The Routledge Handbook of Language and Politics

Ruth Wodak, Bernhard Forchtner

Parliamentary debates

Publication details


Cornelia Ilie

Published online on: 22 Aug 2017

How to cite :- Cornelia Ilie. 22 Aug 2017, Parliamentary debates from: The Routledge Handbook of Language and Politics Routledge

Accessed on: 11 Jul 2023


PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Part III

Genres of political action
Parliamentary institutions: systems and functions

Parliament is a democratically elected, representative political assembly that ensures responsiveness and accountability of government to citizens by performing two vital political functions: first, by conducting free and open political debate regarding government legislation, financial records, and implementation of policies; second, by representing and championing the interests of citizens and groups in their dealings with government. The organisation, powers and effectiveness of parliaments vary widely, depending on the surrounding governance context, the relations between the state, the market and civil society, the extent of political space and support for active citizenship, and last but not least, the parliamentary culture, including motivating and constraining beliefs and practices. Members of parliament (henceforth MPs) and parliamentary staff carry out their tasks in four main lines of activity: the parliamentary chamber, committees, party caucuses and constituencies (Müller & Saalfeld 1997). In Westminster-system parliaments (the UK parliament and the parliaments of Commonwealth countries), government accountability concerns the relationship between government and opposition parties in parliament, with MPs and parliamentary committees controlled by party discipline. Whereas in Westminster-system parliaments, debates in the plenary chamber (displaying frontstage parliamentary performance) tend to assume a more prominent role than debates in parliamentary committees (carrying out current backstage parliamentary activities), the opposite situation prevails in European-model parliaments. In terms of the scope and focus of parliamentary procedures, two categories of parliaments are distinguished, namely debate parliaments and working parliaments (Gallagher, Laver & Mair 2011). To the first category, belong Westminster-type parliaments, such as the UK House of Commons, which are known to favour the parliament’s close political connection with the government, and to function largely as an arena for lively adversarial debate and display of rhetorical skills. By contrast, most European parliaments can be regarded as working parliaments, with less spectacular and less confrontational interactions or statements, placing the emphasis on legislative proceedings and committees, rather than on the political struggle with the government.
An important power of parliament, which is less visible to the general public, is exercised through its oversight of the executive by parliamentary committees whose task it is to track the work of individual government departments and ministries, and to conduct specific investigations into salient aspects of their policy and administration. Crucial to the effectiveness of committee investigations is the power to require ministers and civil servants to provide information, to answer questions and to produce relevant documents. The outcome of a committee’s investigations typically takes the form of a published report, addressed to the government with recommendations, which is laid before parliament as a whole. It is then up to parliament to decide its priority for debate, and how the government response is to be followed up. Another important mechanism of parliamentary oversight consists in questioning ministers in the plenum on a regular basis, both orally and in writing. Parliamentary questioning practices (see p. 313) represent an important contribution to accountability in that they impose on ministers the obligation to explain and justify their policies to parliament on a regular basis, and to answer publicly for any shortcomings (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2006).

In parliamentary government systems, the struggle for political power is extensively deployed in intra-party and inter-party politics. Parliamentary debates constitute institutionally ratified practices of multi-party-political deliberation through pro and con dialogue between democratically elected representatives of the citizens (Ilie 2016). The discourse and rhetorical patterns of parliamentary debates display ideological visions, party affiliations, institutional position-takings and political agendas of the members of parliament as representatives of citizens in terms of their social, professional, gender and ethnic backgrounds. Essentially, parliamentary debates are prototypical instantiations of parliamentary government, which was aptly described by Thomas Babington Macaulay as ‘government by speaking’ (2005/1860, p. 353). In a parliamentary government, the power of speaking is the power of acting, and consequently the social and political outcomes of parliamentary debates show that ‘what can be done (das Machbare) is to a large extent dependent on what can be said (das Sagbare)’ (Steinmetz 2002, p. 87).

The European Parliament (henceforth EP) is a special parliament in several respects, one of which is its multilingualism: it consists of members of the European Parliament (MEP) from 28 EU member states speaking 24 official languages, which involves a large number of translators and interpreters. Moreover, the EP is a parliament in development: it has developed and increased its legislative powers with each treaty reform, and the 2007 Treaty of Lisbon represents a significant step in this evolution (Kreppel 2002). The EP is a working parliament and the only directly elected EU institution. It functions like parliaments in semi-presidential systems, since it interacts with a dual executive: the European Commission and the Council of Europe. As the EP’s focus on legislative matters has moved to the parliamentary committees, it is through these committees and the key functions of committee chairpersons and rapporteurs that political groups exert power (Mamadouh & Raunio 2003). Despite ongoing formation of EU-level political parties, MEPs are in general more independent of national parties than their national counterparts. At the same time, the Treaty of Lisbon strengthened the role of national parliaments within the EU, especially by participating in the EU legislative process. National parliaments can, for instance, scrutinise draft EU laws to see if they respect the principle of subsidiarity, participate in the revision of EU treaties, or take part in the evaluation of EU policies on freedom, security and justice. An important forum for enhanced participative and open forms of deliberation, including national parliaments and the EP, was offered by the 2002 Convention on the Future of Europe. This Convention emerged, through a consensual process, as intergovernmental and
Parliamentary debates

democratic, and as a parliamentary assembly in that it does not follow the process of bargaining behind closed doors, but the process of deliberation.

This chapter outlines, illustrates and discusses the following major issues related to parliamentary debates: parliamentary deliberation practices (p. 311), parliamentary discourse genre and its subgenres (p. 312), parliamentary addressees and parliamentary audiences (p. 315), parliamentary participant roles (p. 315), key research topics on parliamentary debates (p. 317), and final remarks (p. 321).

**Deliberation in parliament**

The primary goals of parliamentary debates are to negotiate political solutions, to reach agreements and to make decisions, the results of which affect people’s everyday lives. The deliberative dialogue between MPs exhibits both histrionic features, that is, elements of a theatre scenario, and agonistic features, that is, elements of a competition scenario (Ilie 2003a). Building on and fostering democratic processes of political deliberation, opinion-building, and decision-making in the public sphere, parliaments are ‘open forums where elected representatives engage in arguments over policy’, and parliamentary debate is ‘a fundamental part of democratic lawmaking’. (Proksch & Slapin 2015, p. 1).

Parliamentary debates are audience-orientated in that they are enacted by fellow parliamentarians before a wide (present and virtual) audience that is comprised, not only of parliamentarians, but also of members of the electorate, the general public and the media. If we envisage the debate as a rhetorical enterprise, parliamentary debates should be regarded as institutionalised rhetorical modes of action for collective decision-making. As has been argued in Ilie (2010b, p. 61), the discourse of MPs ‘is meant to call into question the opponents’ ethos, i.e. political credibility and moral profile, while enhancing their own ethos in an attempt to strike a balance between logos, i.e. logical reasoning, and pathos, i.e. emotion eliciting force’.

Parliamentary debates display interaction patterns characterised by two apparently contrary, yet complementary, principles: in some ways, a spirit of adversariality, which is manifested in position-claiming, opponent-challenging acts, and polarising argumentation, and in others, a spirit of co-operativeness, which is manifested in joint decision-making and cross-party problem-solving processes in order to reach commonly acceptable goals regarding suitable lines of action at a national level. It is precisely these dimensions of parliamentary practice that prompted theoreticians of deliberative politics, such as Habermas (1996), to argue that parliaments are an important sphere of deliberation since they fulfil essential legitimising and social integrative functions. His two tracks of political deliberation can be identified in parliamentary debates, as a ‘problem-solving process’ and a ‘power-generating process’. Both combine to uphold the presumption of rationality for the outcomes, and, at the same time, to maintain the legitimacy of MPs’ political decisions.

Using the Habermasian interpretation of deliberation, Bächtiger (2014) has analysed the extent of deliberative action in three legislatures: the US Congress and two parliaments with different legislative systems: the Swiss and the German. The Swiss parliament is regarded as a ‘non-parliamentary’ consensus system, the German parliament is regarded as a competitive parliamentary system, whereas the US Congress is regarded as an example of a competitive presidential system. The findings confirm that the Swiss grand coalition setting enhances the respectful behaviour of MPs. In contrast, government-opposition settings, such as the German parliament and the US Congress are conducive to zero-sum games, undermining respectful behaviour and constructive problem-solving activities.
Parliamentary discourse genre and its subgenres

From a pragma-linguistic perspective, the parliamentary discourse genre belongs to the wider field of political discourse, displaying particular institutional discursive features and complying with a number of specific rules and conventions. Parliamentary debates are meant to achieve a number of institutionally specific purposes, namely position-claiming, persuading, negotiating, agenda-setting and opinion-building, usually along ideological or party lines. The discursive interaction of parliamentarians is constantly marked by their institutional role-based commitments, by the ongoing dialogically shaped institutional confrontation, and by the awareness of acting in front of, and for the benefit of, a multi-layered audience. When debating, ‘parliamentary identities are co-constructed by MPs complying with institutionally established communication constraints, while they resort to particular linguistic choices, discourse strategies and emotional/rational appeals to circumvent the institutional constraints’ (Ilie 2010b).

From a rhetorical perspective, parliamentary discourse essentially belongs to the deliberative genre of political rhetoric, targeting an audience that is asked to make a decision by evaluating the advantages and disadvantages of a future course of action. At the same time, it also displays, even if rather occasionally and to a lesser extent, elements of the forensic and epideictic genres, which confirms the Bakhtinian view that genres are heterogeneous. One of the major responsibilities of MPs is to contribute to problem-solving tasks regarding legal and political deliberation, as well as decision-making processes. A major incentive for parliamentarians’ active participation in debates is the constant need to promote their own image in a competitive and performance-oriented institutional interaction.

The parliamentary discourse genre displays several subgenres, that is, procedure-based communicative interactive tools that are subordinated to specific parliamentary goals. They include goal-orientated forms of demands or requests for action, reaction and/or information, as well as confrontational exchanges across party-political lines. Some of the most representative subgenres of parliamentary discourse are ministerial statements, interpellations, parliamentary speeches, parliamentary debates, Parliamentary Questions (oral and written) and Question Time.

In Westminster-type parliaments, government ministers can address written, as well as oral, statements to parliament. Oral ministerial statements often regard major incidents, policies and actions. Written ministerial statements are normally used to put the day-to-day business of government on the official record and in the public domain. Oral ministerial statements are made in the House of Commons after questions and urgent questions, before the public business of the day. Their purpose is to announce new policies or to provide specific information about current or urgent political matters.

A common feature of many parliaments is the interpellation, a formal (often written) request for information on, or clarification of, the government’s policies. It is used as an instrument for the scrutiny of government, whereby a group of MPs can call for a debate on a topical issue or a matter of public concern. Interpellations are normally distinguished from ordinary questions by their more critical and extensive content in that they tend to address matters of national importance. The procedure of interpellation differs across parliaments. In several parliaments, interpellations can only be issued by a group of MPs or by recognised parliamentary political groups.

Parliamentary speeches are traditionally established forms of MPs’ discourse. In most parliaments, speeches are addressed to the presiding officer, who is most commonly called
the speaker in unicameral parliaments, or in the lower house of bicameral parliaments, and president in the upper house or second chamber. The Opening Speech is the first speech introducing the annual parliamentary session, and in many parliaments, it is given by the head of state. In some parliaments, the speech is given by the head of the executive and is usually followed by debates.

A *parliamentary debate* can be described as a formal discussion involving (often heated) exchanges of opinion and is intended to facilitate the chamber’s informed collective decision-making on specific issues. A debate serves to hold the government to account by enabling focused discussion and eliciting clarifications about government policies. Votes are often held to conclude a debate. Parliamentary debates are particularly effective when the sittings are broadcast and/or the minutes are made public. A special case is the British style of debate, which exhibits a notorious rough-and-tumble debate style, accompanied by loud shouting, cheering and heckling.

*Parliamentary questions* are used by MPs to hold the government to account by criticising government policies, exposing abuses and seeking redress. According to Rogers and Walters, parliamentary questions serve as ‘the best-known inquisitorial functions of Parliament’ (2006, p. 311). MPs can address oral or written questions requesting information about various government policies or recent events to ministers of any government department every day during Oral Questions. As was pointed out by Franklin and Norton (1993), in the UK parliament *oral questions* are most frequently asked when MPs want to score points and attract publicity, whereas *written questions* are normally asked when the primary goal is indeed to obtain information. Asking an oral question is usually a pretext to attack, if asked by opposition MPs, or to praise the government, if asked by government MPs; it involves much information that is already known, as illustrated in excerpt (1) from the sitting on oral answers to questions on migration:

(1) Joanna Cherry (SNP, Edinburgh South West): (regarding the influx of refugees in Europe) […] In her statement, the Home Secretary [Theresa May] said: ‘The response of the British public has been one of overwhelming generosity’. Why are her Government unable to match that overwhelming generosity?  
(Hansard Debates, 16 September 2015, c. 1056)

One of the prototypical forms of parliamentary questioning discourse is *Question Time* (henceforth QT), a regular session in a parliament’s agenda that is set aside for questions to the government and answers from its ministers (Franklin & Norton 1993). QT has different names in different parliaments: *Question Period* in the Canadian Parliament, *Frågestund* in the Swedish Riksdag, *Questions au Gouvernement* in the French parliament, *Heure des Questions* in the Belgian parliament, to name but a few. This questioning procedure was also introduced in the EP in 1973. In many parliaments, this is the media highlight of the parliamentary agenda. In the UK parliament and other Westminster-type parliaments, there is also a session called *Prime Minister’s Questions* (henceforth PMQs), which gives MPs the chance to address questions to the Prime Minister. During QT and PMQs, complaints and criticisms are raised by MPs, and information is sought about the government’s plans and policies; QTs and PMQs are notorious for their adversarial and often aggressive language, and the use of hostile questions serving as face-threatening acts (Bull & Wells 2012). The nature and intensity of the debates during QT may be a good indicator of the political climate and of the power balance between the representatives of the major political parties at that very moment. The results of Bates et al.’s (2012) comparative analysis of the
opening sessions of PMQs from Thatcher to Cameron indicate that PMQs has become increasingly a focal point for shallow political point scoring and increasingly dominated by the main party leaders. Their findings also suggest that, at the beginning of their premierships at least, Thatcher and Brown appear the most accomplished in terms of the fullness of their answers, and Blair and Cameron the least accomplished.

Unlike the questioning strategies in courtroom interaction, which are meant to elicit specific answers and to exclude unsuitable ones, parliamentary questioning strategies, especially during QTs and PMQs, are not intended to elicit particular answers, but rather to embarrass and/or challenge the respondent to make uncomfortable, damaging or self-revealing declarations. In their turn, responding government MPs, including the prime minister, resort to counter-attacks by refuting, challenging and/or dismissing the questioners’ accusations and face-threatening acts (Ilie 2015). Excerpt (2) illustrates a typical instance of ritual confrontational exchange during PMQs.

(2) Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Labour): Wigan council has had a cut of over 40% in its funding over the past five years and lost a third of its staff. Does the Prime Minister advise that I should write to the leader of the council regarding the consequent reductions in services, or should I place the blame firmly where it belongs: in the hands of his Government?

The Prime Minister (David Cameron, Conservative): If the hon. Lady is looking for someone to blame, she might want to blame the Labour party, which left this country with the biggest budget deficit anywhere in the western world. […]

(Hansard Debates, 18 November 2015, cc. 675–676)

It is significant that in addition to questions from opposition MPs, the prime minister and government ministers also receive a significant number of friendly and co-operative questions – called partisan or planted questions – from MPs belonging to the government party (Ilie 2001; 2015). Asking partisan questions is a recurrent practice promoted by party whips to advance the party-political agenda by encouraging backbench MPs to ‘plant’ questions that help increase the chance of government-favourable subjects dominating QT and PMQs. Very often, planted questions are asked by government MPs to defend and reinforce the power of the government, but also to attack the opposition, as illustrated in excerpt (3):

(3) Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Conservative): Does the Prime Minister agree with the comment of Lord Glasman, special adviser to the Leader of the Opposition, that the last Government lied to the British people about the extent of immigration?

The Prime Minister (David Cameron, Conservative): My hon. Friend raises an important point, which is that the last Government did not tell it straight to people about what was happening on immigration and that it has fallen to this Government to take the steps to get the numbers under control.

(Hansard Debates, 4 May 2011, c. 668)

The rules controlling parliamentary forms of interaction are subject to a complex interplay of institutional and socio-cultural constraints: the overall goal and impact of the institutional activity in which the MPs are engaged, the nature of the institutionalised relationships (social distance and dominance) between MPs, the extent to which MPs share common sets of assumptions and expectations with respect to the parliamentary activity and speech events that they are involved in (Ilie 2000; 2003a).
Parliamentary addressees and parliamentary audiences

In all parliaments, MPs engage in parliamentary interaction both as speakers and as interlocutors or audience members. MPs are involved in an institutional co-performance whereby they both address and involve (sometimes even co-act with) an audience of fellow MPs as active participants, expected to contribute explicit forms of audience-feedback, such as questions, responses, comments, or disruptive interventions. The various categories of directly or indirectly targeted addressees in parliamentary speakers’ interventions are represented schematically in Figure 20.1 (Ilie 2010, p. 66).

When taking the floor, speaking MPs target their interlocutors (primary addressees), while at the same time, they address a multiple parliamentary audience (fellow MPs, members of the press, members of the public at large) and TV-audiences. However, according to parliamentary conventions, MPs can only address their fellow MPs through a moderator, that is, the speaker or president of the parliament. As a rule, only the speaker or president is addressed directly by MPs. But parliaments differ with respect to the ways in which the current interlocutor is addressed, that is, indirectly (in the third person) and/or directly (in the second person). The MPs in several parliaments, such as the French and the Italian parliaments, are normally addressed in the second person. In some parliaments, such as the Swedish Riksdag, both strategies of parliamentary address are used, although the MPs’ officially recommended form of address is the third person (Ilie 2010). In others, such as the UK and Canadian parliaments, for example, MPs consistently follow the rule of addressing fellow MPs in the third person.

Parliamentary participant roles

As a result of the increasing mediatisation of parliamentary proceedings, MPs perform a major part of their work in the public eye, namely in front of several kinds of audiences made up of MPs, journalists, politicians and laypersons (Müller & Saalfeld 1997). On examining the nature of multi-party dialogues in comparison with two-party dialogues, it is essential to consider factors such as: common ground, group homogeneity/heterogeneity,
dialogue conventions, as well as participant roles and identities. In a two-party dialogue, there is always a speaker (addressee) and a hearer (addressee), both of whom are regarded as ratified participants. In a multi-party dialogue, several participant roles can be identified. Goffman (1981) introduced a useful distinction between direct participants (speakers and addressees directly involved in the dialogue), side-participants (present, but not directly involved in the dialogue) and overhears (passive observers, onlookers). This classification was further developed by Clark (1996), who proposed to add the distinction between participants and non-participants. The participants include the speaker and the currently addressed hearer, as well as other co-locutors taking part in the conversation, but not currently being addressed, that is, side-participants. In principle, side-participants have a choice: they may or may not actively contribute to the dialogue. Overhears, who are regarded as non-participants, fall into two main categories: bystanders and eavesdroppers. Bystanders are those who are openly present, but not part of the verbal interaction. Eavesdroppers are those who listen in without the speakers’ awareness. Overhears generally have more limited access to relevant information and thus to the main interlocutors’ mutual understanding because they have no opportunity to intervene and negotiate an understanding or clarification of the issues under consideration. These role distinctions apply to multi-party dialogue in general and can be used for mapping parliamentary participant roles and political identities. Table 20.1 maps the main categories of parliamentary participant roles and institutional identities.

An investigation of parliamentary interaction between debating MPs reveals role shifts between their institutional roles as elected representatives of part of the electorate and their non-institutional roles as members of the same electorate they represent. MPs who are current speakers, as well as their fellow MPs acting as targeted addressees, can be regarded as direct participants. The audience of listening and onlooking fellow MPs are acting as side-participants. Unlike certain kinds of non-institutional multi-party dialogue, parliamentary interaction exhibits a supplementary institutional role, namely the role of dialogue moderator or chairperson, assigned to the speaker or president. As far as the category of overhears is concerned, it is rather difficult to designate a prototypical category in parliament. However, the category of parliamentary bystanders can be seen to consist both of insiders (parliamentary reporters and political journalists) and outsiders (members

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 20.1 Parliamentary participant roles and institutional identities (Ilie 2010, p. 69)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Multi-party dialogue roles</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Side-participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overhears Bystanders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eavesdroppers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of the electorate, ordinary citizens, visitors). We can also distinguish the category of parliamentary eavesdroppers as represented by the more remote audience of TV-viewers, who may be either political insiders, or political outsiders, and may consequently display non-institutional, institutional or semi-institutional identities in relation to parliamentary interaction.

In all parliaments, MPs are involved in a co-performance that is meant to both address and engage (sometimes even co-act with) an audience of MPs as active participants. What is important for MPs is to consistently promote a political line that meets the general wishes of the voters (as expressed at general elections), to put certain issues on the political agenda, as well as to take desirable initiatives and effective measures.

**Key research topics on parliamentary debates**

Ever since the latter half of the twentieth century, parliamentary discourse and parliamentary rhetoric have gradually become a topical object of scholarly research in the fields of political sciences and sociology, several of which showed an increasing interest for the usages, functions and effects of parliamentary language. Significant scholarly contributions were made by political scientists, philosophers and media scholars, who specialised in parliamentary studies (Chester & Browning 1962; Franklin & Norton 1993), who pointed out institutional and language-related aspects of parliamentary debating strategies, emphasising the interplay between parliamentary procedures, socio-historical traditions and political speaking styles. However, it was only recently, in the past few decades, that the study of parliamentary discourse has acquired truly interdisciplinary scope, as a result of contributions made by scholars from the fields of rhetoric and linguistics (particularly pragmatics, rhetoric, discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis and cognitive linguistics), several of whom have developed and used integrative analytical tools in multi-disciplinary and cross-cultural approaches (Bayley 2004; Ilie 2010c; Ihalainen, Ilie & Palonen 2016). The discourse-focused research into parliamentary practices and interaction strategies has benefited from cross-fertilisation of linguistic studies with social and political sciences for in-depth exploration of shifting and multi-level institutional uses of language, interpersonal behaviour patterns, interplay between institutional and non-institutional language use, as well as interdependence between language-shaped facts and reality-prompted language ritualisation and change.

Since it is during debates that most of the parliamentary confrontation takes place, it is hardly surprising that several studies on parliamentary discourse have focused their analysis on topical issues discussed in parliaments. For example, one of the recurrent themes has been the dispute on immigration (Wodak & van Dijk 2000), and more specifically, legitimating the expulsion of illegal immigrants in the Spanish parliament (Martín Rojo 2000), the argumentation and counter-argumentation strategies in Italian parliamentary debates on immigration (ter Wal 2000) and the debates on immigration and nationality in the French parliament (van der Valk 2000).

The discursive and argumentative strategies displayed in parliamentary discourse make frequent use of *metadiscourse*, which accounts for (re)shaping institutional relationships and for producing shifts in the balance of power from the micro- to the macro-level (Ilie 2003a). Parliamentary metadiscourse is also intended to enable its multiple audiences (specifically addressed MPs, listening MPs, journalists, parliamentary reporters, general public, TV-viewers) to identify significant shifts and overlaps between institutional and interpersonal levels of discourse. Several metadiscursive strategies have been identified in...
British parliamentary debates, for example, metadiscursive argumentation through the use and misuse of clichés (Ilie 2000), metadiscursive attribution, reporting, and quoting strategies (Ilie 2003a). An important category of frequently used metadiscursive strategies was identified in Ilie (2003b) as *parliamentary parentheticals*, an example of which is provided in excerpt (4).

(4) Mr. Bercow (Conservative): I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary [Mr. Cook, Labour] for giving way. No sensible person – from which category one should probably exclude the right hon. Gentleman – would favour European Union enlargement at any price.

(Hansard Debates, 22 November 1999, c. 367)

Through the insertion of the (underlined) parliamentary parenthetical, Bercow is deliberately operating a shift from his discursive role of MP to the metadiscursive role of observer and commentator, which enables him to practically dismiss his interlocutor (and political opponent) in derogatory terms.

Adopting interdisciplinary perspectives, several scholars have examined, defined and analysed some of the distinctive elements of parliamentary questioning practices. Sánchez de Dios and Wiberg (2012) carried out a comparison of questioning procedures in several European parliaments in terms of particular parameters, such as form and content of questions, timing of questioning, maximum number of questioners and allocation of the duty to answer. Two of the most widely explored parliamentary subgenres in the UK parliament are QT and PMQs and they were found to be particularly ‘face-threatening’ (Harris 2001; Pérez de Ayala 2001; Ilie 2003c; Bull & Wells 2012) and prone to (un)parliamentary practices, such as insults (Ilie 2001, 2004) and interruptions (Carbó 1992; Ilie 2005).

In the UK parliament, two main types of interruptions have been identified by Ilie (2005): ‘authorised’, that is, performed by the speaker, as illustrated in excerpts (5) and (6), and ‘unauthorised’, that is, tokens of approval or disapproval performed by MPs, as illustrated in (6):

(5) Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister for Children is under no obligation to behave like a child. It is not required.

(Hansard Debates, 4 May 2011, c. 668)

(6) Hon. Members: Oh, no.

Mr Speaker: Order. It is very discourteous of the House to issue a collective groan—notably on the Opposition Benches.

(Hansard Debates, 13 February 2013, c. 857)

In the case of debates in the Austrian parliament, interruptions were found to have teasing and ridiculing functions, resulting in interlocutors’ utterances being twisted (Zima, Brône & Feyaerts, 2010), whereas in the Italian parliament, interruptions were found to be less personalised and therefore more likely to be used as a signal of shifting from a two-party towards a multi-party discourse (Bevitori 2004).

In a systematic discourse-analytical study of interruptions in Mexican parliamentary discourse, Carbó (1992) showed that, although interruptions are forbidden by the rules of
procedure, they occur frequently as a practice tacitly accepted by all participants. Her text-based analysis provides evidence for the fact that interruptions perform a double function: to legitimate the pluralistic ideology of the Mexican regime in a strongly presidential system where one party has monopolised the power, and also to allow the manifestation of genuine disaffection, sometimes in an ironical way.

Regarding parliamentary questioning-answering strategies, in an investigation of QT in the Australian Parliament, Rasiah (2010) found recurrent cases of evasion, whereby MPs ‘resist’ answering questions. Responses that were considered to be evasions were further analysed to determine the levels of evasion, whether they were covert or overt in nature, and the types of ‘agenda shifts’ that occurred in the question-response sequences.

Harris (2001) identified a mixture of negative politeness and positive impoliteness, as well as swift transitions from positive politeness to positive impoliteness, in British parliamentary discourse. Her findings were confirmed by subsequent researchers, such as Lovenduski (2012), who pointed out that systematic impoliteness is not only sanctioned, but rewarded in accordance with the expectations of British MPs who are socialised into an extremely adversarial and confrontational parliamentary culture. The use of face-threatening acts is counterbalanced by a wide range of politeness strategies, including strategic uses of parliamentary forms of address (Ilie 2010a). The study of covert and overt impoliteness strategies in parliamentary debates has also focused on the use of unparliamentary language. As has been shown in Ilie (2001, 2004) and Pérez de Ayala (2001), parliamentary debates exhibit systematic face-threatening acts articulated through unparliamentary language and behaviour. These acts cover a continuum that ranges from milder/mitigated acts, such as reproaches, accusations and criticisms, to strong ones, such as insults.

The various instantiations of unparliamentary language provide important clues about moral and social standards, prejudices and taboos, as well as value judgements of different social-political groups, as well as individuals. A multi-level cross-cultural analysis of several cognitive and rhetorical aspects of unparliamentary language in the UK parliament and in the Swedish Riksdag carried out by Ilie (2004) provided evidence for the fact that the preference for certain types of rhetorical appeals is rooted in political traditions, such as higher or lower levels of competition and conflict tolerance, higher or lower political control of societal developments, tendency towards open or closed confrontation, and process- or result-orientated consensus. The results of her contrastive analysis indicate that British unparliamentary language is marked particularly by pathos-orientated logos, whereas Swedish unparliamentary language is marked particularly by ethos-orientated logos.

In a study on the construction of the addresser in the Portuguese parliament, Marques (2010) examined the use of markers of personal deixis in the construction of discursive voices and of the relationships between addressers and addressees in the Portuguese parliament. Her findings show a convergence of the uses of first-person singular pronouns and first-person plural pronouns, which contribute to emphasising the various manifestations of collective and individual voices and to indicating relationships of group proximity anchored in the delegation of political power.

Recurrent instances of humour and irony appear to be the hallmark of parliamentary debates, particularly in political cultures where the display of wit and verbal eloquence is expected and praised as a sort of histrionic co-performance in a rather conventional and strictly regulated institutional setting. Exchanges of parliamentary joking and sarcastic statements, often based on recycled stereotypes, are meant to reinforce in-group solidarity and inter-group dissent, for example, through a combination of unparliamentary language and insults in the UK parliament (Ilie 2001, 2004), of lightly playful or moralising irony in
Throughout their (longer or shorter) history, most parliaments have undergone several stages, with more-or-less-dramatic metamorphoses regarding parliamentary norm reinforcement, gender-representation balance and degree of tolerance to MP rule violations. While each individual parliament exhibits its own oratorical preferences and specific debating styles, a closer look at their overall evolution reveals comparable dialectics of interconnectedness between patterns of parliamentary continuity and change, and sometimes even of continuity in change (e.g. Ilie 2010d on managing dissent in Romanian parliamentary discourse; Ornatowski 2010 on changes in discursive practices and behaviour in the Polish Sejm). After 1989, in the post-communist period, the fledgling democracies of Central and Eastern European countries have undergone similar or comparable processes of reinvention and reactivation of their respective parliaments, by removing communist ‘pseudo-parliamentary’ constraints, by reactivating historical parliamentary practices, rituals and traditions, and by reinventing new (post-communist) parliamentary norms and conventions (e.g. Ornatowski 2010 on the Polish parliament; Bruteig 2010 on the Czech parliament). Although these countries experienced a relatively similar political system during the communist era, they nevertheless display significant differences due to their distinctive historically rooted political cultures, which are still reflected in their specific parliamentary practices. For example, both the Romanian and the Polish parliaments shared the experience of communist censorship that did not allow actual debates, but only well-rehearsed speeches followed by applause on command. At the same time, as Ilie and Ornatowski (2016) convincingly show, while the Romanian parliament (The Great National Assembly) served mainly as a political platform for the Romanian Communist Party, especially during the time of Ceauşescu’s personality cult, the Polish parliament (Sejm) was actually more than a mere rubber stamp, especially throughout the 1980s. Another telling example is provided by the debates in the German parliament (Bundestag), which underwent a significant transition from discussion parliament via working parliament to today’s media-oriented display-window parliamentarism (Burkhardt 2004).

A fast-growing body of research on parliamentary discourse has been devoted to the ways in which gender roles are instantiated in parliament (Wodak 2003; Lovenduski & Karam 2005; Ilie 2010a). For example, undertaking a comparative approach (of Australian, Canadian and UK Westminster-style bureaucracies), Chappell (2002) found that the reliance on masculine gender norms in institutions such as parliament, made them hostile to the presence of women and led to the production of gender-insensitive laws. Walsh (2013) pointed out that ‘the overall culture of the Commons resembles a gentleman’s club’ (p. 70), whereas Ross (1995) and Puwar (1997) carried out surveys that identified instances of verbal sexual harassment of women MPs. In a comparative study of the linguistic behaviour of male and female politicians in the House of Commons and the Scottish parliament, Shaw (2002) found that in both parliaments, male MPs make more interventions than women MPs overall, and this practice constructs male MPs as more powerful participants as they assume the entitlement to break the rules. At the same time, while in the House of Commons, humour, sexist jokes and filibustering were identified as gendered linguistic practices, in the Scottish parliament, humour was frequently produced by female as well as male MPs and no sexist jokes were made.

Based on research exploring language use and gender in the Italian parliament, Formato (2014) found that both female and male MPs still tend to stereotypically use masculine unmarked terms (in singular and plural forms) when addressing female politicians. At the
same time, on a more promising note, her results indicate that the use of (semi-)marked forms of address by both genders is gradually emerging in Italian parliamentary debates.

Analysing gendered discourses in the Cameroonian parliament within a ‘masculine’ society, with patriarchal ideologies, Atanga (2009) looked at the way men’s and women’s identities are constructed using traditional discourses of gender differentiation and how some of these discourses get challenged, appropriated or subverted using progressive gendered discourses that advocate equal opportunities and gender equality. She identified linguistic practices that reflect asymmetrical power relations in the way female and male MPs are addressed differently by government ministers, the speaker and other MPs.

Ilie (2013) compared the ways in which female and male MPs (mis)use addressing strategies in the UK parliament and the Swedish Riksdag, by examining how gender identities are negotiated, reinforced and/or challenged by observing or violating institutional norms of interaction. Berit Ås’s theory of master suppression techniques was used to account for interpersonal discursive behaviours whereby debaters are being acknowledged and appreciated, or are being ignored, ridiculed and under-rated (Ås 1978). The findings show that subversive uses of addressing strategies can both reinforce and challenge the power balance between MPs, both within same-gender and mixed-gender interactions. While the two parliaments display certain similarities, there are also differences with regard to particular institutional and culture-specific features. Thus, in the analysed British QT sessions, the cross-gender adversarial confrontation is largely ritualistic (Rai 2010) and consists in consistently and openly challenging the power balance between female and male interlocutors. In the Swedish Interpellation sessions, the cross-gender adversarial confrontation appeared to be more subtle and apparently more subdued, although it also involves challenging the power balance.

Apart from a number of similarities, European parliaments display great variation, both with respect to institutional norms/procedures and to discourse practices. The growing interest in the structures, functions, discourses and roles of national parliaments in Europe has stimulated the research into the rising role and the discourse practices of the EP. One of the targets of these complementary strands of research is the ongoing debate about changing discourse practices and the diversified roles of national parliaments, including their role as European institutions involved in European decision-making (Morgan & Tame 1996; Katz & Wessels 1999; Hix, Noury & Roland 2007). Examining the functioning of the EP, Raunio (1996) found that parliamentary questions can serve as a two-way informational channel – MEPs use questions not only to obtain information, but also to highlight problems to the Council and Commission. In a more recent critical ethnography of the EP, Wodak (2011) explored the discursive and social practices of MEPs and showed how politicians construct and are constructed discursively by backstage and frontstage identities. She identified typical ‘orders and disorders of discourse’ that illustrate the discursive mechanisms by which politics is organised in this transnational and multinational arena. Roald and Sangolt (2011) carried out a multi-level analysis of debates on climate change in the EP, using a Habermasian perspective and a rhetorical approach. A major part of their analysis regarded topical issues related to the relationship between emotion and deliberation in political discourse, questioning the possibility of systematically measuring the role of emotions in political debate.

Final remarks

Many of the recent and current research studies on parliamentary debates point to a number of partly common and partly specific challenges that are facing parliaments in the
post-modern world. We are witnessing changing discourse practices and institutional relations that parliament maintains with the public, the media, the executive branch and the international organisations. However, there is a growing representation in parliament of diverse parts of society, men and women, minorities and marginalised groups. As parliamentary debates are assuming an increasingly decisive role in (re)shaping political confrontation practices and in articulating the most topical social, economic and political issues on national and international agendas, further empirical research is necessary. Furthermore, in order to identify and better understand the common, as well as the distinctive features of parliamentary practices in national parliaments, more cross-cultural studies need to be carried out.

References

Ås, B, 1978, Hersketeknikker [Master suppression techniques], Kjerringråd, Bern.


Walsh, C, 2013, Gender and discourse: Language and power in politics, the church and organisations, Routledge, London.


