

***Theory and praxis of parliamentary
record construction.
Towards a 'universal grammar' of
parliamentary reporting?***

Roberto La Rocca
Parliamentary Reporting Office (DVR),
The Netherlands

INTRODUCTION

Only these last two talks will be separating you from the IPRS Social Club, so let's get started right away!

So the title of this speech is: ***Theory and praxis of parliamentary record construction.***
Towards a 'universal grammar' of parliamentary reporting?

But let's immediately forget about this complicated and perhaps somewhat pretentious title. It was only meant to impress the IPRS-board in the call for papers-stage.

*(Theory and praxis of parliamentary record
construction.*

*Towards a 'universal grammar'
of parliamentary reporting?)*



= a search for

*general/universal parliamentary editing principles
(& what they might entail)*

What we really will be really doing in the next 20 mins or so is to ask ourselves:

What do we, parliamentary reporters from all over the world, have **in common**?

I'm sorry to say that we won't be investigating the **personality traits** shared by people working in the business of parliamentary reporting - although such an enterprise might produce quite interesting insights!

What we **will** be doing though, is trying to find out what parliamentary stenographers of all nationalities share when they do their practical day-to-day work. Parliamentary reporters all over the world essentially all do the same thing: they turn words of politicians, uttered in certain contexts called 'parliaments', into written texts; written text that will become official documents.

Using the same word 'parliament' for the working context of parliamentary reporters all over the world might be misleading, though. It may be misleading, because this particular English word may conceal a lot of diversity among individual national working contexts for parliamentary reporters. In fact, political cultures are dissimilar from one country to the other. Speech cultures vary. The methods, processes and operating procedures employed by the various reporting offices diverge. And of course, no language is the same.

So in this talk we will be asking ourselves: In spite of all these differences in working environments, do parliamentary reporters show similarities when they work with language? In short: Are there **general principles** in parliamentary editing?

outline

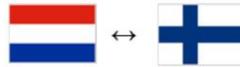
- (1) Intro
- (2) Data & methodology
- (3) Comparison NL vs SF
- (4) Findings: “Universal principles of parl. editing”
- (5) Assessment => discussion?

(2) Data & methodology

- **introspection**
- (non-systematic) **observation**

- **comparison:**

- comparison NL-SF



- comparison literature: UK

- (2 articles: Slembrouck (1992)
Mollin (2007))



METHOD

It is already late and it has been a long and warm day, so I will try to cut short the methodology section. To the lovers of method, the extended methodology section I had prepared for this meeting can be provided on request.

What may be done in order to get a hold on universalities in parliamentary reporting?

In the last couple of months I have simply looked at what **I myself actually do** when changing the spoken words of politicians into written texts.

The technical word for this is **introspection**.

Apart from that, I observed what **my colleagues** at the Dutch Parliamentary Reporting Office do. In methodological terminology, this is **observation**. It is important to stress that I tried to look at what is really and actually done, so regardless or even in spite of official professional rules and guidelines.

Next, all these observations were listed and categorized.

Consequently I **compared** my findings to the results **Eero** presented in his talk on the

rules of reporting and editing principles applied by the **Records Office of the Finnish national parliament** during the last IPRS-meeting in Ghent in 2013.

Eero and I met last year and since then we had a lot of interesting conversations about the art of parliamentary reporting. During our discussions, the Dutch and the Finnish cases turned out to be very interesting cases for comparison.

Finally, the outcomes of the Dutch-Finnish comparison were checked with the existing literature. In fact, parliamentary reporting has been the subject of a handful of scholarly research articles, so not that much: about 4 articles. For this talk, two articles were used in which the workings of the British Hansard, the records office of the parliament of the UK, were scrutinized. Slembrouck (1992) and Mollin (2007).

WHY COMPARE?

Helps us see what we know and know what we see

Logic:

dissimilar contexts, similar results =>
universalities?

WHY COMPARE?

Before continuing, a quick remark about the importance of comparison might be in place.

So comparison is at the heart of this talk. Why is that?

That is because comparing makes us **see what we know** and **know what we see**. Because comparison helps us understand the world. By comparing, we become aware of things we unconsciously take for granted: see what we know. Comparing gives us a way to evaluate and put things into perspective: know what we see.

And if very different contexts are compared, comparing might lead you to in the direction of context-independent phenomena. And these are, almost by definition, general principles of universalities.

(3) NL vs SF



the Dutch and Finnish cases **compared**

differences on at least **4 relevant dimensions**:

- political system
- parl. (speech) culture
- record offices' practices & procedures
- language

During our discussions, Eero and I found out that the Netherlands and Finland present good material for comparison. Beside some similarities, the Dutch and Finnish cases show striking differences, on at least 4 dimensions. I think it is safe to say that these 4 dimensions define the working context for parliamentary reporters all over the world:

- political system
- parl. (speech) culture
- record offices' practices & procedures
- language

Unfortunately, we now don't have time to dwell upon these four dimensions for too long, so I will leave it by just mentioning them. But individually and collectively all 4 of them determine the context in which parliamentary reporters do and have to do their daily work.

(4) Findings: General principles

RRRRs

- Remove
- Repair
- Reorganize
- Render service

Disclaimer: tendencies; not exhaustive nor mutually exclusive

Caveat: examples are in English, **nó**t English examples

FINDINGS: GENERAL PRINCIPLES

Now at last we have arrived at the very **core** of this presentation: what in fact are the general principles of parliamentary reporting?

The results can be summarized in the following “**magic formula**”:

RRRRs

No, this is not some phonetic transcription of the snoring sounds of parliamentary reporters on a busy working day.

RRRRs stands for:

REMOVING

REPAIRING

REORGANIZING

RENDERING Service

Before we move on, some disclaimers must be mentioned. Please read the smallprint on the slide. The 4 Rs of Record Reporting – indeed, 2 other Rs - aim to reflect **tendencies**. So some of the examples given shortly may not actually apply to some parliaments, or not exactly. If that is the case, please say so in the discussion afterwards. The Rs refer to tendencies, so to relative phenomena rather than absolutes. Tendencies reflect a direction, and are matters of degree.

Furthermore, the 4 categories do not pretend to be conclusive or definitive. In fact, the findings are considered preliminary, the product of exploratory research, and therefore very much open to discussion. As said, I am hoping for a lot of feedback in discussions afterwards. Furthermore, it is possible that the 4 categories are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. We right now are actually at the beginning, we still have to find things out.

Caveat: the examples given are intended to be mere illustrations of the general idea, so they are not real fragments from actual parliamentary debates. They have been translated into English.

we REMOVE things (1)

Delete

- Interjections, pause fillers, hesitators, mannerisms, hobbywords etc

'Uh... ', 'Er...' , 'Erm...', 'well', 'oh!', 'Oh dear!', 'Pooh!' 'you know', 'Well', 'actually', 'basically', 'like', 'Ahem - sorry -', 'Pooh!', etc etc

- Hedges (euphemistic/'modalising' expressions)

'In my humble opinion, there would be some contradictions in your argumentation we might need to address.'

=> I think there are some contradictions [...] we need to address.

'This was very, very, very good, mister prime minister' => This was very good [...].'

- Repetitions without any real meaning

No! No! No! No! No! No! No! No! No! No!

=> No! No! No!

- false starts of sentences
- unfinished endings of sentences

In the following few sections we will be **zooming in** upon the four categories. The slides show examples of the general principles. Illustrations of them are in blue.

To start with the first: parliamentary reporters **REMOVE things**:

Actually, in the course of transforming parliamentary speech into parliamentary prose, parliamentary reporters might throw out a great deal of speech. Here are some categories that have a hard time surviving parliamentary reporters' keyboard strokes.

For one thing, generally **interjections, pause fillers, mannerisms, hobby words** etc. are eliminated.

It is maybe interesting to note that this habit of parliamentary reporters is the layman conception, so the idea of the non-expert, of what the work of a parliamentary reporter is all about: leaving out the errrrs and um's. At least that is what I personally have to deny and explain when people ask me what I do for a living.

Hedges / modal constructions:

Hedges are words, sounds, parts of sentences intended to reduce the weight of the impact of words. They express politeness, modesty, a respectful and cooperative attitude.

Repetitions:

E.g, when a speaker says no! 11 times, the reporter might reduce this to 3 times, in order to both express the emphatic nature of the uttering and save the speakers face.

we REMOVE (2)

Delete

- Self corrections
Errr, no, let me put this differently.
- Planning expressions / thinking out loud:
'What was the name of that thing again?', 'whatsamacallit'
- Inappropriate language/conduct, foul/obscene language, swear words, slang?
(NL: 'dead bodies')
- Inconsequential procedural talk:
e.g. verbal 'routines' by chairman, turn taking remarks, technical remarks (microphone)

=> 18%

- false starts. - sloppy endings - self corrections - thinking out loud

- improper language/conduct, offensive/obscene language, swear words?

There is no need to explain that this type of speech is relatively frequent in everyday language. Still, examples of offensive language are very rare in both the Dutch and Finnish parliaments, even though the use of such language by a parliamentarian media attention would be guaranteed. In the end, parliamentarians seem to be a well-educated bunch of people indeed.

Nonetheless it may be worth noting that in the Dutch parliament between the years 1934 and 2001 the chairman officially had the right to have expressions removed from the official records which he found inappropriate. Selfevidently, for such a removal a careful procedure had to be followed. In the end, such removals were stored in a special archive at the Dutch Reporting Office, so sheltered from the public eye. The unofficial name of such deletions, supposedly come up with by a parliamentary reporter, was: 'dead bodies': (lijken). The name of the archive was the "dead body closet" (lijkenkast).

In this time span of 67 years this happened **457** times, virtually all in the period between the two world wars.

Inconsequential procedural talk:

E.g. when the chairperson says: Now I give the floor to Mr. Smith’.

- 18%

Parliamentary reporters appear to be quite good eliminators. In fact, Mollin in one of the consulted articles concludes after a simple word count that a staggering 18% of the words spoken does not make it to the parliamentary record, so almost **1 in 5** spoken words.

we REPAIR things



- Grammatical correctness
 - spoken => written language
 - BUT: what is grammatical 'correctness'?
- Factual errors/procedural mistakes
 - Obvious factual mistakes / blunders, slips of tongue
 - Erroneous claims, false citations, incorrect references (e.g. to document titles & numbers)
 - (In)direct address: via chairperson or 'you'

REPAIR

Grammatical correctness:

It goes without saying that our written reports are grammatically correct. So in any case, parliamentary speech that is in any way grammatically flawed, is **fixed** in the written record.

This presentation is not the occasion to expand upon this many-, many-faceted notion of grammatical correctness. We all know that grammatical correctness comes in many shapes and colors, and may vary in degree and that every language has its own specific complexities.

Factual errors:

Obvious mistakes / blunders, slips of tongue, erroneous claims, false citations

This factor might be more controversial. In the heat of spontaneous political debate, the potential for mistakes is immense. Various types of factual or procedural errors are routinely corrected by parliamentary reporters, **unless** the errors are reacted to immediately and on the spot, e.g. by the chairperson or by political adversaries.

Procedural mistakes:

Stenographers in the Netherlands are required to check if references (e.g. to official

document titles or numbers) are correct.

What needs fixing in the Dutch parliament very often, is the **forms of address**. Dutch and Finnish?, parliamentarians in principle are supposed to address each other indirectly. So while debating, they are not supposed to refer to each other and e.g. use each other's names. They have to invoke the chairperson and should use the third person. Unfortunately, parliamentarians tend to be very inconsistent in applying this rule and often use the second person – so 'you' - , which often causes a lot of confusion. The parliamentary reporter is required to patch things up and take care of a consisting.

we REORGANIZE.....



(for the sake of readability)

- morphology: rearranging (parts of) words
- syntax: parts of sentences, sentences
- Cut very long sentences into pieces: separated (.) colons (:) semicolons (;)
- passive constructions => active (NL, UK)

This was said by the prime minister yesterday =>

The prime minister said this yesterday

REORGANIZE

Some quick remarks on the last two categories.

A conspicuous difference between spoken language and written language is the relative free order of word particles, words, group of words, parts of phrases and entire phrases. In parliamentary reports these items are continuously **rearranged** in order to help the reader. To give our audience an easier read, we 'place together what belongs together'.

The ease of reading is also enhanced by breaking up very long subordinate sentences with many dependent clauses, into pieces, altering dependent clauses into principal clauses. In the Dutch and British case, passive constructions are frequently altered into their active equivalents, all to the same end of facilitating reading.

... and **RENDER** other services to our readers, e.g.:

- ‘Compensating’ verbally for gestures, non-verbal actions and events
- ADDition official numbers (codes) of parl. documents: motions, amendments, govt. letters;
- Other ways to add necessary context, whenever considered necessary for comprehension:

e.g. irony 🤨

RENDER other services

Apart from removing, repairing, and reorganizing for the sake of readability, parliamentary reporters render other kinds of services to the reader of their texts.

Besides removing things, stenographers tend to **ADD** items to the text that were not literally said or mentioned. This is done for various reasons. One of the reasons may be to compensate verbally for the absence of **images, of visual information** in the records by factually describing gestures, non-verbal actions and events etc. In one of yesterday’s lectures, John Vice from the UK said how the Hansard goes about reporting interruptions. In e.g. Spain and France interruptions etc. are described in a way a journalist would do, and then inserted into the official report. If such an option is lacking, the individual parliamentary reporter has to find some way of getting a description of the events into the running text.

Supplementing **necessary context information** is especially important in cases of the use of, e.g., **irony**. As long as reporters are not allowed to use smileys etc. in their reports, they will have to resort to wording to make clear that the speaker intended to say the exact opposite of what he actually said.

Parl. records: a *perfect picture*? ...



La trahison des images (René Magritte) 1928-1929
(= 'The Treachery of Images')



La reproduction interdite (René Magritte) 1937
(= 'Not to be Reproduced')

ASSESSMENT/ DISCUSSION

Parliamentary records: A *perfect picture*?

To wrap up, I'd like to briefly touch upon some aspects regarding the evaluation or assessment of parliamentary reporting. In the next speech, Eero will focus upon some of these aspects and explain them into more detail. We both hope that the following remarks will stimulate further discussion, both in the workshop after our speeches on and in even more informal settings.

Parliamentary records: A perfect **picture**?

We have seen that parliamentary editing, or parliamentary reporting as such, involves changes: All our removing, repairing, reorganizing and service rendering result into some kind of **alteration** or even **distortion**. All people working in the parliamentary recording business are aware of this. They know that the parliamentary record is **no and can never be a mirror image** of all the things said and done in specific parliamentary sessions. We should be very aware though, that people outside our line of work, normally do not have the slightest idea about that. Even people who should know better, e.g. scholars working with parliamentary records.

Assessment: A *perfect picture*?

'accuracy' / 'authenticity' of reporting?

Some distortion is inevitable...

...because: speech => text

But: ↑ editing => ↑ uniformity ↓ variation

↑ orderly, dignified, elegant

The main reason for the inevitable distortion is the fact that our work involves the transfer of **speech into tekst**. It must be realized that for both kinds of expressions of language, different rules apply. As said, Eero will delve deeper into this fascinating fact

So we claim that distortions are inevitable and inescapable. Although we as professionals are all aware of this, we should also keep in mind that our audience is not.

A small digression: I would even like to claim that parliamentary records cannot ever be a **perfect** picture of the proceedings, so that our work can never be perfect, because we while editing have to reconcile various and often conflicting demands, which results in difficult dilemmatic choices, partly because our product is used by various audiences that associate varying needs and desires with our product and use it to different ends. But that is another discussion, maybe something for a future IPRS-meeting.

E.g. we can safely say that the stricter the editing, the more we eliminate of the individual variation that naturally occurs when people talk to each other and interact. Is that a bad thing? Our editing activities eventually also reflects parliamentary proceedings as more orderly, politicians as better speakers and parliamentary culture as more dignified as they are in reality? Do you agree? If yes, is

that a problem? If yes, how could we circumvent this difficulty?

Much to discuss about!

Discussion? Distortion is inevitable ...



Ecce Homo (by Elias Garcia Martinez & Cecilia Giménez)

... but are some distortions more inevitable than others?

Another nice topic for our discussion might be: if distortion in itself really is inevitable, are all distortions in themselves really inevitable?

THE END

of part one

Thank you for your time!