation of various kinds. In particular she looks at what has come to be called the system of “judgement”, or the system deployed by speakers to make moral evaluations of the behaviour of others. The principle meaning realisations that she analyses are those cotextually related to the node words ‘truth’ and ‘justice’, the latter being analysed from the point of view of its interaction with the former. This does not mean, however, that the ‘tokens’ of the appraisal are to be seen as realised exclusively in lexis; appraisal is realised instead in global patterns stretching across texts and involving linguistic systems and structures at all levels of analysis. What emerges from the textual analysis is the varying meanings given to truth — ranging from the absolute to the relative — according to the positioning of individual speakers, and the overlapping of the concepts of ‘truth’ and ‘justice’.

Perhaps the first thing to note about Carbà’s paper is that she deals with, as she has done in the past, an analysis of Mexican parliamentary discourse practices and thus is not, unlike the other papers in this volume, writing about the affluent corner of the world. This is important since, as I have commented previously, parliaments or legislative assemblies are ubiquitous and their political, institutional and social roles on a world-wide scale may be very different indeed, and it is no coincidence that she stresses the importance of history in any analysis of discourse. The role of the Mexican parliament during much of the period that Carbà has studied was to sustain for a very long time a long cycle of successful domination regime. In this volume, she tackles the question of methodologies from a very broad perspective, advocating an approach that will embrace multiple, intersecting models or planes of analysis since this is the only way to handle the overwhelming complexity of discourse that is both historically grounded and politically crucial. The methodological questions that she addresses include the role of the analyst, the role of history, the social and cognitive dimensions, contexts, parliamentary practices and their anomalies and the paper concludes with an illustration of how graphical representation of discourse features can contribute to our understanding of complex processes.

In the concluding paper, Van Dijk tackles the question of the context in which language is produced and the ways in which this context is reflected in the language by proposing a model through which parliamentary debates may be analysed. At the beginning of his paper, after having asserted that “a more or less explicit theory of context remains on the agenda”, he makes a critique of the way in which the context-semantics-grammar relationship is handled within SFL. He argues that the analytical construction of context into field, tenor and mode is based on vague and heterogeneous categories, and that it lacks a cognitive element, seeking instead to treat knowledge as a societal and not an individual feature. This is a rather controversial position and not all of the authors contributing to this volume would necessarily agree with him, although all welcome the debate. Although this is not the forum to enter into the merits of Van Dijk’s critique, it is my opinion that the levels of “delicacy” foreseen in SFL analysis in general, which can certainly be applied to contextual modelling, would be able to cover most of the categories Van Dijk considers necessary. However, SFL modelling has had little time for “thought” and the “mind”, even though it is possible to find categories such as “purposes” as an element in contextual configurations (for example, Halliday 1978:62), and perhaps, since parliamentary discourse and political discourse in general is self-conscious and purposive social action, a cognitive element would not be out of place. However, as well as being purposive action, parliamentary discourse is not necessarily characterised by frankness and opacity of intentions. We could not, for example, apply Gricean cooperative principles but would need to look much more closely at history. Van Dijk’s model of context includes “macro-level” categories such as domain, global actions and institutional actors, and “micro-level” categories, such as setting, local actions, participants and cognition. The paper concludes with an analysis of a House of Commons intervention on asylum seekers in order to illustrate how these categories impinge upon the text.

To sum up then, this volume takes into consideration certain forms of parliamentary behaviour, certain instances of parliamentary talk according to topic, and some methodological considerations on how such talk can be analysed. Many areas have been left unexplored; for example no consideration of phonology has been made – accent as regional identity of MPs, for example, could be of interest; thorough analysis of political systems, political culture and parliamentary language is still to be undertaken; a comparison between discourse in committee and discourse in full sittings could prove important;
more attention should be paid to parliaments in the less affluent part of the world, and so on. The list of omissions could continue, but at the same time I hope that much has also been achieved.

Notes

1. I am grateful to Professor Gliberto Capano for this observation (personal communication).
2. But see Williams (1976). Democracy acquired its unequivocally positive connotation in the 20th century, and until recently it was characterised by a dichotomy between "people's democracies" and "representative democracies".
3. However, despite the widespread belief that the sovereignty of Parliament has been undermined by the strength of political parties and of government majorities, data supplied by Birch (1998: 183) suggests that parliamentary opposition to government legislation has often "checked or wrecked" bills.
4. "A member of the House who wishes to speak […] must rise in his place uncovered. When his name has been called by the Speaker […] he must address himself not to the House […] but to the Speaker". A member must speak in English and is not allowed to read his speech", Halsbury’s Laws of England (1980), 4th edition, Volume 34, p. 460. London: Butterworths.
5. The examples in languages other than English will all be followed by an English translation. Parliamentary interventions are very often impenetrable to translation, not least because they embody national political cultures and institutions. In this volume we have attempted to strike a balance between "literalness" – to maintain the flavour of different national parliaments, and "congruence" – a good rendering into the target language. So, institutional titles and terms of address, for example, have been translated literally. The "pomposity" and gravity of some interventions has been maintained, to the extent that this has been possible.
6. On this point it should be remembered that, according to Slombruck, the use of honorifics in Hansard is rather inflated in comparison to the actual practice on the floor of the House.
7. The following eight examples are taken from the CESLIS domain specific multilingual corpus on European integration. See Bayley, Bevitori and Zoni in this volume.

References


Insulting as (un)parliamentary practice in the British and Swedish parliaments

A rhetorical approach

Cornelia Ilie

Everyone on the British side understands the constraints. Foreigners, for obvious reasons, do not. Insulting a visiting President may be fine if it’s intentional. But if not, it is careless and can be damaging.

(Memorandum submitted by N. M. Rothschild and Sons Ltd to the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs Minutes of Evidence, House of Commons, 1999)

1. Introduction

Why study parliamentary insults, rather than parliamentary politeness conventions? And why a comparative study? The reason for choosing this particular topic is threefold. First, the intention was to counterbalance the proliferation of studies concerned almost exclusively with linguistic politeness. Second, an institution’s principles of conduct may often be most clearly revealed through violations and disruptions of normative forms of politeness and through negotiated claims about those violations. Third, since verbal abuse involves evaluative statements grounded in specific social and cultural systems of moral values, a comparative study can best reveal the institutionally and culturally available forms of verbal offence, the insult response frames, the ideologically based patterns of ascribing blame and assuming responsibility, as well as the relative balance between the insult’s rudeness and the target’s vulnerability. Institutional acts of verbal abuse and defamation, such as parliamentary insults, provide a rich ground for the study of interpersonal dynamics, of the unpredictable changes in the power balance and of the reasoning fallacies underlying verbal controversies.
Text and context of parliamentary debates

Teun A. van Dijk

1. Introduction

It is customary to search for the defining properties of a genre in the structures of text or talk. The same is true for parliamentary debates. These do have some characteristic textual properties, such as some well-known politeness formulas used to address other members of parliament (MPs), specific forms of political or adversarial ‘impoliteness’ (Harris 2001; Ilie 2001), and some other typical dialogical features. However, I shall argue in this paper that much of the genre theory of parliamentary debates should be formulated in terms of properties of their context. In other words, rather than for instance by their topics, style or turn-taking, parliamentary debates are primarily (and rather trivially) defined by the fact that the people engaging in these debates are Members of Parliament (MPs), that the debates take place in the political institution of Parliament, and that the MPs are ‘doing politics’ or ‘doing legislation’ among other contextual features.

The problem with this thesis is that there is a long tradition, going back to classical rhetoric, to describe the textual structures of political speeches, but that the theory of context in contemporary linguistics and discourse analysis is rather primitive, and barely allows for sophisticated analyses. The present paper therefore should be seen as merely a modest attempt to provide a ‘contextual’ approach to parliamentary discourse. I shall do that by first sketching in brief my current theory of context, and then apply it in a partial theory of parliamentary debates and in a description of some data from a debate held in the British House of Commons. For other properties of parliamentary debates, I must refer to other work in this book, other work by their authors, as well as to a previous paper of mine on parliamentary debates (Van Dijk 2000).
2. Earlier studies on context

Linguists and discourse analysts often speak about context, but a more or less explicit theory of context remains on the agenda. As is the case in psychology, most sociolinguistic accounts tend to examine such relationships in terms of simple co-variation or probability, instead of analyzing the precise nature and strategies of contextualization.

2.1 Systemic Functional Linguistics

Because Systemic-Functional Linguistics (SFL) is undoubtedly the approach in linguistics that most often invokes the notion of context, we shall begin by commenting on their proposals (we hope to do so in more detail in a future book on context).

One may expect of a socially oriented, functional theory a particularly sophisticated theory of context, so our examination of the SFL concept of context will be particularly critical. Without an explicit theory of context, much of the basis of the SF approach to language would lack a firm foundation because the functions of language are precisely defined in terms of properties of such contexts.

Influenced by British anthropology and linguistics (Malinowski, Firth), systemic-functional linguistics distinguishes between the context of situation and the broader context of culture, which is seen as being related, at a higher level, rather to the language system or to genres. In the further discussion of the SF-notion of context we shall however ignore the notion ‘context of culture’ because we are here focusing especially on the theoretical account of the more local, more direct situational environment of discourse (for detail, see e.g., Eggins 1994). It should be emphasized though that types of situation, as well as the system that governs these are of course related to fundamental cultural resources. The same is true for the relations between text and talk at the local level, and larger systems of intertextuality at the global level (see also Lemke 1995).

The main focus of SFL is on the context of situation, which is analyzed in terms of three main categories or parameters, briefly defined as follows:

a. field: ongoing activity, subject matter
b. tenor: participant relations
c. mode: medium, and the role discourse plays in the ongoing activity.


Some aspects of these notions had already been formulated in the 1960s in applied linguistics and linguistic stylistics (see, e.g., Gregory 1967; Spencer & Gregory 1964). However, a further historical study of the origin and originality of these notions in SFL is beyond the scope of this paper. In the last decades the notions are so closely associated with SFL that they should bear the theoretical responsibility for them, so that the critique we formulate below is not primarily directed at the uses of these notions in work of the stylistics of the 1960s.

Although the contents of the three categories of context of situation as formulated in SFL are slightly different for different authors, the notions have not changed much in the last 30 years. Theoretically the notions are rather vague and heterogeneous, and it is striking that for a functional theory of language that aims to provide a ‘social semiotic’, context structures have not been explored more systematically and more explicitly in all these years. Not only are the terms (field, tenor, mode) hardly transparent, as to their intended meanings, but also the usual – informal – descriptions of their meanings are barely enlightening.

Also, several SF linguists are not always happy with them, although they usually maintain them; see also the discussion on these context categories in Martin (1985, 1992, 1999). Indeed, the brief critical discussion we provide here should not hide the fact that also within SFL there are many dissident voices about many aspects of classical SFL. That is, SFL does not offer a unitary, coherent theory but rather a collection of studies by scholars who originally have been inspired by the work of Halliday, and who still use some of the standard notions of SFL, but who otherwise have gone their own way, as is for example the case of such varied approaches as those of Jim Martin, Eija Ventola, Jay Lemke, Norman Fairclough and Theo van Leeuwen, among many others.

But let me return to the standard characterizations (definitions would probably be too strong a term) of the three dimensions of context in SFL. ‘Field’ is the term for the contextual category of (say) ‘ongoing social activity’. This is a relatively clear description of an important aspect of the social situation that may be relevant for discourse. One may only wonder why the term ‘Field’ instead of simply ‘Social Interaction’ has been used for this contextual dimension. To complicate matters, however, Field is also used to refer to “subject matter”, a notion that has little to do with ongoing social activities, but rather should be defined in terms of global semantic meanings (or macrostructures) of texts – and hence not of contexts.
'Tenor' is a similarly strange term, but its intended contextual contents are fairly clear: participants, their relations and their roles. Apart from the somewhat obscure terminology, the only problem with this category in SFL is that it is often only participant relations that are being mentioned in its characterization, and not the other relevant social properties of participants, such as their group membership, let alone the important cognitive properties of participants such as their knowledge – a problem I shall critically deal with in some more detail below.

'Mode' as a term is slightly more comprehensible, but again it is a heterogeneous collection of contextual categories. It is usually described as "the role language is playing in the ongoing activity." For instance, language may be constitutive of such an activity or be only peripheral to it. But the notion is also routinely used to refer to the written or spoken 'mode' of discourse, or even to the distance (intimacy, etc.) of the speakers. Also rhetorical functions and purposes or even genres have been discussed in this category. In sum, Mode is a ragbag of heterogeneous notions, some of which do not belong in a theory of context at all (such as rhetorical properties of language), whereas others merely indicate the functional nature of language use or discourse, and should hence be explained by the joint categories of the context.

If we merely look at these few notions and their definitions, and ignore the broad linguistic implications these have had in SFL, our conclusions about the theory of context in SFL would have to be quite critical:

- The contextual categories are not original (they are largely due to variation stylistics);
- The notions are theoretically unproductive and inert (they have barely changed in many years);
- They are rather vague (even SF linguists have variable definitions of the categories);
- They are heterogeneous (theoretically very different notions are described by these categories).

At the same time, there is very little inspiration from the many other approaches to context in linguistics and especially in anthropology, sociology or social psychology (see below), at least in the analysis of the context. There are relations with sociolinguistics (especially Bernstein's), sociology and critical discourse analysis, among other directions, but these do not primarily focus on the improvement of the theory of context.

In light of for instance what has been done in the ethnography of speaking and in the social psychology of episodes (see below) it is striking that SF for so long has been content with a rather heterogeneous set of very general and vague notions, without doing systematic research on the properties of the social situation of communicative events. Although they are occasionally mentioned as part of one of the three categories, one wonders why there is no systematic analysis of, for instance, such categories as social domain, setting, time, place or direction, of the many institutional constraints on discourse.

The same is a fortiori true for lack of attention to the many types of 'mental' aspects of the social situation that are relevant for text or talk, such as purposes or aims, and especially knowledge, a notion that is very seldom used in SF analyses of context, at least not as a cognitive notion or as knowledge of individual speakers (for SFL, undoubtedly, knowledge is a social notion, in the sense that knowledge is somehow "in" or "of" society, and not in the minds of people).

In other words, the SF concept of context is not only inadequate for the reasons mentioned above, but it is also basically incomplete: very important categories are missing. The same is true for reflections on the internal structures of contexts.

And finally, despite the main claims of a functional theory of language, there is strictly speaking no explicit theoretical framework that describes and explains how social structures of contexts can affect language or discourse structures, and vice versa. The relationship is merely postulated, but there is no explicit interface that shows how language users actually are able to adapt their discourse to their social environment. Like in much of classical sociolinguistics, this relationship in SF is not an explanatory one, but a correlational, descriptive (probabilistic) one.

This is not surprising, because SFL has always rejected a cognitive approach to language in which such an interface should be formulated. SFL developed in the tradition of British empiricism, and against a background of behaviorist assumptions about "observability" as a crucial condition of "objective" scholarship, as we can find in Malinowski and Firth (Firth 1968: 170), and later in Halliday's work (Halliday 1978: 170). Such "mental" aspects as purposes or knowledge are therefore as alien in the SF-descriptions of context as meanings in the work of Bloomfield. And without these and related notions, many aspects of language use cannot properly be accounted for. This official position is again confirmed by Hasan (Hasan 1999: 220), claiming that "the impetus for speaking does not originate in the knowledge of language", a claim that of course hinges upon the interpretation of the vague term "impetus".

Although the SF-theory of context is in my view quite disappointing, this does not mean that systemic linguistics has nothing to offer to a context-
sensitive theory of discourse. That is, its main 'functional' contribution is not so much in the theory of social situations, but rather in the ways social situations impinge on language, that is at the level of what in SF-jargon is called 'register,' or rather in the way register is related to grammar and properties of discourse.

That is, the notion of register itself is quite vague, and for some authors more or less the same as context (e.g., Martin 1992). The context categories of SF described above are often also called register categories, but it seems more sensible to clearly distinguish between the linguistically relevant aspects of social situations, that is contexts, on the one hand, and the totality of linguistic options or possible variations that are related to these context features, on the other hand, and reserve the term 'register' for the latter – thinking of the possible choices language users have in a given situation. In other words, 'register' (or 'style') is rather the discursive-structural result of the way language can vary as a function of context structures or even more succinctly it may be defined as the trace of the context in the text.

Thus, although SF in general describes language structures in terms of their functions (often confusingly called 'meanings' in the SF tradition, already in Firth), and thus is able to relate linguistic structures in terms of their social uses, the lack of explicitness of the SF-notion of context also carries over to its mappings or traces in talk or text. Thus, the context category of field is usually associated with the 'ideational' (meta-) function of language, tenor with the 'interpersonal' function, and mode with the 'textual' function of language.

These general (meta) functions, however, are as vague, puzzling and heterogeneous as their contextual counterpart categories. Thus, what people are talking about, and the current, ongoing activity, vaguely relate to the account of experiences that are typically being denoted by the ideational function, but only very vaguely. Indeed, a news article, as well as many other discourse genres, is usually about events that have little to do with the experiences of its participants, either of journalists or of newspaper readers or TV viewers.

More straightforward is the relation between the context category of tenor (participant relations) with the interpersonal function. However, one would in that case expect at least the integration of a pragmatic theory of speech acts or a theory of conversational interaction, but as is the case for many other theories and approaches of discourse, these have not been integrated in the classical theory of SFL – although later authors have provided some elements of integration.

Perhaps most confusing is how Mode categories are assumed to systematically link up with 'textual' functions – a strange notion at this level when the very notion of context precisely wants to account for the functions of 'text' in the social situation. Probably, this is a remnant of the typical sentence or clause-oriented basis of SFL in grammar, where words, clauses and sentences also had a "textual" function (for instance in relation to cohesion or coherence). In a theory of discourse this does of course hardly make sense, because it is the relations between context and whole texts – and their structures – that are at stake. In other words, the 'textual' function is a rather heterogeneous and inconsistent category in this line-up. Textual functions thus understood must be described in discourse theories, e.g. in semantics, and not in a 'pragmatic' theory of context.

Not only are the language functions based on the three context categories thus getting infected by the same vagueness as their contextual counterparts, one may also, and again, wonder whether fundamental categories are not missing in this approach. Indeed, one may wonder whether there is no linguistic or discursive evidence for the following obvious (global) functions of language variously proposed and used by many other linguists and discourse analysts, in a tradition that has roots in Jakobson's famous article (Jakobson 1960):

- a. Intra-personal functions (personal identity, personal opinions, etc.)
- b. Emotional functions (expression of feelings, affects)
- c. Group functions (membership of a group, group identity)
- d. Intergroup functions (power, dominance and solidarity)
- e. Cultural functions (general common ground, consensus, norms, values, etc.)
- f. Esthetic functions (e.g., in literature).

These 'meanings' or functions are barely revolutionary, and appear in most work on the social or cultural functions of language. Of course, SF linguists also talk about them, maybe in other terms, but it is strange that the triple that organizes the SF concept of context also must be reproduced in the SF concept of register and language functions, thus leading to a strange, arbitrary reduction, and the neglect of important aspects of language use in the classical SF framework. Again, this does not mean that there are no SF linguists who use other communicative functions, but somehow these do not seem to be integrated in the old framework, which as we suggested above seems to be quite resistant to change and updating.

We shall not further detail our critique of the SFL concept of context, but only conclude that compared to other approaches, for instance in ethnography and social psychology, the notion (developed by linguists) is theoretically ad hoc. Although on many topics there are significant variations among SFL...
scholars, for instance in the work of Martin (e.g., Martin 1985, 1992, 1999), Ventola (1995) and Lemke (e.g., Lemke 1995) when compared to the standard theory, there have as far as I know not been any serious alternative formulations for the theory of the structures of context (see Ghadessy 1999).

As briefly suggested above, an important difference with my own approach is that dominant SFL is explicitly anti-mentalist, a stance it shares with much of sociolinguistics, conversation analysis and discursive psychology, but not with cognitive anthropology. On various occasions Halliday and others have emphasized that they do not need any 'mental' interface for the relations between social context and language use (see e.g., Firth 1968:170; Halliday 1978:39). This is also the reason they reject Hymes' concept of communicative competence.

Instead of participants' knowledge of the language, SFL theorists prefer to talk about the 'potential' of the system. How language users are able to acquire, use and change that 'potential' is not further explained, at least not in cognitive terms. The nature or locus of that 'potential' and how they magically control text and talk are not specified, as is also the case for related notions such as 'repertoire' in discursive psychology.

As we have seen, one of the other theoretical problems of the rejection of cognitive accounts is that there is no theoretical interface between the language system or social language use, on the one hand, and actual text and talk of individual language users, on the other hand. Note that accounting for the cognitive dimensions of language use does not imply a reduction to individualism, but only the possibility to also explain personal variations of language use. That is, we should not only account for the social dimensions of discourse, but also explain how and why all discourses are unique and individual, and that this 'subjectivity' must also be built into the context. Moreover, because meanings, knowledge or understandings may be socially shared, mental descriptions may be both personal and social. We here touch upon one of the most resistant and problematic misunderstandings of virtually all 'social' approaches to language and discourse, namely that cognitive accounts are necessarily individualist and hence also anti-social.

Incidentally, SFL's positivism and anti-mentalism is inconsistent with the proposals of one of its historical forerunners, defined as such by Malinowski, Firth and Halliday, namely German linguist Philip Wegener (1848–1916). This scholar is said to have provided the first formulation of a theory of situation, but it is interesting to note that, unlike in SF research, part of this situation is formulated by him in cognitive terms, such as the 'situation of recall', that is, what we recall now of what has been said before (which obviously is not the same as what actually has been said before, that is, the co-text as it is traditionally defined).

Although Halliday and other leading SF theorists explicitly reject any mentalist or individualist descriptions or explanations, and prefer to focus on the social 'reality' of language use, some of their key notions, such as meaning and functions, hardly refer to 'observable' events either. That is, a strictly positivist or behaviorist observational approach is inconsistent with a functional approach to language using terms such as meanings or meta-functions.

The same is true for the theory of context. Already Firth, and later Halliday and others, stressed that we are not dealing with real social situations, but with abstractions, for instance defined in terms of what is relevant for language users. Similarly, notions such as language system, potentialities, levels of grammatical description, cohesion and other aspects of discourse, are all non-observable, abstract, theoretical notions or rather the mental constructs of language users.

What usually happens in anti-mentalist theories of language and discourse (such as conversation analysis, discursive psychology etc.) is that cognitive notions come in through the backdoor. Thus, in spite of their anti-mentalist (or perhaps rather non-mentalist) orientation, SFL theorists also speak of belief systems, value systems, appraisal systems and ideologies. They do so however in terms of their expression in language and discourse, rather than in more cognitive terms (see also Halliday & Matthiessen 1999).

The rejection of fundamental cognitive notions, such as purposes or knowledge, among many others, is therefore in my view inconsistent with an empirically adequate theory of language, for which forms of thought are no less 'real' than forms of action. The crucial point is that social meaning is not just social, but also mental, and this is not only the case for cognitive analysts, but also for language users themselves, for whom meanings, knowledge beliefs, opinions, attitudes and any other aspect of language understanding are things of the mind. We shall argue below that the same is true for their interpretations of communicative events we call contexts.

2.2 Other approaches

Following the early work of Dell Hymes and his SPEAKING model of context (Hymes 1962), ethnographic approaches have so far contributed much to our understanding of context (Auer & Di Luzio 1992; Duranti & Goodwin 1992; Gumperz 1982). The focus here is on the relevant structures of whole commu-
nicative events, and not just on the structures of text or talk as part of such events, and such events also include a setting, participants, goals, etc.

Probably the most systematic work on context has been carried out in the social psychology of language (Brown & Fraser 1979; Giles & Coupland 1991), following various approaches to the social psychology of situations (Argyle, Furnham, & Graham 1981; Furnham & Argyle 1981; Forgas 1979, 1985). Thus, Brown and Fraser (1979: 35) present a situation schema consisting of components such as Scene, consisting of Setting (Bystanders, Locale, Time) and Purpose (goals, tasks, topic) and Participants and their various properties and relationships. Wish and Kaplan (1977), using multidimensional scaling, identify five basic dimensions people use in the interpretation of social situations: cooperative-competitive, intense-superficial, formal-informal, dominant-equal, and task oriented-non task-oriented (see also Forgas 1985; Giles & Coupland 1991). Note though that such dimensions are rather properties of one aspect of the social situation, namely properties of, and relations between participants and their actions, and not a description of context structures as a whole.

Unlike linguistic approaches however, these social psychological approaches do not usually match assumed context/situation parameters with language or discourse structures, and that is of course the very point of a theory of context. That is, a theory of context is not the same as a theory of social situation, but a special and important special case of such a theory. Also, although these proposals come from psychology, they are not always related to mental representations (like models) of social situations. That is, social situations by themselves can of course not directly influence language use or other social practices, but this is only possible through a cognitive interface, which spells out how the social situation is interpreted, or in fact constructed, by participants.

3. Fragments of a theory of context

A fully-fledged theory of context is a complex, multidisciplinary theory of the structure of social situations and communicative events and how their relevant properties are related to the structures of text and talk (for early — more formal, but rather reductive — formulations of this theory, see e.g., Van Dijk, 1972, 1977). I shall only highlight some of the dimensions of such a theory, and in this paper largely ignore the earlier research done on context in linguistics, anthropology, and social psychology as referred to above. Despite this earlier work, we still lack a more or less explicit theory of context. Indeed, until today, there is not a single monograph on context.

3.1 Contexts as mental models

The main thesis of my theory of context is that contexts should not be defined in terms of some kind of social situation in which discourse takes place, but rather as a mental representation, or model, constructed by the speech participants of or about such a situation (for details, see Van Dijk 1999).

Social situations as such, as well as their properties, cannot directly influence how people write, speak or understand talk or text. Gender, age, roles, group membership or power of participants, among many other traditional properties of the situation of communicative events, can be relevant for discourse only when participants attend to them, and construct them as such. This observation is consistent with an ethnomethodological and discursive psychological approach to context. However, my proposal suggests that such ‘constructs’ are not just abstract or vaguely “in between” participants, but defined in terms of mental models, and only thus able to function as the necessary link between social situations and discourse.

According to contemporary psychology, mental models are representations of actions or events in Episodic Memory, which is part of Long Term Memory. In Episodic Memory (sometimes also called Autobiographical Memory), people represent and store their (interpreted) personal experiences, including the ways they interpret the events they read or hear about, witness or participate in themselves. Thus, MPs debating about a recent ethnic conflict do so on the basis of their personal interpretation of such a conflict, as represented in their mental model of that conflict. Each MP will have his or her own mental model (interpretation) of this conflict (for details of the notion of mental model, see, e.g., Johnson-Laird 1983; Van Dijk & Kintsch 1993; Van Oostendorp & Goldman 1999).

Models are not only personal, but also have an important social dimension. What MPs construct also depends on their general, cultural knowledge about conflicts and ethnic groups, as well as on their socially shared attitudes and ideologies about such conflicts or ethnic groups. That is, mental models of different people may sometimes be very much alike. However, despite these social dimensions, each model as a whole is subjective and unique (for the current communicative situation) because it necessarily also features the personal experiences, opinions, or autobiographical associations of MPs about such a conflict.

The same is true for mental models that participants construe of a very special class of events, namely the communicative event in which they are now taking part. These are also personal, and unique for each participant —
if only because of their different autobiographical experiences as well as the different current perspective and interests – and at the same time have a social dimension.

We may conceive of context models as explaining the crucial ‘pragmatic’ notion of relevance: They define what for the discourse participants is now relevant in the social situation (see also Sperber & Wilson 1986). Without a conception of the communicative event as represented by a context model, participants are unable to adequately contribute to ongoing discourse. They would be unable to produce and understand speech acts, would be unable to adapt topics, lexical items, style and rhetoric to the current social event, and they would not even be able to tell what the recipients already know, so that they do not even know what ‘content’ to express in the first place. Indeed, without context models, adequate, contextually sensitive discourse is impossible.

In other words, contexts are not ‘out there’, but ‘in here’: They are mental constructs of participants; they are individually variable interpretations of the ongoing social situation. Thus, they may be biased, feature personal opinions, and for these reasons also embody the opinions of the participants as members of groups. Indeed, a feminist and male chauvinist in conversation are likely to have rather different context models, as do a liberal and a conservative, a professor and a student, and a doctor and a patient talking together. Indeed, biased or incomplete context models are the source of profound communicative and interactional conflicts.

In other words, just like mental models of events talked about, also context models may be ideologically biased. Thus, MPs not only may express biased beliefs about immigrants, but may also exhibit such beliefs in their interaction and discourse with immigrants or with MPs of other political parties.

It should be emphasized that context models are not static mental representations, but dynamic structures. They are ongoingly constructed, updated and reconstructed. They change with each change in (the interpretation) of the situation, if only because of the ongoing changes of discourse itself (one of the components of context). For instance, if nothing else, the discourse will dynamically change the knowledge the participants have about the knowledge of the other. But also the ongoing action, the participant roles, aims and other beliefs may change during interaction. That is, in ongoing interaction and hence also in ongoing conversation, as well as during reading, language participants maintain a dynamically changing model that allows them to flexibly plan, understand, memorize and adapt their discourse to other participants and other aspects of the ongoing event.

**Structures of context**

As is the case for the cognitive theory of mental models of events, we can only guess what contexts (i.e. context models) look like. Like event models they represent events, so – in a structural account – they most likely feature a schema consisting such categories as Setting (Time, Location), Event/Action, Participants, and so on, as suggested above. In this case, the central event/action is discursive (and possibly concomitant with other actions), and the participants are participants of speech. But a more articulate theory of context features more than just these categories.

Thus, at a macro level of situational understanding, we assume that people need to be aware of the global social domain in which they are speaking. Politicians in parliament know they are now ‘doing’ Politics, and teachers are aware they are involved in Education, as judges are aware they are in the area of Law. This general domain (as subjectively represented – and therefore sometimes misguided) will influence the contents of many of the lower level categories of the schema.

Similarly, participants in such domains, when speaking, also engage in global actions, such as legislation, teaching or doing justice. Local actions realize these global actions (such as criticizing the government, asking students about what they have learned, etc.). We see that as is also the case for a theory of discourse structures, we need a global (macro) and local (micro) level account of context.

Participants as we know may have (assume or construct) many different roles, and such roles may affect the production and comprehension of discourse. We assume that there are three basic types of role that are contextually relevant: communicative roles, interactional roles and social roles. Thus, participants obviously need to represent themselves and other participants as speakers/writers or recipients, as well as a complex range of other communicative roles, such as various production roles in institutional situations (for instance in the mass media: writers, editors, actual speakers, etc.) and recipient roles (reader, listener, overhearer, etc.). Interactional roles need to be represented in order to be able to account for various situational positions, such as friends and enemies, proponents and opponents – as is the case for speakers in parliament speaking in support of, or against government proposals. Social roles account for group membership, as defined for instance by ethnicity, gender, age, political affiliation or profession. Obviously these various role types may be combined: Someone taking part in a parliamentary debate may (right now) be speaker, take a stand as opponent of the government, be an MP, a woman, a conservative, and so on – each role differentially affecting discourse
structures. The same is true for the social relations between participants as group members, for instance in conversations between women and men.

Finally, contexts also have cognitive categories, such as the goals, knowledge and other beliefs of the participants. The goal-directedness of discourse is of course crucial to interpret the interactional functions of discourse, obviously at all levels.

The knowledge component is the very basis of a host of semantic and pragmatic properties of discourse, such as implications and presuppositions: The speaker must know what the recipient already knows in order to be able to decide what propositions of a mental model or of the social representations are known to the recipients. And recipients need to know the same about the speaker or writer in order to establish what is actually intended in implicit, indirect, ironic or other non-explicit forms of talk. In other words, people have mutual ‘knowledge models’ of each other’s knowledge, and these models crucially control many of the discursive strategies of participants.

So far, this is merely a tentative taxonomy of probably relevant categories of contexts. Note that not all categories are always relevant: Participants in principle only construct those that are situationally relevant. Moreover, personal variation of context modelling may be a function of earlier communicative experiences. Some speakers, in some situations, will construct a rather rich and extensive context model, whereas others may be rather sloppy or general in their interpretation of the context. Some will be socially more or less ‘intelligent’ than others in interpreting non-verbal signals such as facial expressions, gestures or body posture, for instance, as expressions of contextually relevant emotions, beliefs or goals.

An empirical theory of context also needs to specify which of the categories are general and perhaps universal, and which ones are culturally variable. Thus, in many cultures gender and age will usually be relevant in the production and comprehension of several discourse forms, whereas the length or the colour of the hair of speakers is not usually a relevant category. Such a theory also needs to spell out the relations between the categories: Some may be more relevant than others, thus suggesting a hierarchical structure for context models. The theory should be explicit about the actual effects of context model categories and contents on the selection of model information for meaning representations: What propositions may or must (not) be included? And finally, it should carefully specify what discourse forms, such as those of style, rhetoric, etc., are influenced by context features.

3.2 Parliamentary contexts

This brief account of what we understand by context should be able to help us formulate fragments of a theory of parliamentary contexts as they are routinely and ongoingly constructed by MPs (for other studies of parliamentary discourse and events, see, e.g., Bayley 1998, 1999; Carbó 1992, 1995; Illie 1994, 1999, 2000, 2001; Miller 1997, 1998; Van Dijk 2000; Wodak & Van Dijk 2000).

Although contexts are by definition personal and unique, we also have seen that they have important social (and political) dimensions: MPs share much of their knowledge and beliefs about the contexts they construct, and also know how other MPs define the current situation, for instance of a parliamentary debate, in terms of their own mental models. They know, for instance, that whatever the other politicians may say or claim, they represent themselves (and other MPs) as members of some political party, and hence as political friends or opponents. Such awareness, as represented in the mental model we call context, also may actually be ritually expressed or formulated, for instance when in the British House of Commons MPs may address other MPs of the same party as ‘my honourable Friend’—even when in other social situations they may be sworn enemies.

In other words, also due to the socially shared nature of our knowledge about language, discourse and communication, and because of the routine nature of everyday context building (a special case of making models of our daily experiences), MPs need not invent or build their context models from scratch. Despite the variations of the social/political situation, as well as the personally different experiences of MPs, much of their personal models should consist of a more or less fixed schema that can be applied now and again in the interpretation of each session of Parliament. This activation of a known schema is strategic, and similar to the activation of knowledge about discourse genres. However, such a ready-made schema can quickly be adapted to specific circumstances.

In light of the general theoretical remarks made above about contexts defined as mental models of communicative situations and events, and some more informal remarks about parliamentary contexts, let us now try to become more systematic and deal in more detail with the hypothetical categories of the parliamentary context schema.

To test such hypotheses directly, we would need cognitive methods to assess the structure of mental models, but since these models generally involve forms of discourse (induced in the laboratory), I shall assume that these context categories may also be exhibited in parliamentary talk. This is not merely a
methodological decision, but a theoretical one: contexts are defined in terms of relevance, and hence we must assume that its categories are constructed in such a way that they monitor specific structures of discourse. This does not mean that context categories are always explicitly formulated and attended to (as is the case for goals or knowledge), but by definition they are needed to describe and explain at least some properties of discourse.

One of the many assumptions of a theory of mental models is that such models are (hierarchically) organized: important categories on top, and secondary categories lower in the hierarchical schema. In our analysis, we shall first deal with the respective categories, and then make assumptions on their ordering and organization in the model schema.

**Micro and macro categories**

Another form of organization pertains to the level of categorization. As we have seen, some categories may be called macro categories because they are defined in more global societal structures, whereas the more traditional situational categories of face-to-face interaction belong to the micro level of analysis and understanding. Note that it would be a fallacy to assume, as is often the case in contemporary SFL, microsociological or ethnomethodological approaches, that the micro level of situated action is more 'concrete' or more 'observable' than macro-structural categories. In our theory, as well as in everyday experience and understanding, both levels are constructs, and hence represented in mental models.

Thus, in parliamentary debates, global (societal) categories such as politics, parliament, legislation or political parties are no less 'real', and no less attended to in conversation and interaction, than typical local level categories such as a parliamentary session, participants or their actions. The point is that the latter are always defined in terms of the former: a debate is a parliamentary debate precisely because it is carried out as taking place in the institution of parliament, as part of legislation and as 'doing politics'. This understanding is not merely cognitive but is also multiply signaled in talk itself.

### 3.3 Parliamentary Context Categories

#### 3.3.1 Macro-level categories

**Domain.** As we already suggested above, social situations are routinely understood and experienced as forming part of a larger social domain (see also the notion of 'field' in the work of Bourdieu; see e.g., Bourdieu 1985). The content of the macro level category of a domain may well be culturally variable, but in many contemporary (post) industrial societies, such a segmentation of the social realm may feature domains such as politics, business, education, health care, justice, and so on. Institutions, social roles, professions, power relations, as well as social interaction and discourse, and many other societal structures at the macro and micro level of social analysis, tend to be related to such domains. It is here assumed that social actors, when engaging in talk or text, implicitly or explicitly attend to (their conception of) such social domains. References to such domains may especially be expected when things go wrong, when activities or discourses are perceived to cross domain boundaries, when professional competence is at stake, or when domains need to be defended against members of other domains.

Thus, I assume that Politics is one of such domains, and that the definition of Parliamentary Context categories involves such an overall category. Participants know and ongoingly show awareness of participating in the political domain, and of 'doing politics'. Often, such participation in the domain is related to professional roles, such as those of politicians, but that is no condition. Students may be engaged in a political demonstration, and in that case are aware of 'doing politics' rather than of 'doing learning'. In other words, the global domain category is one of the overall categories that contribute to the definition of the situation, and hence to the definition of the status of its discourses. The slogans shouted by students in a demonstration are thus political if the demonstration is defined as being engaged in within the political domain.

For sessions and debates in Parliament, there is in general little doubt about the overall domain. MPs are in general professional politicians, and their work is generally defined as political and as belonging to the domain of Politics, rather than that of Education or Health Care. Of course, individually or variously so because of ideologically differences, MPs may have different conceptions of what exactly politics is or implies, but it is likely that they share the overall category of Politics as the social domain that defines sessions of parliament. MPs may talk about education, health care or business, but such talk would not be construed as being contextually constrained by the domains of Education, Health Care or Business. Indeed, when politicians make their decisions or organize their speeches in terms of personal business interests, they may be criticized or prosecuted for corruption -- a typical example of (illegal) domain crossing. However, domains may sometimes be closely related or even overlap. Thus, MPs are not only elected representatives but also legislators, and as such part of their activities belong to the domain of Justice or Law.
Global actions. Global domains are characterized by global actions. Thus, whatever MPs are actually doing in a parliamentary session, such as giving speeches, criticizing the government, or asking questions, all these actions are defined, for MPs themselves as well as for other people, as engaging in the global acts of legislation or governing the country. Indeed, MPs are legislators. The ultimate point of their speeches or questions, is making or amending laws (as in the U. S. system), or discussing, amending and usually ratifying Bills (as proposed by the government) as in the U. K. system.

At this macro level of analysis (or of understanding and representing situations by participants), we might also postulate other global actions. MPs not only legislate, but also engage in several other global acts of the political domain:

- Representing their constituents
- Governing the country
- Criticizing the government
- Engaging in opposition
- Implementing party programs
- Making policy

Of course, besides these typical political acts, they also engage in more general social acts of many kinds, such as:

- Making decisions
- Promoting themselves
- Reproducing (anti)racism
- Making money

All these global acts may take place concurrently, and may be realized by a single discursive act at the local level. That is, 'doing politics' at the highest level of this domain representation may involve much more than just legislation, and self- and other designations of MPs as representatives, opposition, policy makers, etc. show that such global acts are part of their political identity. We shall assume that for each local discursive act, politicians are – or may be – aware, of the global (political) significance or functionality of such acts. Questions may be asked on behalf of constituents, and politicians can only do so when being aware of their role as representatives or as members of the Opposition. And since such awareness influences the properties of their speeches, we assume that these global acts should be part of the context model of MPs. They are not just analytical inventions of political scientists or discourse analysts, but 'real' global acts in which participants consciously engage in when talking in parlia-

ment, and which guides their discourse, their understanding, their interaction, and also their mutual critique. Being a 'good' politician and professional may imply carrying out local actions as satisfactory manifestation of the global acts.

Institutional actors. If global domains are the scenes of global actions, the logic of action requires there to be also global actors. That is, we do not merely understand political debates as being defined in terms of MPs, but also as a confrontation between political parties, between government and opposition, and parliament as an institution that 'does' things also as an institution. We thus routinely hear that the Government has decided so and so, or that Parliament has blocked a government decision.

MPs are continuously aware of their participation in global groups or institutions, rather than merely as unique individuals. Thus their discursive style may be unique, but despite such uniqueness, they always also act as representatives of the parties, opposition, and so on.

3.3.2 Micro-level categories

Setting. At the specific micro level of ongoing interaction, MPs construct their environment first of all in terms of the ubiquitous category of a temporal and spatial setting. Storytelling, news reports and many other aspects of language and discourse, routinely express such a setting by initial categories of time and space ("Yesterday, in the office. . . .", "Paris, May 5, 2001", etc.).

Also in parliamentary debates MPs construct their context in terms of such a definitional environment. Indeed, parliamentary debates take place, also by law, in a well-defined space, Parliament, multiply indexed in their speeches as 'here' or 'in this House' – expressions that may be ambiguous between global institutional deixis (here in the institution of Parliament) or local spatial deixis (in this building of parliament).

The temporal setting might be trivially defined as a specific date and day, routinely referred to by deictic expressions such as 'today', and made explicit as a date in the Acts or Proceedings of parliament. But further analysis may suggest that also temporal settings in parliamentary debates also have legal and political significance beyond a day or date. Indeed, parliamentary decisions or votes may be legally valid or invalid before or after a specific day and date.

Even more influential in parliamentary encounters is clock time. Such time is allocated to speakers by the Chair or by leaders of a debate, and scrupulously measured and administrated. Continuous reference is made in parliamentary speeches to the minutes MPs dispose of, request, or allocate to each other. Time of talk is thus one of the most precious resources of MPs, and allocated under
Local actions. The central defining act of a parliamentary session is undoubtedly the discursive act of a debate. Note though that a ‘debate’ itself is a higher level, complex discursive notion, which consists of a sequence of speeches of MPs, interventions by the chair, questions of MPs directed at cabinet ministers, interruptions, and so on. Such a debate may not only go on for hours, but sometimes stretch over various days, and various sessions. Formally opened and introduced by the Chair, the debate may be formally concluded by a vote, and a final word of closure by the Chair.

This observation first of all shows that also in the definition and understanding of context, the notions of macro vs. micro, or global vs. local, are gradual. That is, at the most specific local level of action description, an MP may ask a question (below the level of actions, we might even go down to the level of locutionary acts of uttering words or clauses), which may be part of her or his speech, which in turn is part of the complex debate. That is, the notion of ‘ongoing’ action or interaction is vague in that it can be defined at various linguistic, discursive, interactional and political levels. This also means that the contextualization of each aspect of talk in parliament may be multiply related to these different levels, referring or presupposing ‘these words’, ‘this question’, ‘this speech’ or ‘this debate’, respectively. And since in one session of parliament various topics may be addressed, we may even assume a higher level unit consisting of several debates.

Although we have suggested that in the analysis of parliamentary debates the main focus will undoubtedly be on the discursive interaction defining a debate, it should be borne in mind that the contextual definition of local action in general is not limited to discursive action. Indeed, MPs ‘do’ a lot of things when speaking in parliament, and most of these things require definition in political terms.

Thus, we have seen above that at the global level of analysis and representation MPs are first of all engaged in legislation. And although the distance between a word, speech act or speech at the local level and legislation at the global level may be considerable, we must assume that at least occasionally MPs are aware and show awareness of the functionality of their speech at these more global levels. Also the formality of parliamentary debates reminds MPs constantly of their ‘lofty’ task of legislators and representatives of the people. This overall, global or macro, organization also acts as a control at the local level. Although local goals of action may vary, the overall goal needs to be consistent with the global acts engaged in. Thus, a local question may be asked as a strategic move to criticize the government, and thus to attack a Bill proposed by the government, and such a move may be an excellent way to engage in opposition, and such opposition may be necessary as a responsible way to represent voters whose interests may be curtailed by the law, and so on.

In other words, by talking, engaging in speech acts or in other discursive acts, MPs are typically also engaged in a considerable number of political acts. It is also for this reason that we need a context theory of parliamentary debates. Asking a question about (say) immigration is, as such, not a political act: many people in society in their respective situations may ask such questions. It is however the political functions of these acts (as part of legislation, governing, engaging in opposition, representing the people, etc.) that define a question as constitutive of a parliamentary debate.

Each of these local moves of global level political actions in parliament may be recognized and categorized as such by experts, that is, by MPs themselves. For instance, during question time in the British House of Commons, no speeches may be given and only questions may be asked. But through specific formulations (“Is the Minister aware that...”, etc.) indirect assertions and hence indirect little speeches, including points of critique may be formulated.

Participants. One of the crucial categories of context models is of course Participants and their relevant properties. It is standard knowledge that many discourse structures vary as a function of the properties of the participants and their relations: pronouns, politeness phenomena, and so on.

In order to make these insights more explicit, I first propose to further analyze this category in terms of different kind of roles:

- Communicative roles (various producer and recipient roles)
- Interaction roles (friend, enemy, opponent, etc.)
- Social roles (e.g., based on gender, class, ethnicity, profession, organization, etc.).

Thus, the traditional speaker/recipient role distinction obviously controls the system of turn taking in parliament. There are however other ‘speaking’ roles that overlap with membership and leadership in social groups or organizations.
These social and political categories control such characteristics as pronouns and speech acts, and acts such as attacking and defending are controlled by these categorizations. In the British House of Commons, members accomplish their aims, that is, it is crucial for the adversarial structures of party-based democracy that MPs are also categorized as representing and defending the interests of many different social categories, groups, institutions, or other units. They will speak also as Dutch or English, as men or women, as white or black, old or young, and so on, and by definition as MPs.

That is, a speaker in parliament may be defined as ‘speaker’ of her or his party on a certain topic or issue, and may even be expected in that case to speak for someone else, and barely expressing personal opinions. Similarly, MPs are by definition ‘representatives’ of their constituencies, and may be heard as ‘speaking’ for them. Similarly, the chair of parliament is called the Speaker of the House in the U. K. and USA. We also know that the person who is the speaker of a speech in parliament, need not necessarily be the one who has conceived the speech, as is the case for many institutional speakers. These different identities or types of Speaking roles, some of which are properly political, control for instance the selection of pronouns. Thus, it is well-known that we is one of the most political of all pronouns, and variously reflects the identification or representation of the speaker as speaking for her or his party, as an MP speaking for all MPs, as a member of a nation, and so on.

Similar remarks hold for various Recipient categories. MPs first of all address other MPs, and such an identity in the Participant-Recipient subcategory controls many of the strategies of address, politeness and persuasion in parliamentary debates. But MPs know that they will also be (over)heard by journalists and (often through the media) by the voters and any group, organization or country for whom the speech is relevant. This means that the recipient design moves in parliamentary debates all need to take into account such address directed to voters and others outside of parliament. Indeed, there are rhetorical moves that allow you in such debate to refer to others than those directly addressed in a parliamentary debate, namely the MPs.

Secondly, participant categories are also defined by the very actions they accomplish. That is, it is crucial for the adversarial structures of party-based democracy that MPs are also categorized as representing and defending the Government or the Opposition. In the British House of Commons, members of the same party are routinely addressed as “Friends”. We call these categories ‘interactional’ because they may, like communicative categories, be wholly defined by the verbal interaction: one is an Opponent only when actually engaging in ‘doing opposition’. Many of the properties of the debates, and not only speech acts and acts such as attacking and defending are controlled by these interactional roles.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, MPs may belong to, identify with, represent or defend the interests of many different social categories, groups, institutions, or other units. They will speak also as Dutch or English, as men or women, as white or black, old or young, and so on, and by definition as MPs. These social and political categories control such characteristics as pronouns (such as Us vs. Them), and in general the broad strategy of positive ingroup description and negative outgroup descriptions so typical of any ideological discourse. This overall strategy may in turn control a host of positive vs. negative local moves in the presentation of Us vs. Them, and in general the forms of identification with various social groups. Topic choice, at the global level, and actor descriptions, presuppositions, disclaimers, implications, level of description, at the local level, and many more semantic structures and moves are typical of this social identity assumed by or ascribed to MPs.

Cognition. Often neglected as a context category, because context has often been exclusively associated with the ‘social situation’, we finally must assume a major cognitive category. Indeed, the crucial notion of the Aims or Intentions of the speakers is of course a cognitive category, namely a mental model represented in episodic memory. Both in production as well as in comprehension, thus, the aim each participants has of the interaction is fundamental, giving rise to a broad system of functional choices. If the overall aim of an MP is to attack the Bill of the current government, then this Aim controls the way the MP describes the Bill and those who are responsible for it.

Perhaps most basic of a theory of context, however, is the notion of knowledge. It is crucial that MPs know or believe what the current knowledge is of the other speakers, so that they are able to select from their mental event models precisely that information that would be most relevant for the recipients. This is however a very difficult procedure, because sometimes knowledge must be repeated, sometimes only part of the information is provided, for instance in presupposition. Sometimes speakers do not keep track of the knowledge set of their interlocutors, so that ‘gaps’ may come to exist between what each of them takes for granted. Hence we need a strong knowledge component in the complex theory of context, because so many structures of discourse depend on them, such as presupposition, completeness, etc.

3.4 Example

As our example we shall analyze a few passages from a debate on Asylum Seekers held in the British House of Commons on March 5, 1997. Note that location and date are already various properties of the context category of Setting. As to the participants of the context, this debate is initiated by Mrs. Teresa Gorman, Conservative MP of Billericay, later seconded by several other MPs of her party, and responded to by Labour MP Jeremy Corbyn.

I shall focus on those properties of discourse that are controlled by the hypothetical context models of the participants. A full analysis of the debate
Global action. Similarly, the context model needs to represent globally what kind of overall activity the current activity (speech, debate) is constituting, so that it has a broader aim and functionality, namely legislation. One of the specific aims of Mrs. Gorman is to defend government policy and a restrictive immigration law that is being criticized by Labour. Such defense of current legislation and critique of proposals to change the law is a routine component of the overall political action of legitimization. Contextual knowledge about ‘what we are doing here’ is thus crucial to make the current activities of the MPs meaningful and politically relevant. Moreover, legislation usually deals with current social problems, so that also semantically the reference of Mrs. Gorman to difficulties of boroughs and problems of (created by) asylum seekers can be understood, and as a legitimate concern of an MP, that is, as part of the overall parliamentary action of legislation.

Setting: Location. Implicit is also the knowledge about the Setting of the current debate, namely the British House of Commons (as explicitly signaled by Mrs. Gorman – see below). This may be a routine content of the Location category of the context models of MPs, but we still need to make this explicit in order to account for explicit deictic referential expressions (the House, or here). In the British House of Commons, such contextual knowledge about the current location is interestingly also presupposed in such expressions as ‘the other place’, referring to the House of Lords.

Setting: Time. Note also that Timing is important as a temporal aspect of Setting. The Hansard transcript explicitly signals starting time, and regularly does so for other moments. Speakers routinely refer to their lacking or running out of time, or argue that they have only a few minutes left, and that they therefore cannot ‘yield’ to the other speaker.

Knowledge. As suggested above, another overall contextual constraint that needs to be highlighted from the start is the fundamental role of shared knowledge. Mrs. Gorman needs to have various types of knowledge, largely shared by the other MPs, and indeed, with many other people in the UK: general knowledge of the language and knowledge of asylum seekers and related topics of immigration, and more specific professional knowledge about how to proceed in such a debate, what her duties and rights are as an MP, and even more specifically the knowledge of Conservative MPs about the Labour Party and its attitudes about asylum seekers and immigration. Spelling out all this knowledge, just for this small fragment, let alone for all other fragments below, would require many pages, and is outside the aims of this paper. I shall further regard the relation between general or political knowledge shared by MPs as being a condition for the meaningfulness and interpretability of this text, and hence as
a problem for a semantic, rather than of a contextual analysis. Strictly speaking though, knowledge of participants is of course a contextual category. In other words, discourse meaning is, at least also indirectly, a function of context.

Relevant though is Mrs. Gorman’s knowledge about the current communicative situation as it is represented in her context model. Note also the use of the definite articles the, the House, the difficulties, the London boroughs, and the problems, which also presuppose (political) knowledge about the current political situation around immigration and asylum seekers and its financial consequences. However, it is worth noting that such knowledge presuppositions may be ideologically manipulated. The difficulties of the London boroughs and the problems of asylum seekers may exist only in the mind (situation model) of Mrs. Gorman. Others, with a different mental model of the current situation around asylum seekers, might well deny that the London boroughs have any (particular) difficulties, or that the asylum seekers are (causing) a problem.

**Participant description/identification.** In this (printed) Hansard version of the debate (which is not always identical with the spoken version), we first encounter an identification of the Speaker by her name, followed by the name of her constituency. That is, we here have (textual) expressions of Current Speaker, and of her Professional/Social Role as Member of Parliament and Representative. Note though that her role as MP need not be made explicit, because it is presupposed that all those present in parliament are MPs. In other words, there is much (social, political) knowledge shared by speaker and recipients that needs not be expressed, and that may be attended to only under specific conditions.

**Participants: Communicative role: Current speaker.** Turning now to the analysis of her speech, we find that the Current Speaker category is routinely expressed by the personal pronoun I. Selection of the first person pronoun also politically signals that she is the person who takes the initiative of the debate. Although speaking as a Conservative MP, and as such also representing her party, she here also speaks for herself, and not necessarily voices the opinion of her party. Indeed, later in the debate some of her party members will subtly take distance from what she says about asylum seekers.

**Participants: Social role: MP.** Apart from the description in the written Hansard version, and the usual introduction (or permission to speak) by the Speaker of Parliament, Mrs. Gorman’s social (professional) role as MP is presupposed as shared knowledge of the participants. This means that in the context model of all participants the Social Role category of the current situation is filled by the profession of MP, attributed to Mrs. Gorman, as well as to all others present. Although not made explicit, however, the current passage can only be understood when the relevant political knowledge is activated and applied to MPs, and hence also Mrs. Gorman. On that knowledge basis she feels not only entitled, but expected to speak about constituents or (other) citizens, as is the case here. That is, her expressed concern is a routine manifestation of her contextual role as MP.

**Action.** Mrs. Gorman uses a performative verb (to bring to the attention of) to refer to her own ongoing communicative act, and thus makes part of the very context explicit. Note that usually speakers simply say what they have to say, without making their affirmative speech acts explicit. Combined with the self-descriptive volition verb to wish such a formulation expresses both a formal and a polite register, which is itself controlled by the Institution (part of the Setting category).

**Recipients.** As subcategory of the Participant-Communicative Role subcategory, Recipients is filled by the expression the House, which is intended and understood (on the basis of shared political Knowledge, analyzed above) as metonymically standing for the (British) House of Commons or parliament, and more specifically here (all) its present members, as (primary) Addressees. There is no textual trace here of possible other (secondary) addressees, such as her constituents, the media or the public at large. Note also that the definite article the presupposes shared knowledge of the recipients about which House is meant, trivially so as part of the contextual knowledge of the (one and only) ‘house’ they are members of.

We see that the rather informal contextual analysis of even a small fragment already marshals a rather extensive theoretical framework, of which several elements (such as all relevant knowledge of the participants) is not yet fully specified in order to explain all discursive theoretical structures of this fragment (such as the plausibility of the expression caused by as linking difficulties of boroughs with problems of asylum seekers).

The next passage of Mrs. Gorman’s speech runs as follows:

(2) There are, of course, asylum seekers and asylum seekers. I entirely support the policy of the Government to help genuine asylum seekers, but to discourage the growing number of people from abroad who come to Britain on holiday, as students or in some other capacity and, when the time comes for them to leave, declare themselves to be in need of asylum.

**Knowledge.** With a well-known rhetorical trick of the apparent tautology (usually expressed with special intonation, not represented in the transcript), Mrs. Gorman right from the start begins the ideological categorization between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ asylum seekers, one of the implications of such a tautol-
ogy. Much of such an analysis needs to be provided by a semantic description though. Contextually interesting however is the use of of course. This marker of obviousness signals not only presupposed knowledge, but also that such knowledge is or should be widely shared by everyone. Knowledge (or rather an opinion) about what is or should be known is typically contextual, and thus relevant here: it is Mrs. Gorman’s opinion. This evaluation of the obviousness of the categorization of asylum seekers as good and bad is driven by an underlying anti-immigration ideology which overall tends to assign negative properties to immigrants, as is indeed the case throughout Mrs. Gorman’s speech.

**Participants: Interaction role.** Mrs. Gorman’s speech has many communicative, social, political and interactional functions, some of which explicitly formulated by the speaker herself. That Conservative MPs support the policies of a Conservative government is obvious, and as such is a belief that needs not to be formulated, because everyone (at least in the House of Commons) knows that. In this case, however, Mrs. Gorman does more than merely assert the obvious. By explicitly supporting Government policy she not only signals her role as MP (see above) and not only her role as MP who is member of a party in power, but also her interactional role in the current debate, namely as supporting the government. Since the policy of the government is formulated in positive terms (help genuine asylum seekers), her support is at the same time a form of praise for such government policy – and hence the expression of an (indirect) speech act. As member of the government party and as a supporter of such (good) immigration policy, she thereby also implicitly evaluates herself as positive, a well known conversational move.

**Action.** Most of the rest of this passage is an expression of Mrs. Gorman’s (conservatively biased) mental model of the current situation of asylum seekers. Analysis of such a biased expression (such as the description of asylum seekers and their actions) is the task of a critical discourse semantics. But Mrs. Gorman is also politically doing something right now, and such actions are of course relevant in the interpretation of the current (political, social) situation, both by herself, as well as by the other MPs. Most explicit is the use of the performative verb to support, which enacts the political act of accepting and defending government policy. At the same time, she is starting to say negative things about asylum seekers, and this implies the enactment of various speech acts (such as accusation) and other social actions, such as spreading negative opinions about immigrants, a well-known type of elite discrimination and racism. Note that the euphemism used here (discourage) further contributes to the positive self-image of the speaker and the institution (government) she hereby identifies with. Policing and other actions against immigrants are usu-
poses first that British ratepayers do indeed pay for refugees, negatively evaluates this as bad and a problem that needs to be addressed. In other words, in political terms, she is defending the interests of the British property owners.

Finally, this passage exhibits a disclaimer, namely the disclaimer of Apparent Empathy (I understand... but...), which appears to contribute to positive self-presentation, but is a move that contributes to the negative presentation of Others. Apart from being part of a semantic strategy, this move apparently also has contextual dimensions, namely when implying (or suggesting with the audience) a positive opinion of the speaker.

In these examples we see that the semantics and context description of discourse intermingle. Negative other-description in racist discourse like this is a common dimension of its meaning. However, such a strategy of negative other-presentation is usually combined with a strategy of positive self-presentation, and such a positive opinion about Self or the own group, is of course an important part of the context model of most speakers. At the same time, in this case, the speaker signals her political allegiance, her party solidarity, and her social identity as a member of the dominant white majority in the U.K.

We also see that in such an informal 'contextual' analysis, the description of contextualization cues involves many context categories, such as

- overall domain (we are dealing with politics here),
- Global action (we are engaged in legislation),
- Setting (we are here in Parliament, today),
- Current action (I am now giving a speech as part of a parliamentary debate),
- Participants
  - Communicative roles: Speakers, Recipients;
  - Interactional role: Supporter of Government;
  - Social/political role/identity: MP, Conservative, woman, white British, etc.
  - Positive self presentation
- Goals: defend government, attack Labour, discredit refugees
- Knowledge: general: on immigrants, financial issues; political: on legislation, policies, etc.

These categories are not neatly separated in their manifestation in the text. Often they remain implicit, and only indirectly control discursive properties (such as negative descriptions at the semantic level), or the vast amount of knowledge presupposed and shared by participants, especially also in institutional settings.

In our theory of context this does not mean that such context categories are not relevant, and hence need not be part of the analysis. Participants need not always explicitly attend to, orient towards or express (contents of) contextual categories. Contextual relevance may also be implicit, for instance when it explains the choice of specific words, the absence of specific descriptions, the choice of topic, the selection of the information of mental models of events, the speech acts of the participants, and so on. An explicit theory of Context should make the details of these interactional and cognitive strategies more explicit.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Paul Bayley, Donna Miller, Jay Lemke, Theo van Leeuwen and Paul Chilton, for their comments on an earlier version of the section on the SFL notion of context, and to Cornelia Ilie and Paul Bayley for other comments on the rest of the paper. This does not mean that they agree with everything in the final version of this paper.

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