SPEECH ACTS AND RHETORICAL PRACTICES IN PARLIAMENTARY QUESTION TIME

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Abstract. By tradition, parliament has developed into a prototypically institutional *locus* devoted to verbal confrontation between politicians representing opposite political parties who present arguments supporting the *pros* and *cons* of issues under discussion. For parliamentarians who participate in the political decision-making process by interacting and debating, *speaking is acting*. In Question Time sessions parliamentary acting consists in question-response sequences that display exchanges of challenging, accusatory, but also countering, defensive and ironical, remarks between Opposition MPs and Government MPs. An examination of the speech acts performed during Question Time can provide revealing insights into the confrontational nature of the relationships between opposition MPs and government MPs, as well as into their multifunctional and shifting rhetorical strategies. The present analysis focuses on the multiple functions of the speech acts performed by MPs, which can be used and misused in unpredictable ways, in various degrees and for different purposes.

> Le Parlement, comme son nom l'indique, n'est rien de plus que le lieu de la parole. […] L'institution parlementaire combine *le parler avec, le parler au nom de, le parler pour*. (Marc Abélès, Un ethnologue à l'Assemblée, 2000 : 266).

INTRODUCTION

In keeping with parliamentary codes of conduct and institutionalised rhetorical conventions, the behaviour and interaction patterns of Members of Parliament (= MPs) of are primarily conditioned by their belonging to parliament, irrespective of their party allegiance. Moreover, by attending and participating in parliamentary debating sessions, as well as in committee debating meetings, MPs are bound to develop a sense of togetherness, of acknowledging overall common interests, and sharing concerns and goals. In many respects, MPs belong to a close-knit community of political actors, whose behaviour and discourse practices are supposed to follow parliamentary codes and rules, while at the same time they are expected to break these very codes and rules in order to defend their own ideas and to attack their political opponents' ideas.

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By tradition, parliament has developed into a prototypically institutional *locus* devoted to verbal confrontation between politicians representing opposite political parties who present arguments supporting the *pros* and *cons* of issues under discussion. It is fully justified to regard parliamentary politics as a 'politics of dissensus', as suggested by Palonen (2009: 82), since "the parliamentary procedure is built on the rhetorical assumption that a proper judgement of any proposal can only be made if it is confronted with opposing views". In order to cope with open adversarial confrontations on a regular basis, parliaments have acquired a highly structured functional complexity due to the emergence of increasingly conventionalised norms and procedural standards, patterns of debating and decision-making routines. As has been pointed out by Ilie (2006a: 190), parliamentary discourse belongs to the genre of political discourse, which involves "complying with and/or circumventing a number of specific rules and constraints". As parliamentary proceedings have undergone gradual ritualisation through regulation of the collective behaviour and encounters of MPs the form and structure of their dialogic interactions also display a high degree of institutionalisation.

Parliamentary debates do not only reflect political, social and cultural situations in an ever changing world, they also contribute to shaping these very situations. Consequently, parliaments have generally been regarded as democratically constituted fora for political deliberation, problem solving and decision making. All these activities are primarily carried out by means of discussions, consultations and disputes. A distinguishing characteristic of parliaments as institutions is that parliamentary work essentially consists in speaking (monologic communication) and debating (dialogic communication). Not surprisingly, parliamentary government was described as "government by speaking" by Macaulay (1857) and "government by discussion" by Bagehot (1872).

Parliamentarians are supposed to constantly try to improve their rhetorical skills in an attempt to find the best ways to verbalise their opinions, beliefs and convictions. This applies in particular to discussions about matters of vital national importance, when crucial political decisions have to be made. Parliamentarians are therefore supposed to be able to act and to interact with each other in effective and goal-oriented ways. The sense of togetherness is reinforced by the activities carried out within varying types of groups: *parliamentary groups* (which consist of MPs of the same political party), *all-party parliamentary groups* (which can usually include members of both houses/chambers in bicameral parliaments), *associate parliamentary groups* (which are similar to all-party parliamentary groups except that they are made up of not only MPs, but can also include members from outside Parliament). However, groups do not represent a single or homogeneous category. For example, the following types of groups are very different from each other: an

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orchestra, members of a steering board, football fans in the stadium, a family reunion, a.s.o. The differences depend, among other things, on the various criteria used to classify groups and their constituents: in terms of professional goals and relationships, of shared hobbies, of kinship relations, etc. that unite the members of the group.

One such distinction was made by Harré (1997), who identified three main categories of groups:

(i) *taxonomic groups*: for example the cinema audience members older than 16; members of this group only share a particular characteristic, they do not have 'internal' relations in the sense that if one drops out, it will not affect the others;

(ii) *crowds*: for example, the crowd entering a stadium: members share a common goal, but do not have beliefs about each other given that common goal, or rights and obligations;

(iii) *structured groups*: for example, a family: members are physically related; or a football team: members are related by sharing a common purpose. An example of the former is a family, of the latter a team playing soccer; in such groups members share a common goal, they have beliefs about each other, and they have rights and obligations. The members of structured groups are internally related, i.e., the loss of one of the members will affect the others.

In terms of Harré's classification, parliamentary groups would fall into the category of structured groups, since MPs as insiders to parliamentary institutions share a great deal of institutional *savoir faire* and experience, as well as a significant number of intentions and goals. Moreover, they share an awareness about the deliberate use of norm-regulated rhetorical practices. However, there is a certain vagueness in the description of selection criteria for membership in structured groups. A more useful and appropriate categorisation is provided by the cognitive anthropologists Lave and Wenger (1991), who coined the term "community of practice" (CoP). On their view a CoP can evolve naturally because of the members' common interest in a particular domain or area, or it can be created specifically with the goal of gaining knowledge related to their field. Discourse and behaviour patterns, as well as power relations, are produced and reproduced in such communities of practice according to the members' dynamic role shifts, interpersonal positionings, political configurations, a.s.o.

A community of practice is not merely a club of friends or a network of connections between people. It has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest. Members engage in joint activities and discussions, share information and build relationships. Membership therefore implies a commitment to the domain, and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people.

In parliament, communities of practice can be described as aggregates of people who come together around mutual engagement in some common endeavour. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short, practice – emerge in the course of their joint activity around that endeavour.

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PARLIAMENTARY SPEAKING IS ACTING

Parliamentary discourse can be looked upon as rhetorically constituted in the sense that it is called for by various rhetorical situations (Bitzer 1968) as an instrument of political reflection, as an instance of deliberation and as a mode of action. It is used as a tool for jointly reasoning about possible alternatives, for negotiating future solutions, and for jointly acting to reach commonly agreed goals. Above all, due to its dialogic nature and goal orientation, *parliamentary discourse* counts as *parliamentary action*. For parliamentarians who participate in the political decision-making process by interacting and debating, *speaking is acting*.

The theory that best captures the notion of performing actions through speaking is the *theory of speech acts* outlined by Austin (1962), according to whom verbalised human interaction is construed as the performance of particular acts carrying various kinds of intentionality. The main tenet of this theory, as proposed by Austin, is a consideration of the social and linguistic contexts of language use, which had been neglected in earlier syntactically and semantically oriented linguistic and philosophical studies. His theoretical approach was an attempt to bridge the gap between philosophical approaches (which overlook the role and importance of context in human communication) and sociological approaches (which take into account the context in which communication occurs).

Austin claims that many utterances used in human interaction (things people say) are equivalent to actions. For example, when someone says: "I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth" or "I now pronounce you husband and wife", the respective utterance creates a new social or psychological reality.

> To name the ship is to say (in the appropriate circumstances) the words "I name". When I say, before the registrar or altar, "I do", I am not reporting on a marriage, I am indulging in it (Austin, 1955: 6).

In the former case – an act of baptising a ship –, the outcome of the utterance is that the ship gets a name, whereas in the latter case – an act of proclaiming a couple officially married –, the outcome consists in the fact that the man and woman in question have changed their civil status becoming husband and wife, respectively. However, the appropriate conditions must be in place if the utterances are to be effective and the outcomes to be reached: in the former case the person performing the ship naming must be authorised, the ceremony must take place at a particular time, in front of an audience; in the latter case, there must be an authorised person (a registrar official, a priest) carrying out the ceremony in an authorised place (registrar's office, church), a.s.o. Hence, if the circumstances are appropriate, the speech acts of 'baptising a ship' and of 'proclaiming a couple officially married' can be said to have been performed felicitously. '*Felicitous*' is Austin's term for statements that successfully enact what they say. In these situations to say something is to do something. Austin contrasts *performative* utterances like the ones above with *constative* utterances, such as "The food is tasty" or "I visited Paris last week', which do merely describe or report something.

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Consequently, the analysis of utterances functioning as speech acts does not amount to simply examining the issuing of an utterance in a speech situation, but the *performance of a speech act*. The structure and functions of speech acts have to be analysed at both micro- and macro-level, since there is a close interdependence between the two analytical levels. At the micro-level, performing a speech act in an institutional setting such as the parliament involves the use of ritualised forms of address (Ilie 2005a, 2010), recurring key words (Ilie 1999a, 2007), recycled clichés (1999b, 2000), counter-clichés (Ilie 2006b), particular questioning and answering patterns (Ilie 2003, 2005b), to name but a few. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that speech acts are not performed or evaluated separately, as self-standing units. Rather, they occur in sequences and are performed by speakers engaged in globally structured speech activities, such as debating, chatting, lecturing, explaining, problem-solving, preaching, a.s.o. This is particularly noticeable in dialogic interactions like parliamentary debates. In such cases the appropriateness of the speech acts embedded in interaction sequences needs to be evaluated at the macro-level, with reference to broader frames of action and goals than those implicit in the act itself.

Austin drew a threefold distinction between different kinds of speech acts: *locutionary acts*, *illocutionary acts* and *perlocutionary acts*. According to him a locutionary act is simply *the act of saying something*. Hence, any utterance would practically qualify as a locutionary act. An illocutionary act is *an act performed in saying something*. It is its real, intended meaning which is what the speaker really means. For example, when Mary says to John, who is crossing the street: "Watch out!", she is actually doing something at the same time, namely she is sending a warning to him. A perlocutionary act is *an act performed by saying something.* It is a speech act which gets someone to do or realise something following on from the illocutionary act. In our example, John starts looking around before crossing the street. The perlocutionary act is expected to have an effect on the feelings, thoughts or actions of the speaker or the listener. Rhetorically speaking, it seeks to change minds.

SPEECH ACTS IN PARLIAMENTARY INTERACTION

A systematic comparison made by Ilie (2003) between parliamentary subgenres and corresponding subgenres of theatre performances shows how parliamentary dialogue contributes to revealing frames of mind and beliefs, as well as exposing instances of doublespeak and incompatible or inconsistent lines of action. MPs are not expected to have a straightforward dialogue with each other, i.e. to be engaged in a genuine reasoning process or truth finding discussion. They are fully aware of the fact that they cannot realistically hope to persuade political opponents of the justifiability of their ideas and beliefs. Instead MPs get engaged in a theatre-like dialogic game between adversarial positions in a spirit of competitiveness

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and agonistic behaviour. To a large extent, the MPs' interaction in parliament is a competition for power and leadership roles, but also for fame and popularity.

One of the prototypical subgenres of parliamentary interaction consists in a particular type of questioning, which is known as 'Question Time' in the U.K. Parliament, '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. Question Time is a specific session devoted to questioning the foremost representatives of the Government, namely the Prime Minister and/or Government Ministers, by their fellow MPs. Government members are held accountable for their political intentions, statements and actions by fellow MPs. The order in which the questions are asked is previously established by a process of random selection. Question Time becomes particularly confrontational when the questioning is carried out by members of the Opposition. A number of histrionic and agonistic features can be identified in the rhetorical strategies used by MPs during Question Time.

The question-response sequences represent the default adjacency pairs in Question Time sessions. They often display exchanges of challenging, accusatory, but also countering, defensive and ironical, remarks between Opposition MPs and Government MPs, as well as friendly and cooperative questions from MPs belonging to the Government party. Particularly confrontational is the line of questioning carried out by members of the Opposition. An examination of the speech acts performed during Question Time can provide important insights into the confrontational nature of the relationships between opposition MPs and government MPs, as well as of their multifunctional and shifting rhetorical strategies. For the purpose of illustration, the analysis focuses on significant speech act events recorded during the Question Time session in the U.K. Parliament on 7th April 2010.

The following excerpt consists of an exchange between David Cameron, leader of the Conservative Opposition party at that time, and Gordon Brown, the Prime Minister at that time.

(1)
Mr. David Cameron (Witney) (Con): […] *Will he* [the Prime Minister] *start by admitting* that when British forces were sent into Helmand, they did not have sufficient helicopters to protect themselves and get the job done?
The Prime Minister (Mr. Gordon Brown, Lab): *I do not accept* that in any operation to which we sent troops our commanding officers gave wrong advice; they told us that they were properly equipped. […]
(Hansard Debates, 7 April 2010: Column 961)

The Conservative opposition leader's sentence "Will he start by admitting …" addressed to the Prime Minister Brown counts as a locutionary act, as it basically consists in uttering the very words. At the same time, the utterance is an

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illocutionary act since it is conveyed by Cameron in the form of a question which serves to challenge, embarrass, accuse and irritate the Prime Minister. The latter's reaction provides evidence that Cameron's question had the intended effect, since it succeeds in triggering a perlocutionary act from Gordon Brown in the form of a strong refutation and direct denial. Obviously, Brown's statement can hardly be regarded as a proper answer, just as Cameron's utterance can hardly be regarded as an information-eliciting question. What Cameron is actually doing is to challenge Brown by calling into question his past actions and decisions. In order to avoid losing face, Brown reacts by refuting the presuppositions underlying Cameron's blatant accusations.

While it is theoretically possible, as well as necessary, to discuss the distinction between locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts, it is nevertheless impossible to separate them in reality, since all speech act events consist of varying sorts of combinations of these three categories. In theory, an illocutionary act becomes felicitous when it succeeds in triggering (in the hearer) the perlocutionary effect intended by the speaker. However, example (1) instantiates one of the common situations where the nature and scope of the perlocutionary act do not necessarily coincide with the intentions that underlie the speaker's illocutionary act. This unpredictability with regard to perlocutionary acts applies to both conventional and non-conventional speech acts. Thus, Cameron's utterance is deliberately framed as a *loaded or complex question* addressed to a government representative on behalf of the opposition. This type of question is used to limit a respondent's options in answering it (Walton 1981). Moreover, it is often fallacious in the sense that it combines several presuppositions, which amounts to combining several questions into one, i.e. the fallacy of many questions. The classic case is "*Have you stopped abusing your spouse?*" No matter which of the two direct answers the respondent gives, s/he concedes engaging in spousal abuse at some time or other.

By treating the negative assumptions about the Prime Minister's past action as commonly accepted, Cameron manages to imply the presumed answer to a question that was never asked. He rhetorically builds up not a simple, but a complex/loaded question, which amounts to a fallacy of many questions. Thus his question in extract (1) – "Will he [the Prime Minister] start by admitting that when British forces were sent into Helmand, they did not have sufficient helicopters to protect themselves and get the job done?" – contains in fact one question and an embedded statement, whose content is implicitly presented as already accepted by the interlocutor – the Prime Minister:

(i) **QUESTION**:
Will he start by admitting [X]?

presupposes that [X] has already been established in agreement with the Prime Minister. However, in reality this is not the case. Instead Cameron should have first asked the following question in order to establish the Prime Minister's standpoint on the respective issue:

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(ii) **QUESTION – not asked**:
Did British forces have sufficient helicopters to protect themselves and get the job done when they were sent into Helmand?

What Cameron does by means of his speech act is to implicitly attribute the following answer to the Prime Minister:

(iii) **ANSWER – implied**:
No, when British forces were sent into Helmand, they did not have sufficient helicopters to protect themselves and get the job done.

This implicit attribution strategy is a rhetorical mechanism that is frequently used by MPs in loaded questions addressed to the Prime Ministers and other ministers during Question Time sessions. The leader of the Opposition party, who is entitled to ask several successive questions, often takes advantage of this privilege to rephrase and ask again the same question if the respective minister fails to provide a satisfactory answer (which obviously happens more often than not).

(2) Mr. David Cameron (Witney) (Con): That answer sums up this premiership. The Prime Minister takes no responsibility and always blames somebody else. *Why can he* [the Prime Minister] *not just admit something that everybody knows to be true – that there were not enough helicopters?* […]
The Prime Minister (Mr. Gordon Brown, Lab): We have increased the number of helicopters in Afghanistan. We have increased the flying time by more than 100 per cent. *I think that the right hon. Gentleman should recognise* that the Merlins were adapted, and are now in Afghanistan. *He should also recognise* that the Chinooks were also adapted, so that they, too, can be in Afghanistan. *He should recognise* that we have other helicopters in Afghanistan that are working, and we are part of an international operation in Afghanistan, where we share equipment with our coalition partners. I have to say to him that the amount of money spent in Afghanistan now is £5 billion a year; that is 1,000 extra vehicles, and twice the number of flying time hours for our helicopters. *I think that he should accept that our troops, for the operations that they are asked to undertake, have been given the equipment that they need.* That is the right position.
(Hansard Debates, 7 April 2010: Column 961)

As illustrated in extract (2), the exchange between Cameron and Brown keeps unfolding in the same vein, but with significant changes in the types of speech acts performed by each of the two MPs. The parliamentary confrontation game is largely ritualistic and role-related, but can take unpredictable forms depending on the rhetorical skills and power balance between the interlocutors. Not surprisingly, after receiving Brown's response in (1), Cameron is dissatisfied, since his illocutionary act has not managed to trigger the intended perlocutionary effect. Consequently, he decides to continue his political attacks by resorting to a questioning speech act that involves an accusation, thus echoing the preceding one in excerpt (1): "*Why can he* [the Prime Minister] *not just admit something that*

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everybody knows to be true – that there were not enough helicopters?" This time Cameron uses a classical type of loaded question, i.e. a wh-question. Particularly why-questions occur frequently in such speech acts, which contain embedded claims for which there is no evidence. In this particular case the speaker's illocutionary act includes implicit answers to two questions – (v) and (vi) – that have never been asked:

(iv) **QUESTION – asked**:
Why can he not just admit X?

(v) **QUESTION – not asked**:
Is it true that there were not enough helicopters?
ANSWER – implied:
Yes, it is.

(vi) **QUESTION – not asked**:
Does everybody know to be true that there were not enough helicopters?
ANSWER – implied:
Yes, they do.
The implicit answers are collapsed in one explicitly conveyed claim:

(vii) **CLAIM – overgeneralisation**:
Everybody knows to be true – that there were not enough helicopters.

Cameron's claim in (vii) is a speech act of overgeneralisation – "*Everybody knows"* – in the sense that its validity can hardly be verified and/or proved. Nevertheless, like other rhetorical generalisations, this is a strategy used to emphasise and give strength to the speaker's argumentative stance. In spite of his efforts, Cameron fails to induce the expected perlocutionary effect from the Prime Minister Brown. The latter's speech acts mark a rhetorically relevant change of style, by actually adopting his opponent's strategies. Far from becoming overpowered by Cameron's forcefully accusatory speech acts, Brown counter-attacks his opponent by borrowing his strategies. For example, one such strategy is the use of the rhetorical three-part list:

(a) I think that the right hon. Gentleman *should recognise* X

(b) He *should also recognise* Y

(c) He *should recognise* Z

Brown finishes his turn by using the same speech act verb as in (1) – "accept" –, but this time its purpose is not to refute an accusation, but rather to challenge Cameron to change his standpoint: "I think that *he should accept X*".

In the process of dialogic interaction conventional uses of speech acts acquire dynamic instantiations in the sense that one and the same convention, for instance, can be used and misused in endless ways, in various degrees and for different purposes by individual MPs. Moreover, meaning cannot be fully pre-determined by conventions, it emerges to a large extent in terms of how it is expressed, conveyed and perceived in each context-specific use of language.

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A systematic examination of the functions and effects of the speech acts performed by MPs shows that parliamentary discourse counts as parliamentary action. For parliamentarians who participate on a regular basis in the political decision-making process by interacting and debating, *speaking is acting*.

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