

This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details.

Author(s): Vaarakallio, Tuula

Title: Review: Ilie, Cornelia (ed.), European Parliaments under Scrutiny. Discourse strategies and interaction practices

Year: 2013

Version: Published version

Copyright: © 2013 the Authors

Rights: CC BY 4.0

Rights url: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Please cite the original version:

Vaarakallio, T. (2013). Review: Ilie, Cornelia (ed.), European Parliaments under Scrutiny. Discourse strategies and interaction practices. *Redescriptions*, 16(1), 222-229.
<https://doi.org/10.7227/R.16.1.15>

Review

Ilie, Cornelia (ed.), *European Parliaments under Scrutiny. Discourse strategies and interaction practices*. John Benjamins Publishing Company, Discourse Approaches to Politics, Society and Culture –series 38, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, 2010, 378 pp.

Besides their legislative and government control functions, modern parliaments still have their classic role of being an arena for parliamentary deliberation. As the etymology of the word parliament indicates (*parler – parlement*), parliaments are forums for political talking, discussion and deliberation. This specific perspective to parliamentarism has been recently (re) acknowledged by certain number of researchers. In addition to institutionally and constitutionally oriented parliamentary studies, the focus has been increasingly turned to rhetorically, conceptually and linguistically oriented parliamentary research.

Cornelia Ilie edited the book “European Parliaments under Scrutiny, Discourse strategies and interaction practices” and proposes a new contribution to this, yet rather limited field of research that highlights parliamentary language. But as Ilie points out, the renewed interest in the roles and discourses of national parliaments lately has grown along with the rising role and powers of the European Parliament.

The starting point of Ilie’s book is to value parliamentary arena as an institutionalised forum of open deliberation and dissent in which opposite points of view are discussed and political solutions reached through interaction between political adversaries. Through parliamentary discussion, that is “by negotiating ideas and opinions, proposals and counter-proposals”, Ilie argues, “parliamentarians are discursively (re) shaping and (re)framing current conceptualisations of values, identities and relationships that lie at the basis of collective decision-making” (1). These processes lead to polyphony of parliamentary discourses that “do not only reflect political, social and cultural configurations” but also “contribute to shaping these configurations linguistically and rhetorically”. (1) Therefore parliamentary discourse analysis is brought into play: in order to better understanding of parliamentary rules and prac-

tices, parliamentary interaction and a use of parliamentary language.

Ilie's book is comprised of 11 different articles focusing on parliamentary discourse as well as on 11 different European parliaments including some post-communist parliaments and the European Parliament.

The book regards parliamentary discourse as a particular genre of political discourse which has a number of sub-genres. As parliaments are arenas of institutionalised use of language, i.e. parliamentary discourse is formalised, ritualised, monitored and rule-bound, the sub-genres refer to these institutionalised forms of speech events such as debates, interpellations or oral or written questions which all have different institutional functions. The authors, whose articles comprise the volume, deal with various parliamentary sub-genres and analyse their corpus-based parliamentary data through different theoretical models from the fields of linguistic and discourse analysis.

In most chapters the secondary background literature concentrates on the recent, so-called interdisciplinary-studies on parliamentary discourse done by scholars from different linguistic sub-disciplines. Among these scholars Cornelia Ilie's studies are frequently referred to but the research of scholars such as Ruth Wodak, Teun A. van Dijk, Paul Bayley or Paul Chilton who have inspired many writers is also prevalent.

Even though the articles that comprise the book are mostly based on the workshop papers on European Parliamentary Discourses ¹, they are well grouped and provide mutual dialogue to some extent. The chapters of the book are divided in four parts, each of which focuses on particular topics. Part one deals with political identities in parliamentary debates, part two concentrates on ritualised strategies of parliamentary confrontation, part three introduces procedural, discursive and rhetorical particularities of post-communist parliaments and part four concentrates on contrastive studies of parliamentary rhetoric and argumentation.

The first part of the book focuses on parliamentary roles and identities. In his article, Teun van Dijk discusses discursive formulations of political identities and analyses them through various fragments of par-

1 Language in focus: Interdisciplinary Perspectives, Södertörn University, Sweden, 11.-12. November 2004, ASLA Conference.

liamentary debates in Spain and in the UK which related to the war in Iraq. His framework is a new theory of context which regards contexts as mental representations or models.² After a detailed theoretical discussion about social identities and political identity as a specific one “in the domain of politics,” his analysis of parliamentary debates reveals that political leaders such as Tony Blair and José Maria Aznar can display multiple political identities in just a few minutes.

In the next article, Cornelia Ilie furthers the discussion of identity co-construction in parliamentary confrontation. She includes the role of the audience in her analysis of parliamentary interactions and represents a typology of parliamentary participants. Her multidisciplinary approach to the complexity of parliamentary interplay and her examples of the Prime Minister’s Question Time in Britain reveals multiple politically interesting details and confirms once again the witty practise of parliamentary language within Westminster.

Maria Aldina Marques’ article concludes the first part with its discussion on the public and private spheres represented in the Portuguese parliament’s interpellation to the government debates. She analyses how the first person pronouns (we and I) are used in these debates but without paying any attention to the *topic* of the interpellation, which could affect to these formulations (whether the question in interpellation was about social and labour policies or about abortion).

The second part of the book highlights ritualised strategies of parliamentary confrontation from the viewpoint of three different parliaments: the Italian, Austrian and French. In their article on Italy, Donatella Antelmi and Francesca Santulli compare Romano Prodi’s and Silvio Berlusconi’s speeches as new prime ministers presenting a new government to the Italian parliament. The authors’ well-written argumentation shows that the two leaders of opposite parties shared similar concepts and *topoi* but different linguistic strategies and discursive styles in the same institutional context.

In the next article, Elisabeth Zima, Geert Brône and Kurt Feyaerts

2 See e.g. Teun A. van Dijk: Text and context of parliamentary debates. In *Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Parliamentary Discourse*. Ed. by Paul Bailey. John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam/Philadelphia 2004.

discuss interruptive comments in the Austrian Parliament and bring out interesting viewpoints about this as yet under-researched topic. According to the authors' quantitative analysis, the unauthorised interruptive comments (referred to as the icing on the cake of parliamentary debates) are adversarial in nature. Therefore "speakers in the adversarial discourse type of parliamentary debates opportunistically parallel and exploit linguistic input that is brought into the speech situation by political opponents at different levels of linguistic organisation." (161) The political significance of these findings, though, could have been further analysed.

The last article of the second part examines the government control function in the French National Assembly. Clara-Ubaldina Lorda Mur focuses the *Questions au gouvernement* sessions in 2002. Contrary to the British Question Time, the French sessions are, according to the author, lifeless and unimaginative mostly due to the speeches written in advance and then read aloud by the MPs. Lorda Mur states that the MPs' behaviour is reminiscent of football fans in a stadium: "they cheer for the goals scored by their team and they attempt to drown the cheers of the other team." (188) Nevertheless, contrary to football matches, in these parliamentary sessions "*le coeur n'y est plus*," as the author puts it.

The cultural variations in parliamentary cultures become convincingly visible in the third part of the book in which post-communist parliaments' procedural, discursive and rhetorical particularities are scrutinised. Cornelia Ilie opens this part with her article on dissent and interpersonal relations in the Romanian parliamentary discourse. Ilie shows how the discourse of these recently emerged democratic parliaments in Central and Eastern Europe are under-researched. Therefore this section is of special value. Ilie indicates the tendency towards consensual behaviour, to keeping the degree of disagreement and confrontation under control and maximising agreement in parliamentary debates. She demonstrates that in this fairly new parliament in a reform-oriented post-communist society, there are less formalised and ritualised regulations concerning parliamentary interaction but, instead, more emphasis is put on hierarchical position and status (and politeness) than in older European parliaments.

Yordanka Madzharova Bruteig discusses Czech parliamentary in-

teractions in the debates, speeches and interpellations of the present Czech parliament and of the post-communist Czechoslovak parliament. Bruteig's findings about negative relationship towards parliamentary confrontation are similar to what Ilie described in the previous article. According to Bruteig, "a style of parliamentary communication based on confrontation between political opponents is still not accepted as beneficial by Czech citizens." (286) She sees this as symptomatic of the current Czech political culture and states that contradiction is regarded as something negative that reinforces citizen scepticism in the parliamentary institution. The reasons for this reluctance towards confrontation are two-fold: the influence of the monologic and non-conflictual parliamentary discourse of the communist regime and "the lingering reflection of the idealised and consensus oriented democracy blooming in the first years after 1989." (297)

Cezar M. Ornatowski's article addresses Polish parliamentary discourse and its transformation after the political transition of 1989. He examines the changes in the verbal and non-verbal behaviours of Polish MP's in the lower chamber, the Sejm, by concentrating on interruptions, turn-taking, selection and change of topics, obstructions in the conduct of debate and in applause and humour. Ornatowski's analysis departs from the thesis that parliamentary discourse is related to its historical, political and cultural contexts. He argues that the assumptions about parliamentary discourse connected to the paradigmatic model of the British House of Commons or other stable democracies, cannot be applied to the Polish parliament in the period before the fall of "real socialism". Ornatowski considers the confrontational aspect inherent to the structure of parliament, which makes the Polish parliamentary discourse adversarial today. However, this was not the case between 1947 and 1989 when the parliament was under the control of the ruling party and parliament's existence was to guarantee party's political leadership as well as to maintain the pseudo-democratic facade.

The same is true with the rules and ritualised conventions of parliamentary behaviour which were not "valid" in the transitional new parliament. After the political change, Polish MP's (many of whom were novices in both parliament and politics) faced a demand for a new style of doing politics as well as understanding it as a novel rhetorical situ-

ation. Ornatowski indicates that seemingly “background” or unparliamentary behaviours such as laughter or applause constitute an important aspect of the political dynamics in the chamber and therefore are also valuable to highlight the understanding of their roles in periods of political change. According to Ornatowski, “changes in verbal and non-verbal behaviours *functionalized* emerging pluralism, both helping MPs to work within it, all within the specificity of the Polish historical context.” (261)

Ornatowski interprets the fragments taken from parliamentary records. His analysis of details is historically and politically contextualised and his argumentation does not stay merely on empirical or theoretical level but consistently leads to broader conclusions. Therefore he links his observations regarding the behaviours of MP’s to their political functions and significance “within the context of change in the chamber and in the broader polity” (226).

Ornatowski’s personal familiarity with the Polish political culture and language is evident which is especially enjoyable from the reader’s point of view. In section seven of his article, which deals with the changing role of humour within Polish parliament, he analyses the evolution of humour in the Sejm after 1989 and argues that similarly to other behaviours in the chamber, humour is related “in complex ways to ideological and ‘global domain’ political context”. (259) The appearance of humour in parliamentary discourse has been one of the most visible signs of political change since the socialist-era parliament in which humour had no role in the chamber.

Compared to Ornatowski’s article, some of the other articles in the book remain more on the technical level of linguistic-theoretical analysis without attempting to connect the empirical data to wider politically and historically oriented contexts and conclusions. It seems that some linguists, who are using political and parliamentary material as their primary sources, remain satisfied with their linguistic findings and therefore their argumentation ends at the point where politically interesting questions about the findings just begin to manifest. Sometimes it is also questionable if the straightforward application of linguistic theories to parliamentary debates is fertile, especially when no historical significance concerning the specificity of parliamentary style of speak-

ing is taken into account (e.g. parliamentary proceedings as a model for other forums of speaking). Undoubtedly, this is simply a question of perspective, since the book's framework of linguistic theories, models and concepts are not self-evident for a political scientist. Nevertheless, without being that familiar with the linguistic or discourse analysis theoretical framework, a historically or politically oriented reader is able to find fresh point of views to parliamentary sources. One of the main targets of the volume is to provide an interdisciplinary contribution to the field of parliamentary research.

The last part of the book focuses on contrastive studies of parliamentary rhetoric and argumentation. H. José Plug discusses ad-hominem arguments in the Dutch and the European Parliaments and aims at determining politicians' strategic manoeuvring in parliamentary debates when staging direct personal attacks. He considers whether institutional characteristics of parliamentary debates affect the way in which Dutch MPs and Members of the European Parliament use these attacks. Although he discusses the rules of procedure of both parliaments in his analysis, it would have been fascinating if he could have included a broader consideration of the institutional differences between the Dutch parliament and European Parliament in terms of the principle of parliamentarism and the role of opposition that affect the discursive cultures of these parliamentary arenas.

In the last article, Isabel Iñigo-Mora deals with rhetorical strategies in the British and Spanish parliaments' discussion of the Iraq conflict. She does this through the framework of discursive psychology, and shows similar interpretations in style and discourse practices in each parliament. Iñigo-Mora concludes that besides similarities, there are also striking differences between the British and the Spanish parliamentary discourse practices: British MPs used a less exaggerated style than Spanish MPs.

In sum, *European Parliaments under Scrutiny: Discourse strategies and interaction practices* provides a warmly welcome contribution to parliamentary studies that has a language based perspective to representative assemblies and their proceedings. For readers who are not that familiar with modern parliamentary structures, it gives essential and basic information about parliamentary proceedings within different parliamentary

REVIEW OF Ilie, Cornelia (ed.), *European Parliaments under Scrutiny*

cultures in Europe and thereby also renders intelligible the overall role of talk within any parliamentary framework. It can also serve as an opportunity to enlarge a reader's purely institutional perspective of parliaments. For such a reader, Ilie's book offers a fresh angle to review parliamentary day-to-day decision-making practices through various multidisciplinary linguistic analyses about MP's discourses, behaviours and interaction.

Tuula Vaarakallio