

Analyzing parliamentary discourse: systemic functional perspective

Laura Treimane

Faculty of Humanities

University of Latvia

4A, Visvalza St.

LV-1050 Riga, Latvia

Tel.: +371 2 9653224

E-mail: treimane@e-apollo.lv

Abstract

Contemporary research views parliamentary discourse as a variety of political language which is largely defined by its contextual properties and thus requires a contextual approach of analysis. According to the systemic functional theory, a contextual discourse analysis is the analysis of register, i.e. the analysis of the text as embedded in its situational context. The present research demonstrates the relevance of the systemic parameters to parliamentary discourse analysis where the parliamentary transcripts of the debate held at the British House of Commons and the Latvian Parliament (*Saeima*) are used as the empirical data. The investigation of parliamentary texts reveals a consistent occurrence of fixed lexico-grammatical patterns, namely, noun phrases which are realized as politeness formulas and verb phrases which ensure the legislative procedure. Both in Latvia and in Britain these fixed patterns may be considered as indexical features of parliamentary register. The contextual analysis reveals significant discrepancies in the interpretation of the categories of context within systemic functional linguistics and underscores the necessity of developing a more systemic context framework which would employ extra-linguistic, rather than linguistic, criteria for context analysis.

Keywords: parliament, discourse, system, function, context, register

1 Introduction

Along with the development of the linguistic enterprise of discourse analysis, considerable effort has been made to explore parliamentary language as a sub-domain of political discourse. Among the most significant recent contributions to the field one has to name

those by Ilie (2000; 2003; 2006), Bayley (2004), Van Dijk (2000; 2004), Steiner (2004), as well as the compilation of research articles edited by Alvarez-Benito, Fernandez-Diaz, Ma Inigo-Mora (2009). Apart from the much studied British parliamentary discourse (Bayley 2004; Chilton, Schäffner 2002; Van Dijk 2004; Ilie 2000; 2003), studies of the features of Swedish, Italian and German parliamentary language (Bayley 2004), parliamentary language in Austria, the Netherlands and Switzerland (Steiner 2004), as well as that in Brussels (Alvarez-Benito *et al.* 2009) have been carried out. The majority of these studies take a cross-cultural perspective, highlighting the peculiarities of a national parliamentary language.

The definitions of parliamentary discourse vary across the sources. To quote Bayley, “parliamentary talk is a sub-genre of political language and represents its most formal and institutionalised variety” (Bayley 2004, 1). According to Ilie, parliamentary discourse consists of “a norm-regulated interaction among politically elected representatives for deliberation and decision-making purposes in specific institutional settings and which displays a number of particular communication patterns” (Ilie 2009, 61). Van Dijk, in turn, points out that parliamentary discourse is largely defined by its contextual properties – where it is held, what it is about and who the participants are, thus the approach to its analysis should be “contextual” (Van Dijk 2004, 340). On the basis of these definitions, three characteristic features of parliamentary discourse can be singled out:

- It is the most formal and institutionalized variety of political discourse;
- It displays fixed, recurrent communication patterns which both shape and restrict the mode of communication;
- It requires a contextual approach of analysis.

It is the latter that is the focus of the present research. The goal of the present analysis is to investigate the implications of the contextual approach to discourse analysis found within Systemic Functional Linguistics. To reach the goal of the research, the systemic contextual models are discussed and their applicability to parliamentary discourse analysis is demonstrated. Two different linguistic domains are used as empirical data – samples of parliamentary spoken texts of the Parliament of Latvia (*Saeima*) as contrasted with those of one of the oldest parliaments in Europe – the British House of Commons.

2 Language and context: systemic functional view

A contextual approach to linguistic analysis is the hallmark of Systemic Functional Linguistics known by the works of Michael Halliday and his associates Jonathan Webster, Suzanne Eggins, John Martin, etc. Systemic functional view sees language as

a “social semiotic” (Halliday, Webster 2003, 295). This concept is two-fold: language is a semiotic system, it is a system of signs where a sign is meaningful only in the context of its relationship with other signs, and language is a social phenomenon, i.e., it should be viewed as an intrinsic part of social reality. If the former aspect has to do with the inner structure of language, the latter relates to the environment of language – the social context.

According to the systemic functional theory, any context can be described in terms of the following notions.

Field is the social action which is going on and has recognizable meaning in the social system; typically a complex of acts in some ordered configuration, and in which the text plays some part. The field includes, but is not limited to, the subject matter as one special aspect. *Tenor* is the role structure, or the cluster of socially meaningful participant relationships, both permanent attributes of the participants and role relationships that are specific to the situation; including the speech roles, those that come into being through the exchange of verbal meanings. *Mode* is the symbolic organization, or a particular status that is assigned to the text within the situation; its function in relation to the social action and the role structure; including the channel or medium, and the rhetorical mode (Halliday 2002, 55). This three-fold model of context forms the foundation of the systemic functional view of language as a context-dependent system. The use of language both depends and has impact on the configuration of the three context variables. Thus, a contextual approach to language analysis entails analysing the three elements of the context of situation – field, tenor and mode.

Furthermore, the three context variables are crucial in understanding the systemic concept of register, which is explained as “a configuration of meanings that are typically associated with a particular situational configuration of field, mode and tenor” (Halliday, Hasan 1991, 38). Such a definition suggests that the register of a text can be defined only in terms of its situational context. “The register is what you are speaking at the time, depending on what you are doing and the nature of the activity in which the language is functioning.” (Halliday, Hasan 1991, 41) Hence, a contextual text analysis is essentially the analysis of register, the analysis of the text as embedded in its situational context.

2.1 Register analysis

2.1.1 Analysis of lexico-grammar

According to Halliday, registers differ in semantics and thus in lexico-grammar (as expressions of meanings) (Halliday, Hasan 1991, 39). Halliday argues that any register

has recognizable indexical features. These are particular lexico-grammatical signals that taken out of the text still make it possible to reconstruct certain aspects of the context of situation – those of field, tenor and mode (ibid.). To exemplify, a formula *Once upon a time...* suggests that a fairy tale is about to be delivered. *This is to certify that...* typically introduces a legal document acknowledging a certain type of relationship. Abbreviations such as *LOL*, *CU* and *4U* are characteristic of communication on the Internet or via instant messaging. Thus, any text carries within itself explicit indications of the context, which allow reconstructing the elements of this context: field, tenor and mode. Similarly, parliamentary discourse displays specific lexico-grammatical features that taken out of the text still make it possible to reconstruct certain elements of the context of situation. Such ritualized expressions as *my Honourable Friend*, *the Honourable Gentleman*, *I move to...*, *Order!*, *Hear, hear!* typically heard at the House of Commons serve as indexical features of this particular register. Taken out of the text, they evoke specific associations and point outwards – to the context of situation.

2.1.2 Context analysis

Ambiguities arise when analysing context as defined within systemic functional linguistics. Halliday's threefold theoretical model of context may definitely serve as a starting point for context description, yet for more in-depth analysis it is hardly sufficient. To refer to Hasan, the description of context so far offered in systemic functional linguistics is "interesting with its vagueness, lack of 'checkable' criteria and the reliance on 'common sense'. It is as if, other than the context's tripartite division, its description has no underlying regularities and no reasoned framework to work with" (Hasan 2009, 180). Indeed, to look beyond the text and describe the dimensions of the context there is currently no framework at hand. Curiously, the systemic functional view of context is not systemic at all, since there is a lack of consensus among the systemic linguists as to what the exact parameters of the three context values are (Ghadessy 1999; Halliday 2002; Martin 2001; Poynton 1985; Eggins 2004). Thus, to analyze the context of situation from the systemic functional perspective is not a straightforward task.

The present research discusses in detail the theoretical propositions by Martin (2001) and Poynton (1985) as expanded in "An Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics" (Eggins 2004). On the basis of these propositions, the following parameters can be applied in context analysis:

- a) Field varies along the dimension of *technicality* which is encoded by lexis: from *technical* (specialized) lexis to *commonsense* (everyday) lexis. Specialized lexis

entails technical terms (words only “insiders” know), acronyms, abbreviated syntax and verbs of technical processes. Everyday language involves everyday terms (words we all understand), full names, standard syntax and defining verbs (Eggins 2004, 110). A situation that would be described as technical would be characterized by a significant degree of assumed knowledge about the activity in focus. In everyday situation the only knowledge assumed is “common knowledge” (ibid., 107).

- b) Tenor involves the social role relationships played by the interactants. These are student/ lecturer, child/parent, husband/wife, etc. According to Poynton, there are three continua that characterize tenor: *power*; *contact* and *affective involvement*. The power continuum positions situations in terms of whether the roles played are equal or unequal (hierarchical) in power. The contact continuum positions situations in terms of whether the roles played bring the participants in frequent or infrequent contact. Lastly, the affective involvement continuum positions the situations in terms of whether the affective (emotional) involvement between the participants is high or low (Poynton 1985; Eggins 2004, 100).
- c) Martin points out that mode is a channel of communication (Martin 2001, 153) and can be characterized by two simultaneous continua: *spatial/interpersonal* distance and *experiential* distance. The spatial/interpersonal distance continuum ranges situations according to the distance among the interactants – visual and aural contact involved (one-way, such as when watching TV, or both-ways as in case of a face-to-face encounter) and the feedback available (immediate, delayed, such as when writing a letter, or absent). The experiential distance continuum ranges the situations according to the distance between language and the social process. Namely, language may accompany a social process (for instance, playing a game, commenting a football match, etc.) and constitute a social process (construing experience) (Martin 2001, 158, 159; Eggins 2004, 90, 91).

One must note that Martin’s parameters of mode contradict those of Halliday’s. According to Halliday, the analysis of mode is the analysis of the text and such textual properties as nominalization, lexical density and grammatical complexity are typically named as the parameters of mode (Halliday, Hasan 1991; Halliday 2002). Martin, on the contrary, emphasizes extra-linguistic aspects that characterize mode – contact, feedback, etc. This discrepancy is apparently the result of Halliday’s somewhat vague and elusive definition of mode (Halliday 2002, 55).

According to the systemic functional theory, the analysis of register should embrace both the textual and contextual (extra-textual) aspects of discourse. However, there is a lack of consistency in the interpretation of the context values. According to Halliday,

the analysis of text is the analysis of the contextual dimension of mode (Halliday 2002, 55). Conversely, according to Martin and Eggins, it is the analysis of field variable that reveals the features of the text (technicality of the lexis) (Martin 2001, 152; Eggins 2004, 110). Mode analysis, according to Martin, requires the investigation of the extra-textual properties of the discourse (ibid., 158, 159). Thus, the contextual approach found within systemic functional linguistics has ambiguities yet to resolve. The present research is an attempt to apply the contextual approach to parliamentary discourse analysis. The further analysis will combine the frameworks discussed above to demonstrate the applicability of the theory in practice.

3 Analyzing Parliamentary Discourse

3.1 Methodology

As set forth in the above discussion, contemporary research defines parliamentary discourse as a sub-domain of political discourse governed by specific communication patterns which serve to establish the formal framework of discourse. Compared to other varieties of political discourse such as political interviews or political campaign speeches, it is regarded as more formal or “norm-regulated” (Ilie 2009, 61; Bayley 2004, 1). However, it has to be clarified what is implied by the term ‘parliamentary discourse’. One has to distinguish a discourse that takes place during the plenary session usually open to public from that taking place in the committee sittings and in the “corridors” – the background informal communication among MPs. The focus of the present research is the plenary session, which is a gathering of MPs after some scrutinizing work in the committees has been done. The central element of the plenary session is the debate – a formal, verbal confrontation of MPs on the matters of legislation. In the debate the Members voice not only their personal opinion, but also that of the political party they represent. Thus, the debate is usually a formal confrontation between the parliamentary position (the political force that forms the government, known as the ‘coalition’) and the opposition.

To identify the most typical lexico-grammatical patterns that govern the parliamentary debate, one has to study samples of parliamentary text, namely, written transcripts of the debate. The transcripts serve as an evidence of the most typical lexico-grammatical strategies employed by the speakers in a particular context of situation. To use Halliday’s terminology, these recurrent lexico-grammatical patterns (ritualized expressions) may be seen as indexical features of parliamentary register (Halliday, Hasan 1991, 39). Both in Latvia and Britain parliamentary transcripts are freely accessible from the online

parliamentary text archive. The present research is a synchronic study, thus, samples of the present day parliamentary debate have been selected. The Latvian parliamentary language is studied on the basis of the debate held throughout November, 2010. The Latvian subcorpus comprises verbatim reports of all 7 parliamentary sittings of this month, the total number of words – 43 746 (Parliament of Latvia). The choice of the period is motivated by the fact that November represents the first working month of the newly elected Latvian Parliament. For the purpose of consistency, the analysis of the British parliamentary language is based on the samples of the debate held in June, 2010, which is likewise the first full working month of the newly elected British parliament. Considering the length of the House of Commons debate, the English sub-corpus contains verbatim reports of 4 sittings chosen randomly, so that the total number of words is approximately the same – 44 608 (UK Parliament). The corpus of Latvian and English texts is used for the empirical analysis in the following sections.

3.2 Lexico-grammatical patterns of parliamentary debate

The analysis of transcripts of parliamentary debate reveals a consistent occurrence of fixed lexico-grammatical patterns used in a particular context of situation – plenary session. As previous research in the field of parliamentary discourse suggests, the most typical lexico-grammatical patterns of parliamentary discourse fall into two main categories: fixed lexical patterns (most notably, noun phrases and verb phrases) and fixed syntactic patterns (Treimane 2009). The present research will discuss in detail fixed lexical patterns, namely noun phrases and verb phrases, used consistently during the plenary session in the British and Latvian Parliaments.

a) Noun phrases

The majority of the fixed noun phrases identified in the parliamentary transcripts function as politeness formulas used to refer to other MPs. The study reveals interesting regularities. On the whole, politeness formulas in the British parliament are less varied. This can be explained by the fact that their use is restricted by the rules of order known as “Erskine May’s Treatise on the Law, Privileges, Proceedings and Usage of Parliament” (Boulton *et al.* 1989). According to Erskine May, in order to guard against any personality in debate, personal references should be avoided. Instead, “each Member must be distinguished by the office he holds, by the place he represents or by other designations” (*ibid.*, 380). In the Latvian Parliament the terms of address are not codified (*Saeimas Kārtības rullis* 2010), thus, there is a greater variety of politeness formulas the choice of which is often the matter of personal preference and taste. Despite the lack of the codification of the terms of address, in the Latvian parliamentary debate one may find a certain number of

fixed, conventional politeness formulas which are used specifically in the parliamentary situation and can be regarded as indexical features of parliamentary register.

Conventional politeness formulas (noun phrases) used at the House of Commons as evidenced by the transcripts are as follows:

- (1) *The (right) honourable Gentleman / Lady*
- (2) *The (right) honourable and learned Gentleman*
- (3) *My (right) honourable Friend*
- (4) *The honourable Member opposite*
- (5) *The honourable Member for (a constituency)*
- (6) *Mr Speaker*
- (7) *The House* (to refer to the whole assemblage)

As the above examples show, a modifier *right* may be included in the phrase if the person referred to is a member of the Privy Council (Boulton *et al.* 1989, 380). Considering that in the British Parliament personal references are not acceptable, politeness formulas are used as indirect allusions rather than direct forms of address. The analysis of the transcripts of the Latvian parliamentary debate reveals a similar number of fixed (conventional) noun phrases that are used specifically in the parliamentary situation and may thus be considered indexical features of this register. The following examples have been identified in the transcripts:

- | | | |
|------|---|--|
| (8) | <i>Godātie</i>
honourable.ADJ.DEF.PL
'The Honourable Members' | <i>deputāti</i>
members.N.VOC.PL |
| (9) | <i>Cienījamie</i>
respected.ADJ.DEF.PL
'The Respected Members' | <i>deputāti</i>
members.N.VOC.PL |
| (10) | <i>Saeimas</i>
parliament.N.GEN.SG
'Members of the Parliament' | <i>deputāti</i>
members.N.VOC.PL |
| (11) | <i>Godātais</i>
honourable.ADJ.DEF.SG
'The Honourable Presidium' | <i>prezidij</i>
presidium.N.VOC.SG |
| (12) | <i>Augsti godātā</i>
highly.ADV honourable.ADJ.DEF.SG
'The Highly Honourable Chair' | <i>Priekšsēdētāja</i>
chairwoman.N.VOC.SG.F |

- (13) *Saeimas* *priekšsēdētāja*
parliament.N.GEN.SG chairwoman.N.VOC.SG.F
'The Chair of the Parliament'
- (14) *Augstā* *Saeima*
high.ADJ.DEF.SG parliament.N.VOC.SG
'The High Parliament'

One must note that the similarities in the number of specific politeness formulas are not affected by the differences in the use of personal allusions. In *Saeima* it is common practice to address a Member by his or her surname – *Bērziņa kungs*, *Liepas kundze* (Mr Berzins, Mrs Liepa respectively) or by the 2nd person plural pronoun *Jūs* (you) which is the honorific form of address in singular and plural, capitalized in writing. At the House of Commons the use of the pronoun *you* or the person's surname is not acceptable and is thus very rare, even in the case of direct verbal confrontation conventional politeness formulas are used.

b) Verb phrases

Verb phrases are an important element of the legislative procedure. The study of the parliamentary rules of order in Latvia and Britain reveals significant differences in the regulations concerning the language use. The rules of order of the Latvian Parliament (*Saeimas Kārtības Rullis* 2010) do not specify the linguistic aspect of the procedure, namely, they do not say how the parliamentarians should speak, what expression they should use. The British parliamentary rules as defined in Erskine May's treatise are much more instructive, they specify not only the procedure as such, but also the language to carry out the procedure, as, for example, in the following passage:

A Member who has made a motion can withdraw it only by leave of the House, granted without any negative voice. This leave is signified, not upon question but by the Speaker taking the pleasure of the House. He asks, 'Is it your pleasure that the motion be withdrawn?' If no one dissents, the Speaker says, 'Motion by leave withdrawn'. (Boulton et al. 1989, 332)

In order to supersede a question, the motion for the adjournment must be simply that the House do now adjourn (or that the debate be now adjourned) and cannot be coupled with any prefatory words. (ibid., 333)

Thus one may say that the British parliamentary language is codified, whereas in the Latvian Parliament it is conventional and derived from the procedure rather than prescribed by it. The study of the transcripts reveals a number of verb phrases that are consistently used in the House of Commons debate. These are fixed verb structures that

belong to the parliamentary lexicon and are a characteristic feature of parliamentary discourse:

- (15) *to make a motion*
- (16) *to table a motion*
- (17) *to withdraw a motion*
- (18) *to read the Bill*
- (19) *to pass the Bill*
- (20) *to resolve a debate*
- (21) *to adjourn a debate*
- (22) *to give way*

Recurrence of fixed verb phrases is a characteristic feature of the Latvian parliamentary language, as well. One may identify a consistent occurrence of fixed verb patterns some of which are identical to the British tradition. Listed below are some of the most typical verb phrases that may be considered indexical features of the parliamentary register:

- (23) *izskatīt* *likumprojektu*
revise.V.INF bill.N.ACC.SG
'to revise the Bill' or 'to read the Bill'
- (24) *sagatavot* *likumprojektu... lasījuma*
prepare.V.INF bill.N.ACC.SG reading.N.DAT.SG
'to prepare the Bill for the... reading'
- (25) *pieņemt* *likumprojektu*
pass.V.INF bill.N.ACC.SG
'to pass the Bill'
- (26) *noraidīt* *likumprojektu*
reject.V.INF bill.N.ACC.SG
'to reject the Bill'
- (27) *debatēt* *par* *likumprojektu*
debate.V.INF about.PREP bill.N.ACC.SG
'to debate the Bill'
- (28) *slēgt* *debates*
close.V.INF debate.N.ACC.PL
'to close the debate'
- (29) *atsaukt* *grozījumus*
withdraw.V.INF amendment.N.ACC.PL
'to withdraw amendments'

The analysis of the use of verb phrases demonstrates the concurrences of the choice of particular lexical items (verbs) such as *read, withdraw, debate, pass, etc.* One may notice certain uniformity in terms of the choice of verbs which points to common linguistic traditions of parliamentary communication in both countries.

One may agree with Ilie that parliamentary discourse is characterized by recurrent lexico-grammatical structures (Ilie 2009, 61). On the basis of the recurrence of fixed noun phrases and verb phrases revealed in the present analysis it can be claimed that the language of parliamentary discourse is governed by linguistic conventions which ensure its formality. Both in Britain and Latvia parliamentary discourse displays fixed patterns of communication. Such expressions as *My Honourable Friend, the Right Honourable Member, to table a motion, to adjourn a debate* typically used at the House of Commons, as well as *Godātie deputāti* (The Honourable Members), *Augsti godātā priekšsēdētāja* (The Highly Honourable Chair), *pieņemt likumprojektu* (to pass the bill), *slēgt debates* (to close the debate) typically heard at the Parliament of Latvia serve as indicators of a particular context of situation. To use Halliday's terminology, these are indexical features of the parliamentary register, namely, lexico-grammatical signals that point outwards, to the context.

3.3 Context of parliamentary debate

The investigation of the frameworks for field analysis offered by Martin (2001) and Eggins (2004) helps identify several problems. Given the field of the situation is encoded by lexis, the analysis of this contextual component must be performed on the level of a text rather than context. The field parameters discussed in the previous chapter require that the analysis of lexico-grammatical features of the text focus on such characteristics as standard or abbreviated syntax, technical or common terms, full words or acronyms, etc. Apart from the distinction between "technical" and "commonsense", the criteria developed by Eggins are purely linguistic (textual), thus, such an analysis may reveal the peculiarities of the language use, yet it says little about the context. Another problem is that the author does not provide degrees of technicality. The system is based on two extremes – technical and commonsense, which means that the field is either technical, commonsense or something in between. Can one say, for instance, that the parliamentary field is "very technical" or "moderately technical" or "almost commonsense"? The only clue given by Eggins in this regard is that lexis "tends to be" either technical or commonsense but this is hardly an exhaustive characterization of the field (Eggins 2004, 108).

On the basis of the criteria suggested by Eggins (ibid.), a thorough description of the field would require a separate lexico-grammatical analysis which is outside the scope of the present paper. Nevertheless, the comparison between the frequency of occurrence of technical terms and common terms leads to a claim that the first may be considered as part of specialized parliamentary vocabulary. Such lexical items as *procedure*, *amendment*, *opposition*, *reading*, *motion* are part of the parliamentary lexicon both in Latvia and Britain. Yet it is arguable whether these items belong to what could be described as “words only insiders know”, as it is unlikely that they are used exclusively in the discourse of parliament.

On the basis of the parameters of mode offered by Martin and Eggins (Martin 2001, 158, 159; Eggins 2004, 90, 91), the mode analysis requires some knowledge about the design of the hall and the seating of the Members. The examination of spatial/interpersonal distance among the MPs reveals that the seating of the MPs in Britain is slightly different from that in Latvia. The hall of the House of Commons is formed by two opposite aisles, whereas in the Latvian Parliament it has the form of an amphitheatre. Nevertheless, the communication among the MPs in both Latvian and British Parliaments involves visual as well as aural contact. However, there are significant differences as to the feedback and these differences stem from the parliamentary rules of order. The Latvian parliamentary procedure strictly forbids any communication between the debater and the audience. Brief interjections are allowed; yet the audience may not ask questions or respond to the speaker’s statements during his or her speech (*Saeimas Kārtības rullis* 2010). Therefore, in Saeima the debate goes in the form of a monologue and any spontaneity of expression is overruled. In the British parliament the debater may be asked questions, which makes the debate more dynamic and dialogic. Therefore, one can say that in the Latvian parliament feedback is delayed, while in the British parliament it is immediate. Further on, in parliamentary situations the language can be used both as action and reflection because, for instance, a phrase *The Bill is rejected* is action itself, as well as its verbal manifestation.

To apply Poynton’s system of tenor dimensions, there are three aspects of tenor to analyse: power, contact and affective involvement. Thus, the parameters of the tenor require some knowledge about the practices of MPs – the frequency of their communication, emotional and power relationship involved. With regard to the tenor variable, Eggins proposes an interesting theoretical claim – the differentiation between formal and informal situations of language use derives directly from the tenor (Eggins 2004, 100). Eggins suggests that the two situation types, formal and informal, can be contrasted according to their typical tenor dimensions. Thus, an informal situation is characterized by equal power, frequent contact and high affective involvement, while a formal

situation is characterised by unequal (hierarchical) power, infrequent or one-off contact and low affective involvement (ibid., 100, 101). Unfortunately, this suggestion is not valid in parliamentary situations. They are formal (institutional), yet the participants (MPs) meet on a regular basis (frequently) and their power relationship (with, perhaps, one exception – the Speaker) is generally equal. The affective involvement in a parliamentary situation is supposedly low, although it is a value difficult to measure. Thus, while Poynton's system embraces the main aspects of tenor – frequency of contact, power relations and emotional involvement, it is not clear how the value of the latter can be established. Furthermore, one can hardly agree with Eggins' claim that informal and formal situations display fixed configurations of tenor dimensions. The analysis of the tenor alone is not sufficient to determine the level of formality of discourse. Rather, the differentiation between formal and informal situations can be made on the basis of the configuration of all three context dimensions – field, tenor and mode.

4 Conclusions

The present research has been carried out to demonstrate the applicability of the systemic functional frameworks of register analysis to the study of parliamentary discourse. According to the systemic functional theory as explicated in the works by Halliday and Webster (2002; 2009), Halliday and Hasan (1991), Eggins (2004), Eggins and Martin (1997), etc., a contextual approach to discourse analysis is essentially the analysis of register. The parameters of register analysis have to embrace two dimensions of the discourse – textual (lexico-grammatical elements) and extra-textual (the elements of the context of situation). This research has been an attempt to demonstrate the relevance of the systemic functional parameters to the analysis of parliamentary discourse using parliamentary transcripts of the debate held at the British House of Commons and the Latvian Parliament (*Saeima*) as the empirical data. The lexico-grammatical analysis of the text samples has been carried out to identify the most typical lexico-grammatical features of parliamentary debate, namely, noun phrases and verb phrases which could be regarded as indexical features of this register.

The study has revealed that the most typical noun phrases are realized as politeness formulas in parliamentary situations. The rules of order in the British parliament prescribe the use of politeness formulas, while in the Latvian parliament politeness formulas are not codified. Nevertheless, in both parliaments one may find a similar number of fixed politeness expressions which seem to be a characteristic feature of parliamentary register. The transcripts reveal a consistent occurrence of fixed verb patterns which in some cases are identical in both parliaments. Such verb patterns as *read*, *amend*, *withdraw*, *debate*,

pass, etc. belong to the parliamentary lexicon. Uniformity in terms of the choice of certain vocabulary items points to common linguistic traditions of parliamentary communication. While it is clear that an explicit register analysis requires both the analysis of lexicogrammatical patterns of language and those of context, it is not clear how the analysis of the latter should be performed. It seems that there is no consensus among the systemic linguists as to what the parameters of context analysis should be. One may not find a common framework that would offer strict and measurable parameters of the three context values. Rather, various attempts have been made to deal with the problem of context (Halliday 2002; Martin 2001; Poynton 1985; Eggins 2004).

The present analysis of the parliamentary context has been conducted on the basis of the frameworks by Martin (2001), Poynton (1985) and Eggins (2004). The field analysis has revealed that apart from the distinction between “technical” and “commonsense”, the criteria offered by Eggins are purely linguistic (textual). Therefore, they lead to conclusions about the language, but say little about the context. The mode analysis has revealed that the only difference between the mode of communication in both parliaments is that of the feedback available – in the British parliament it is immediate, while in Saeima it is delayed. This difference stems from the parliamentary rules of order which in Latvia, unlike Britain, do not allow communication between the debater and the audience. It may also be concluded that Poynton’s system for tenor analysis embraces the main aspects of tenor – frequency of contact, power relations and emotional involvement, yet it is not clear how the value of the latter can be established. Furthermore, one can hardly support Eggins’ claim that informal and formal situations display fixed configurations of tenor dimensions. The analysis of the tenor alone is not sufficient to determine the level of formality of discourse.

As the present research has revealed, the context categories specified in systemic functional linguistics are not clear-cut and in some cases even contradictory. Therefore analysing context from a systemic functional perspective is not a straightforward task. A lack of clear criteria for context analysis causes ambiguities as to where the boundaries between text and context should be drawn. If the investigation of context variables goes back to the analysis of the text, it is hardly a context analysis. In this respect one may agree with Van Dijk who argues that the theory of context in contemporary linguistics is rather primitive and barely allows for sophisticated analyses (Van Dijk 2004, 339). He claims, “it is striking that for a functional theory of language that aims to provide a ‘social semiotic’, context structures have not been explored more systematically and more explicitly in all these years. Not only are the terms (...) hardly transparent as to their intended meaning, but also the usual – informal – descriptions of their meanings are barely enlightening.” (ibid., 341). Thus, despite the potential of the systemic functional

theory to describe language in “social semiotic” terms, the contextual approach within systemic functional linguistics raises ambiguities yet to resolve. Unless explicit parameters of context analysis are established, the systemic functional theory of context remains but a theory.

Data sources

- UK Parliament. *The UK Parliament. Publications and Records. Commons Debates by Date.* June 8, 14, 21, 28, 2010. Available at: www.parliament.uk/business/publications/hansard/commons/by-date. Accessed: 5 December, 2010.
- Parliament of Latvia. *Latvijas Republikas Saeima. 10. Saeimas sēžu stenogrammas un skaņu faili.* November 2, 3, 4, 9, 17, 18, 25, 2010. Available at: www.saeima.lv/lv/transcripts/category/15. Accessed: 5 December, 2010.

References

- Alvarez-Benito, G., G. Fernandez-Diaz and I. Ma Inigo-Mora (eds.). 2009. *Discourse and Politics.* Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Bayley, P. 2004. Introduction. The whys and wherefores of analysing parliamentary discourse. *Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Parliamentary Discourse.* P. Bayley (ed.). Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company. 1–44.
- Bayley, P. (ed.). 2004. *Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Parliamentary Discourse.* Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Boulton, C. J., J. F. Sweetman, D. W. Limon, H. M. Barclay, W. R. McKay, A. J. Hastings, R. J. Willoughby and B. P. Keith (eds.). 1989. *Erskine May's Treatise on the Law, Privileges, Proceedings and Usage of Parliament.* London: Butterworths.
- Chilton, P. A. and C. Schäffner (eds.). 2002. *Politics as Text and Talk: Analytic Approaches to Political Discourse.* Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Eggs, S. 2004. *An Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics.* London: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Eggs, S. and J. R. Martin. 1997. Genres and registers of discourse. *Discourse as Structure and Process.* T. Van Dijk (ed.). London: Sage Publications. 230–256.
- Ghadessy, M. (ed.). 1999. *Text and Context in Functional Linguistics.* Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Halliday, M. A. K. and R. Hasan. 1991. *Language, Context and Text: Aspects of Language in a Social-Semiotic Perspective.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Halliday, M. A. K. and J. Webster (ed.). 2002. *Linguistic Studies of Text and Discourse.* London; New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.

- Halliday, M. A. K. and J. Webster (ed.). 2003. *On Language and Linguistics*. London; New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Hasan, R. 2009. The place of context in a systemic functional model. *Continuum Companion to Systemic Functional Linguistics*. M. A. K. Halliday and J. Webster (eds.). London; New York: Continuum International Publishing Group. 166–189.
- Ilie, C. 2000. Cliché-based metadiscursive argumentation in the Houses of Parliament. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*. Vol. 10 (1), 65–84.
- Ilie, C. 2003. Discourse and metadiscourse in parliamentary debates. *Journal of Language and Politics*. Vol. 1(2), 269–291.
- Ilie, C. 2006. Parliamentary discourses. *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*. 2nd Edition, Vol. 9. K. Brown (ed.). Oxford: Elsevier. 188–197.
- Ilie, C. 2009. Chapter four. Argumentative functions of parentheticals in parliamentary debates. *Discourse and Politics*. G. Alvarez-Benito, G. Fernandez-Diaz and I. Ma Inigo-Mora (eds.). Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. 61–79.
- Martin, J. R. 2001. Language, register and genre. *Analyzing English in Global Context*. A. Burns and C. Coffin (eds.). London: Routledge. 149–165.
- Poynton, C. 1985. *Language and Gender: Making the Difference*. Geelong, Vic.: Deakin University Press.
- Saeimas Kārtības rullis*. 2010. Rīga: LR Saeimas Kanceleja.
- Steiner, J. 2004. *Deliberative Politics in Action: Analyzing Parliamentary Discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Treimane, L. 2009. *The Features of the British Parliamentary Spoken Discourse*. Riga: University of Latvia.
- Van Dijk, T. A. 2004. Text and context of parliamentary debates. *Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Parliamentary Discourse*. P. Bayley (ed.). Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company. 339–372.
- Van Dijk, T. A. and R. Wodak (eds.). 2000. *Racism at the Top: Parliamentary Discourses on Ethnic Issues in Six European States*. Klagenfurt: Drava Verlag.

Parlamento diskurso analizē: sisteminē funkcinē perspektyva

Laura Treimane

Santrauka

Naujausi diskurso tyrimai rodo, kad parlamento diskursas laikytinas viena formaliausiu ir savo normas turinčiu politinio diskurso atmainu. Šis diskursas apibrēziamas specifiniais konteksto bruožais, t. y. vieta, dalyviais ir tematika, o jo tyrimai neatskiriama

nuo konteksto analizės. Konteksto analizė kalbotyroje sietina su sisteminė funkcine gramatika, kurioje kalba suprantama kaip „socialinis semiotinis“ reiškinys, tirtinas konkrečiame socialiniame kontekste. Straipsnyje aprašomu tyrimu siekiama parodyti sisteminių funkcinių parametrų svarbą parlamento diskurso analizei. Empiriniai tyrimo duomenys rinkti iš transkribuotų Didžiosios Britanijos Bendruomenių rūmų ir Latvijos Seimo debatų. Analizė atskleidė tam tikrų leksikos vartojimo panašumų anglų ir latvių kalbose, pavyzdžiui, abiejų šalių parlamentarai vartoja sustabarėjusių mandagumo pasakymų ir veiksmožodinių junginių, laikytinų indeksinėmis struktūromis. Vis dėlto konteksto analizės metodas, taikytas laikantis sisteminės funkcinės tradicijų, iškėlė netikėtų konteksto kategorijų apibrėžties ir sampratos nenuoseklumą. Tyrimo išvadose teigiama, jog tolesnė sisteminės funkcinės teorijos sėkmė priklausys nuo to, ar tyrėjams pavyks tiksliau apibrėžti konteksto analizės parametrus.

Įteikta 2011 m. sausio mėn.