

A consensual topic: The French and Spanish parliaments against domestic violence

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Abstract

This article presents a comparative analysis of two debates in the French *Assemblée nationale* and the Spanish *Congreso de los Diputados* which were held in February 2007 and December 2004, respectively. The common topic was the final debate of a bill for tackling the issue of domestic violence. A comparative discourse analysis is central from a descriptive and communicational theoretical point of view. Methodological tools of enunciational, pragmatic and argumentative approaches are applied in this study. The description of the common aspects of two debates belonging to the same parliamentary genre is meant to contribute to a more nuanced description of the specific discursive strategies used in each of the two countries. While examining a consensual position on the topic, the analysis focuses on varying verbal behaviour patterns and discrepancies, related to differences in socio-cultural contexts and political cultures.

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1. Introduction and theoretical framework

Following Charaudeau (1995, 2005a), a genre is constituted by a corpus or set of texts produced in situations regulated by similar norms. I propose to limit this definition to the *hyper-genre*, for example, the *debate*. Thus, *genre* would correspond to the modalities of a hyper-genre within the framework of specific events (*debates* in the mass media, or in education settings, among others). Therefore, we consider that the various texts produced in discussions on legislative matters constitute *genres of parliamentary debates*. Within these genres several modalities may exist, depending particularly on the configurations of identities (the whole chamber or certain members within a committee) and the variation of specific purposes (different levels of law-making or different modalities of government control), which constitute *sub-genres*.

The aim of this study is to carry out a comparative analysis between two debates in the French *Assemblée Française* and in the Spanish *Congreso de los Diputados*. They belong to the same sub-genre, i.e. a *Séance ordinaire* in the French Parliament and a *Pleno y Diputación del Congreso* in the Spanish parliament. They also deal with the same issue, the approval of a law against domestic violence: “*Prévention et repression des violences au sein du couple*” (France) and “*Proyecto de ley orgánica de protección integral contra la violencia de género*” (Spain). As the headings

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suggest, the protection of women is a more specific aim in the Spanish parliament, where the law proposes explicit positive discrimination.

Previous analyses of parliamentary discourse have often tackled controversial issues which caused heated debate among the parties in the parliaments under consideration (Ilie, 2001, 2003, 2004; Bayley et al., 1994). In the present article, however, I have chosen a consensual topic and its ensuing debate, because such a study will enable me to examine an aspect of the ethical values underlying political discourses that are nowadays indisputable in current European democracies. While in the past the life of a couple was considered a sacred area of private life, current laws that are proactive against violence within the couple insist on applying social values such as gender equality and the right of each person to respect and well-being.

The comparative approach taken in this study uses the descriptive and communicative theoretical framework of discourse analysis and focuses on the specific linguistic strategies that have a preferential status in each of the two parliaments concerned. From this perspective, the first step will be to present and discuss the similarities and differences between these two parliaments, especially those concerning the current political spectrum of each. The next step will be to analyse several linguistic, enunciatonal, pragmatic and argumentative features in order to understand how the different discursive strategies displayed in these debates shape the varying positions on the topic in both parliaments.

Two perspectives will be used to investigate the enunciatonal and pragmatic aspects. Firstly, since “the speaker is [...] in a constant relation with his/her utterance” (Benveniste, 1974:82; my translation), it is necessary to study how Members of Parliament (MPs) are anchored in this particular interaction when expressing their stance, in relation to themselves, in relation to their interlocutor(s), and also in relation to the object of the discourse. Charaudeau (1992) considers that emphasis on one or other of these different positions is the basis of three main enunciatonal expressions: *elocutive* (focused on the speaker), *allocutive* (focused on the interlocutor) and *delocutive* (focused on the object of the discourse). Nevertheless, in the case of the *elocutive* and *allocutive* modalities, we need to distinguish two distinct forms of address. The *elocutive* expresses the position of a speaker as an individual and social being. Human beings are both individual and social, and they share a fair number of opinions and feelings. This modality is normally manifested through the use of the first person singular or plural, and shifting between the two is particularly meaningful in the case of parliamentary debates. When MPs take the floor, they can speak as individuals or on behalf of a group, using the first person singular or plural. A linguistic variation of this type may be significant when motivating the audience (individuals and groups) to support and to commit themselves to the standpoints presented.

Similarly, the speaker may address specifically a variety of listeners, other MPs, members of the government, members of the opposition, members of a committee or the whole house. Therefore the *allocutive* modality is manifest through the use of the second person, singular or plural.

Finally, the *delocutive* form implies backgrounding or distancing the speaker and the listener, whose points of view are not expressed in the statements. Normally, this modality is associated with objective examination of the facts; in parliamentary debates it occurs especially at moments of deliberation. These three discursive modalities are examined in the first part of the analysis (section 3).

Secondly, and complementarily, particular attention is paid to how MPs express their position on the work done in both parliaments, and the type of consensus reached on the respective bills by analysing their speech acts (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969; Vanderveken, 1988; Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2001) and the subjective expressions (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1970) through which they express their feelings. Obviously, expressing satisfaction or approval tends to be related to the *elocutive* modality, while congratulating the other MPs is associated more with the *allocutive* modality (in section 4).

During their interventions, MPs produce a wide range of utterances that are more specifically argumentative in these debates. The argumentation analysis is based on the classical Aristotelian distinction between the three argumentative genres: deliberative, forensic and epideictic:

Now the kinds of deliberation are *exhortation* and *deterrence*. For, in all cases, both those who privately advise those who address the people at large are doing one or other of these. The kinds of forensic oratory are *prosecution* and *defence*, in one or other of which the litigants must perforce be engaged. The kinds, finally, of display speaking are *praise* or *denigration*. (Aristotle, translation by Hugh Lawson-Tancred, 1991:80).

Following Eggs (1994), each of the epideictic, forensic and deliberative argumentation can be related to three corresponding modalities: ethic-aesthetic, epistemic and deontic¹:

¹ I have based previous analyses on such distinctions (cf. Lorda, 1997, 2010).

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