

# Histrionic and agonistic features of parliamentary discourse

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## HISTRIONIC AND AGONISTIC FEATURES OF PARLIAMENTARY DISCOURSE

An eclectic approach situated at the interface between rhetoric and discourse analysis has been used to examine three subtypes of parliamentary interaction, namely speeches, debates and Question Time. The terms parliament and theatre have three roughly corresponding references, namely a spatial frame, i.e. the place where parliamentary and theatrical activities are carried out, an interaction frame, i.e. the type of activity that is carried out, and a participant frame, i.e. the category of agents that initiate and/or perform a particular type of activity. These three distinctive frames have been investigated in this study in order to reveal the histrionic and the agonistic features of parliamentary dialogue, as well as relevant parallels between parliamentary dialogue and theatre dialogue. Two rhetorical strategies have been examined more closely, namely rhetorical questions (that are characteristic of both parliamentary and theatrical dialogue) and rhetorical parentheticals, i.e. metadiscursive parentheticals characteristic of parliamentary dialogue, and theatrical asides characteristic of dramatic dialogue.

*Key Words:* actor, theatre, parenthetical, audience, debate

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Edward Garnier (Harborough): [...] However, today I have been emboldened by the performance of the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I use the word "performance" because, if he fails to impress the Prime Minister as a leading politician in the Labour Government, the right hon. Gentleman has a good career ahead of him on the stage--but I am not sure from which end of the pantomime cow his speech came. (Hansard, 24 Nov 1999, Col 697)

## 1. Introduction

The interaction between members of Parliament (hereafter MPs) exhibits both elements of a theatre scenario, i.e. histrionic features, and of a competition scenario, i.e. agonistic features. As in theatrical performances, an important part of MPs' parliamentary roles overlaps with real-life manifestations of showmanship. What distinguishes parliamentary from theatrical dialogue, however, is the manifestation of real-life, and not fictional, adversariality and competitiveness. Parliamentary proceedings provide an institutional setting for topical confrontations of ideas, opinions and ideologies between institutional agents with well-defined role-based identities, ideological frames of mind and institutional power. An interdiscursive comparative analysis of parliamentary interaction and theatre interaction is proposed with respect to similarities and differences related to spatial frames, turn-taking, speech act sequencing, types of participants and their relationship to audience(s), as well as discursive strategies and end-goals.

Like theatrical dialogue, parliamentary dialogue contributes to revealing frames of mind and shaping beliefs, as well as to strengthening social norms and moral values. However, whereas these represent primary end-goals in theatre, they are only a means to an end in parliamentary dialogue. The primary goals of parliamentary dialogue are to negotiate political solutions, to reach agreements and to make decisions, the results of which affect people's real lives. More often than not, the discussions in Parliament regard divergent proposals and incompatible solutions and the outcome of the debate reinforces the positions of the proponents of the winning alternatives. This confrontational dialogue fuels not only a theatrical stance and a role awareness of the interactants, but also a sense of competitiveness and an agonistic behaviour that underlie the polarisation of political power.

## 2. Aim and method

The aim of this study is to try to answer the following questions: Which are the major features that distinguish parliamentary dialogue from theatrical dialogue? Which are the features that parliamentary dialogue shares with theatrical dialogue? Are there any consistent and/or systematic similarities and differences between parliamentary dialogue and theatrical dialogue with respect to overall structure, turn-taking patterns, role configurations and role shifts, power relations, and speaker-addressee vs. speaker-audience interaction. To what extent is it possible to identify differences related to institution-specific and genre-specific constraints, respectively?

The corpus consists of transcripts of several parliamentary sittings in the House of Commons (1997-2001) randomly selected from the Hansard records (officially called The Official Report of the proceedings of the House of Commons). Hansard is published daily and is an edited verbatim report of proceedings in the Commons. MPs' words are reported with repetitions and redundancies omitted and with obvious mistakes corrected, but nothing is left out which adds to the meaning of the speech or illustrates the argument. The parliamentary records can be easily accessed from the British Parliament home page on the internet: <http://www.parliament.uk>.

The institutionally based dialogue of parliamentary interaction is envisaged in this study as a form of cognitive and rhetorical process, which reflects both institutional and non-institutional discursive strategies. Parliamentary dialogue complies with a number of basic rules and conventions that apply to casual dialogue in general, but also exhibits specific institutional features that are absent from both casual or fictional dialogue. The present approach is located at the interface between rhetoric, pragmatics and discourse analysis. It focuses on parliamentary debates, interventions, interpellations and question-response sessions as prototypical forms of interaction in Parliament in general, but with special reference to the U.K. Parliament.

## 3. Histrionic features of parliamentary dialogue

The term parliament, with non-capitalised p, denotes an assembly of the representatives of a political nation or people, often the supreme legislative authority. The same term written with a capitalised P denotes prima-



rily the U.K. Parliament, made up of the House of Commons and the House of Lords, but also the institutional physical setting in Westminster Palace. It may also denote the parliament of any of various other countries. Although the concept of theatre is rather complex on account of its multiple referents, some of the major English and American dictionaries (see the Reference list) agree on at least three of its meanings that are relevant to the present study: (i) the building or outdoor area designed for the performance of dramatic presentations or stage entertainments; (ii) plays, or dramatic performances regarded collectively as a form of art; (iii) the world of actors, theatrical companies. It is significant that both the term parliament and the term theatre have three roughly corresponding references, namely a spatial frame, i.e. the place where parliamentary and theatrical activities, respectively, are carried out, an interaction frame, i.e. the type of activity that takes place, and, finally, a participant frame, i.e. the category of participants that initiate and/or perform a particular type of activity.

The etymology of the two terms reveals both their own specific meanings and their shared meanings. The term parliament is derived from the Old French parlement, from parler, to speak. The term theatre is derived from the Greek theatron, place for viewing. It is, again, significant that their respective etymologies point to the specific activities that are carried out in Parliament and on the theatre stage, respectively. As far as Parliament is concerned, it is the actual talk (monologue and dialogue) and its ensuing results that count as prototypical parliamentary activity. As far as theatre is concerned, the main purpose of staging a theatrical performance is for it to be watched/viewed by a wide audience (other than the actors on stage). It is apparent, however, that these two elements, i.e. the collocutors' talk, on the one hand, and the viewing audience, on the other, operate in both settings. A basic similarity between parliamentary and theatrical activities consists in the fact that not only actors' performances, but also MPs' speeches and dialogue are being watched/viewed by an onlooking audience, actually by a multi-layered audience, i.e. the insider audience of fellow MPs, the outsider audience of visitors in the Strangers' Gallery, and the outsider audience of TV-viewers. A basic difference, however, consists in the fact that parliamentary dialogue, unlike theatrical dialogue, can fulfil its institutional purpose (basically debating political issues and making political decisions) even without an outsider audience, since parliamentary proceedings are subsequently transcribed and can be scrutinised afterwards by other institutional authorities, or by the public at large.

The term *histrionic* is suggestive of theatre or a stage performance, since it refers to actors and acting, while at the same time it is associated with something that is overtly dramatic and excessively emotional or affected. Etymologically, it is derived from the late Latin *histrionicus*, from Latin *histrion*(n), meaning 'actor'. Although the word was originally used with reference to theatre as joint performance and individual acting or over(re)acting, it gradually acquired a more general meaning that applied to emotionally exaggerated attitudes, gestures used in any other situations. Both MPs and actors are professional performers and interactants who have been elected or appointed to express thoughts and ideas by performing specific institutional activities in two distinct areas, namely political decision-making and public culture-cum-entertainment, respectively. Like actors, and unlike other professionals, MPs carry out a major part of their activities in "the public eye", namely in front of several kinds and levels of audiences made up of politicians and/or laypersons. More than members of other professional categories, MPs and actors are permanently aware of the fact that their professional work is scrutinised and evaluated both simultaneously and subsequently.

It is common knowledge that politics and culture-cum-entertainment are two areas about which most of us have strong opinions and even convictions. Parliamentary dialogue takes place in the real world, which means that what happens in Parliament affects not only the MPs present in the House, but the other members of society too, directly or indirectly (Bentley et al. 1997/1995; Norton 1997). Whereas parliamentary discourse is supposed to be primarily informative and deliberative, theatrical performances are primarily expected to educate and/or entertain the audience. However, parliamentary interaction is not devoid of entertaining moments either, as illustrated in example (1) below.

(1) Keith Simpson (Con, Mid-Norfolk): [...] We have heard, for example, of that wonderful, original phrase, "a new deal". I have a suspicion that someone called Franklin Delano Roosevelt once talked about a new deal. We are saved from hearing the phrase "a new Europe" because someone obviously had the sense to look it up and found that Hitler had used it first.

I am genuinely surprised that we have not heard about the new woman. It is alleged that the length of ladies' skirts reflects economic prosperity and recession. At times of economic prosperity, skirt lengths rise and when we are about to go into recession

skirt lengths fall. Listening to the mutterings among Labour Members, I realise that I may be making a politically incorrect statement. Perhaps I should say that under new Labour, in every possible sense, it is a matter of trousers going up and coming down. I take the advice of my wife that at the moment skirt lengths are beginning to come down, so I suspect that we are heading for a recession.

Yesterday, we heard what could best be described as a hangover Budget. It felt good yesterday, but by God there are some bloodshot eyes among Labour Members today. (Hansard, 3 July 1997, Col 482)

The entertaining side of parliamentary discourse is often displayed in the use of anecdotes, parables, and insider stories, which are adjusted to topical events and persons, and which make use of irony, simile, cliché and metadiscourse (Ilie 2000), as illustrated in Keith Simpson's intervention above.

#### 4. Agonistic features of parliamentary dialogue

According to lexicographic definitions, the term agonistic refers to three particular aspects of human interaction: (i) striving to overcome in argument, argumentative, combative; (ii) struggling to achieve effect, strained and contrived; and (iii) relating to contests, originally those of ancient Greeks. Etymologically, it is derived (via Latin) from Greek agonistikos, from *agon*, meaning 'contest'. The first and third meanings of the term agonistic can be easily recognised in the very spirit and goal of parliamentary dialogue. The second meaning shares a number of elements with the histrionic features identified in both parliamentary and theatrical dialogue.

The rationale of parliamentary debate lies in the existence of opposite political camps and, implicitly, in the confrontation of different, and sometimes contradictory, standpoints and representations of reality (Riddell 1989; Adonis 1993). A major incentive for MPs' active participation in the debates is the constant need to promote their own image in a competitive and performance-oriented institutional interaction. To a large extent, the MPs' interaction in Parliament is a competition for power and leadership roles, but also for fame and popularity. Political power is to be understood here not only as an institutional status which is assigned or earned, but also as "an interactional skill and process":

Power is the skill that all members have to contest roles, dispute and disagree on the interpretation of events. Power is a process insofar as the participant in an interaction who attempts to exercise power needs to be ratified and accepted by the other interactants. (Diamond 1996: 12)

By offering their own ideological representations of institutional interactants, ideas or events, MPs intend to affect a wide and diverse audience's understanding processes and to reshape their attitudes and beliefs in accordance with particular ideological positions. The end-goal of parliamentary dialogue is to affect the audience's beliefs and opinions in order to motivate them to act in a certain way with regard to real-life issues. It also implies that political adversaries have to be proved wrong or at least neutralised. The strength of the parliamentary debate lies in the necessity of confrontation and in the existence of opposite sides: the ongoing confrontation is paralleled by ongoing attempts to destabilise and re-establish the power balance.

A major distinction between a theatrical drama and an oratorical debate consists in the latter's adversarial principle. The speakers in a parliamentary debate, like lawyers in court, are not merely showing off their rhetorical skills in front of an audience. They are actually attempting to do something else, namely to outsmart their institutional adversaries. The prospect of winning rather than losing a debate motivates the MPs' competitive spirit and the polarisation of political forces in Parliament. Whether it is a dispute or a controversy, parliamentary confrontational dialogue is often a win-lose form of contest meant to proclaim a winner and single out a loser. It is precisely these two elements of winning and losing as outcomes of parliamentary dialogue that are missing from the dialogue in theatre.

In many respects, the parliamentary interaction can be regarded as a convention-based and rule-regulated dialogue. MPs as institutional interactants can be regarded as rule-followers, rather than as script-followers, like actors who enact a theatrical scenario on stage. The conventions and rules for staging theatre plays are constantly being challenged by modern theatre directors. Parliamentary rules stipulate and reinforce the MP role hierarchy, the role of the Speaker of the House as moderator, the turn-taking order, the address forms, the tone and style of the interaction.

## 5. Parliamentary discourse frames

Parliamentary discourse consists of MPs' speeches, interventions (questions, replies, etc.) and dialogue with each other. As has been pointed out in 3.0, both Parliament and theatre display forms of communication that can be examined and compared in terms of three main types of institutional frames, namely spatial frames, which regard the physical environment proper and participant positioning in space (see section 5.1), interaction frames, which regard institutional turn-taking patterns, speech monitoring, as well as forms and rituals of address (see section 5.2), and finally, participant frames, which regard role interplay, private and public identities, as well as speaker-addressee and speaker-audience relationship (see section 5.3). These structuring frames will provide the background of the following inter-discursive analysis of the histrionic and agonistic features of parliamentary interaction.

### *5.1. Spatial frames in Parliament*

#### The physical setting of the U.K. Parliament

The physical setting of the House of Commons, with the Government MPs and Opposition MPs facing each other as members of two competing camps has undoubtedly played an important role in fostering an adversarial and confrontational tone of debate. The Speaker's Chair faces the main public gallery, called the Strangers' Gallery. It is in the Strangers' Gallery that the audience, i.e. members of the public at large are supposed to sit and watch the debates. A much wider audience of TV-viewers have nowadays the possibility to watch the parliamentary sessions that are telecast. But in this case, the audience's viewing perspective is restricted to the specific filming angles chosen by parliamentary TV-camera persons when foregrounding or backgrounding certain persons, interactions, etc.

Above the Speaker's Chair is the Reporters' Gallery. On the floor of the House on the Speaker's right are the benches occupied by the supporters of the Government. By convention, Ministers sit on the front bench on the right hand of the speaker. The Prime Minister's seat is opposite to the despatch box on the Table. Official Opposition spokespersons use the front bench to the Speaker's left. The Leader of the Opposition is sitting opposite the despatch box on that side of the Table. Thus, as a result of the seating arrangement, Government MPs and



Opposition MPs are practically facing each other. Minority parties sit on the benches (often the front two) below the gangway on the left, though a minority party that identifies with the Government may sit on the right-hand side. However, as has been pointed out in Factsheet 521 of The Official Report of the proceedings of the House of Commons, "there is nothing sacrosanct about these places, and on sundry occasions, when a Member has deliberately chosen to occupy a place on the front bench or on the opposite of the House from normal, there is no redress for such action".

Speeches made in the House of Commons have to conform to very specific rules. A Minister or Opposition spokesperson can speak from the Dispatch Box at the Table of the House, but other MPs have to rise to speak from where they were previously sitting and not from a rostrum. However, front-bench members usually stand at one of the Despatch boxes. They must stand while speaking (a disabled or incapacitated Member is naturally allowed to address the House seated).

### The physical setting of theatre halls

In modern theatre halls, actors are performing on a stage (of different sizes and shapes). It is the members of the seated audience that are usually placed facing the stage. Historically however, different theatrical traditions imposed varying seating configurations. For example, in Greek and Roman amphitheatres, the audience was seated in a semicircle around the stage. A similar setting was used for the Globe Theatre in Shakespeare's time. Modern and/or experimental theatres can sometimes have audience members sitting on the stage.

Unlike MPs, actors and actresses on stage have more freedom of movement and can adopt varying postures and attitudes to enact the characters they represent. In most cases, the interaction on stage consists in the actors performing in front of and for the sake of an audience, the presence of which they pretend to ignore. During certain theatrical performances (both classical and modern), however, the actors also happen to address the audience directly and explicitly. In some cases, they even interact with the audience, involving members of the audience in a quasi-improvised dialogue. Thus, unlike MPs, theatre actors can be seen to communicate not only to or for, but also with, the audience. It is important to note, however, that the dialogue with the audience is normally not initiated by the characters of the play, but by the actors enacting them who follow the indications of the stage director.

### *5.2. Interaction frames in Parliament*

Parliamentary debating tactics and strategies consist of cooperative interaction and adversarial encounters, both of which instantiate a struggle for political influence and authority that is conveyed partly rationally, and partly emotionally (Ilie 2001). As instantiations of collective undertakings, parliamentary debates display, especially in matters of vital national importance, not only an agonistic interaction, but also converging and complementary discursive contributions that are orchestrated institutionally and performed histrionically. MPs are often engaged in a dialogue that is meant to promote ongoing consultations, discussions and debates. The histrionic features of parliamentary interaction are counterbalanced by institutional constraints. Its participants are active interactants who do not have a script to rely on, as is the case of actors in theatrical performances, but who rely instead on general principles and specific rules.

Like actors in a theatrical performance, MPs position and reposition themselves and their interlocutors during the debates, by evaluating and re-evaluating their respective positions and standpoints. As instantiations of individual and group confrontations, parliamentary debates display well-regulated competing discursive processes in a contest-like event.

Turn-taking sequences are rule-regulated in parliamentary dialogue, but allow nevertheless for spontaneity and unpredictability as far as the occurrence of unexpected interventions is concerned, as in (2) below.

(2)Kali Mountford (Lab): [...] Work must pay, which is why I welcome the tax credits imaginatively introduced by the Government--which are not the ad hoc tax credits that people affected by IR35 awarded themselves.

Mr. Stephen Day (Con, Cheadle): Speak for your constituents.

Kali Mountford: I am. My constituency has low unemployment and many families with young children. [...] (Hansard, 24 Nov 1999, Col 689)

Unlike the dialogue of theatre plays, parliamentary dialogue has no fixed or pre-established duration. The starting times of parliamentary sittings are designated beforehand, but the finishing times are not fixed and are often delayed. In theatre, the performances of one and the same play are normally expected to take roughly the same amount of time. Although the real time duration of the dialogue of a play is expected to be roughly



the same for each performance, the fictional events and actions may cover shorter or longer periods of time, in a close or a remote past, or even in the future. Whereas parliamentary dialogue represents a process that is unfolding "here and now", with unpredictable results and consequences, the dialogue of a theatre play remains basically the same finished and fictional product that is being interpreted and reinterpreted by actors on stage.

Further evidence that parliamentary and theatrical dialogues are generated differently and have specific goals is provided by the fact that parliamentary dialogue is taking shape on the spot as an oral performance meant to be eventually written down in the Hansard records, whereas theatrical dialogue represents the actors' interpretation on stage of a playwright's text. Theatrical discourse represents the enactment of a well-prepared and professionally stage-directed written script and is meant to propose an artistic and plausible representation and performance of a fictional dialogue.

While conveying their own ideas and disputing their adversaries' ideas, MPs deliver their own messages, i.e. they are their own messengers. Basically, actors are not delivering their own messages, i.e. their own thoughts and ideas, they are primarily the messengers of the playwright, on the one hand, and the interpreters of particular characters in the play, on the other. They are impersonating particular theatrical roles and can use a variety of rhetorical devices, verbal and non-verbal, to convey their own interpretation of those roles and of the relationships between them. By embodying particular characters in a theatre play, they are fulfilling the symbolic function of mediators between the playwright and the audience.

Parliamentary interaction can be regarded as a sub-genre of political discourse, the performance of which displays alternating histrionic and agonistic features. It includes a number of institutional forms of verbal communication that are adjusted to specific institutional goals, such as speeches, (5.2.1), debates (5.2.2) and Question Time (5.2.3).

### *5.2.1. Parliamentary speeches*

Parliamentary speeches are traditional forms of political discourse. In the House of Commons all speeches are addressed to the Speaker or Deputy Speaker of the House, who acts as a chairperson. MPs are normally not addressed by their actual names, but by the names of their constituency.

Most importantly, MPs are addressed and address each other in the 3rd person singular through the intermediary of the Speaker. Interestingly, the only parliamentary participant addressed in the 2nd person is the Speaker or Deputy Speaker of the House. A brief illustration is provided in example (3) below:

(3)Mr. Cook (Lab, Foreign Secretary): Membership of the largest single market in the world gives Britain a clout in international trade talks that we would never have on our own. For the past two months--[Interruption from Mr. Bercow.]

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the Foreign Secretary, but I have to tell the hon. Member for Buckingham [Mr. Bercow] that he has spoken for 34 minutes in the debate on the Queen's Speech so far and I do not want to hear him add to that total from a sedentary position.

Mr. Cook: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. However, to intercede for the hon. Gentleman [Mr. Bercow], I should say that we on the Government Benches relish his interventions when they are made from a standing position. [...] (Hansard, 22 Nov 1999, Col 368)

As can be seen in the exchange above, it is the Speaker or Deputy Speaker of the House who ensures the reinforcement of orderly interventions and the observance of parliamentary rules. He is in charge of monitoring speaker selection and turn assignment, so that MPs take it in turns to speak and present their standpoints in an orderly manner.

To maintain the spontaneity of parliamentary interaction, reading a prepared speech is not allowed. Like theatre actors and actresses on stage, MPs may not read their speeches, although they may, if necessary, refresh their memory by referring to notes. If/when they start reading they are instantly interrupted by fellow MPs, who are shouting 'Reading' disapprovingly.

As communicative acts, parliamentary speeches are supposed to display, apart from facts or events, also self-presentations and other-presentations. Self-presentations provide information about the speaker's own opinions and experiences, as well as about the speaker's own party, whereas other-presentations provide corresponding information about other political parties and other MPs' sayings and doings (see further details in section 5.3).

Theatrical discourse resorts to specialised rhetorical devices in order to enable the characters to best enact self-presentations and other-presentations for the audience. Both kinds of presentations are meant to reveal various aspects of the speaker's or character's, background, views and/or commitments. A well-known device is the monologue, by means of which a character makes a speech addressed to other characters, or is simply talking to him/herself. For obvious reasons, the latter case does not apply to parliamentary speeches. Political speeches are not commonly associated with dialogic interaction, but at the same time they can hardly be treated as mere monologues, as in those occurring in theatre plays, since they are intended to challenge and/or arouse the interest of fellow MPs. Parliamentary speakers get sometimes engaged in brief agonistic dialogues with reacting/interfering MPs, irrespective of whether the latter are the targetted addressees or not, as in (4) below:

(4)Mr. Hoon (Lab): [...] We clearly recognised the need for Europe to play a more effective part even before the full lessons of Kosovo had been learned. We accepted and have continued to argue for a proposal that the Conservative Government set out when they agreed to frame European defence policy in the context of the European Union.

Mr. Maples (Con): Do your homework.

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman tells me to do my homework, but the policy is established in a European Union treaty, which the previous Government signed. I am sorry to have to make my point so comprehensively, but if the Conservative party opposes the European Union having an autonomous defence capability, why did Chris Patten, the former Conservative party chairman, say in a submission to the European Parliament:

"What we need are credible military forces that can be brought together quickly and in a flexible manner which would allow the European Union to initiate autonomous operations while avoiding duplication of effort within NATO"? (Hansard, 22 Nov 1999, Col 439)

As can be seen in example (4) above, a relevant parallel between parliamentary and theatrical discourse concerns the occurrence of communicative disruptions caused by interruptions. In theatrical performances even apparently unprepared disruptions are usually carefully rehearsed, for

example by having one or several actors/actresses sit among audience members and behaving in a seemingly spontaneous way. Parliamentary interruptions may be perceived as histrionic features, but unlike interrupted speech in theatre performances, they are totally spontaneous and not pre-planned. Consider example (5) below:

(5)Mr. Gordon Brown (Lab, Chancellor of the Exchequer): [...] I have said that I want to make progress. I shall outline the measures that are in the Queen's Speech. Our domestic policy is built on five foundations--stability, employment and no return to the unemployment that we saw under the Conservatives, help and not harm for working families, investing billions more in the public services rather than privatising parts of them and support for engagement in Europe against isolation in Europe. We have made the Bank of England independent--

Mr. Edward Garnier (Con, Harborough): The Chancellor has wasted 15 minutes.

Mr. Brown: I have not wasted 15 minutes. We have discovered from the Conservative party that it has no answers to the central questions of economic policy. [...] (Hansard, 24 Nov 1999, Col 629)

The fact that spontaneous interruptions from fellow MPs are more or less expected in parliamentary interaction is usually confirmed by the relatively tolerant attitude of speaking MPs, who are even prepared to respond to the interrupters' challenges, as in (4) and (5) above. However, more often than not, such interruptions are considered disorderly behaviour by the Speaker of the House, who has the authority to intervene to stop them, as illustrated in (6):

(6)Sir Teddy Taylor: [...] I do not make my remarks as someone who represents a constituency with no farmers; I have plenty of them there.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): The hon. Gentleman will not have many left.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We do not want sedentary interventions.

Sir Teddy Taylor: I assure the hon. Gentleman that there are many farms in my constituency. (Hansard, 24 Nov 1999, Col 654)

In parliamentary exchanges, like the one in (6), the MPs' histrionic behaviour is overlapping with their agonistic relationships.

### 5.2.2. *Parliamentary debates*

The ritualistic openings of daily debates in Parliament share a number of features with the opening scene(s) of a staged theatre play. The sitting of the House each day is opened by the Speaker's procession, during which the cry goes up, 'Hats off, Strangers', and all the waiting visitors (Strangers) remove their hats as a mark of respect. Afterwards the prayers are read by the Chaplain.

A debate can be described in general terms as a formal discussion on a particular topic and which is strictly controlled by an institutional set of rules and a moderator, who in Parliament is the Speaker of the House. According to Factsheet 52, "the style of debate in the House has traditionally been based on cut-and-thrust: listening to other Members' speeches and intervening in them in spontaneous reaction to opponents' views". The turn-taking structure of parliamentary interaction shows that linguistic constraints are paralleled by institutional constraints, as well as by histrionic rituals. This can be accounted for by a number of factors, such as the addresser's and the addressee's commitments and expectations, the specific ideological positions and goals pursued by the addresser and the addressee, the shifting power balance between the addresser and the addressee(s), the symmetrical/asymmetrical and adversarial/non-adversarial relation between the addresser and the addressee.

A particular agonistic parliamentary procedure is for MPs to compete for the floor. In order to speak during a debate in the Commons, MPs must try to 'catch the Speaker's eye'. This can be explained by the fact that MPs may speak only if called to do so by the Speaker. MPs therefore try to attract the attention of the Speaker by demonstratively standing, or half standing, to show that they want to speak, as illustrated in example (7) below:

(7) Mr. Teddy Taylor (Con): [...] My questions are the questions that the Chancellor should have answered. They are important. It is noticeable that on none of them has he been willing to stand up.

Several hon. Members rose --

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the House that the 15-minute limit on Back-Benchspeeches applies from now. (Hansard, 24 Nov 1999, Col 644)

In principle, an MP cannot suddenly intervene when another MP is speaking to the House unless the speaking MP allows it by "giving way". The formulaic phrase 'give way' is used by MPs who want to interrupt a speaking MP, as illustrated in example (8) below:

(8)Francis Maude (Con): We know that tax is up by £40 billion. Now, the Office for National Statistics itself shows that tax has risen in each and every quarter since the Government came to power.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley) rose--

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Maude: I shall give way in a moment. (Hansard, 24 November, 1999, Col 618)

Disruptions of parliamentary proceedings may occur not only during a speech, as was shown in (4), (5) and (6), but also during a debate. Sometimes, such disruptions may be caused by outsiders, for instance by visitors in the Strangers' Gallery, as illustrated in (9) below:

(9)Mr. Gordon Brown (Lab): [...] There will also be a major interdepartmental review of local government finance.

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): The right hon. Gentleman will have noticed that there was a disruption in the Strangers Gallery earlier, and the pensioners who were shouting into the Chamber threw down some blue leaflets because they wanted to ask him a particular question --

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. There is only this Chamber; we cannot speak of places outside it.

Mr. Davey: I am sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Does the right hon. Gentleman think that a 73p a week increase in the basic pension gives senior citizens their promised rightful share in our nation's growing prosperity? [...] (24 Nov 1999, Col 631)



As in the case of the interruptions discussed above, it is incumbent on the Speaker of the House to restore "law and order" when ongoing debates are being disrupted. The motivation given by the Deputy Speaker in (9) reinforces the common understanding that parliamentary proceedings are not taking place for the benefit of an audience of outsiders. As a result, any actions or reactions coming from the members of such an audience are expected to be ignored intentionally. The goal of MPs' interaction does not coincide with that of theatre actors' performance, namely to entertain and to be evaluated by an audience, but to openly carry out an institutional activity which may only be watched by the public at large.

In Parliament it is members of the audience of MPs that happen to interfere with the speaker, whereas in theatre performances the situation can be described the other way round: it is actors enacting particular characters who may address the audience directly, normally in keeping with the playwright's or stage director's indications. An illustration is provided in example (10) below:

(10)Inspector: Now let's see who we've got here. (Looking at the list) Three stokers, two labourers, a van-driver's mate, janitors, street cleaners, a jobbing gardener, painter and decorator, chambermaid, two waiters, farmhand, [...] Who is that horny-handed son of the soil? (The inspector points his torch at different people in the audience.)

Hostess: (Looking into the audience) Medieval historian ... professor of philosophy ... painter ...

(from Tom Stoppard's *Cahoot's Macbeth*, 1980: 59-60)

Unlike parliamentary audiences, theatre audiences do not normally initiate interruptions of or interferences with the actors' performance on stage.

### 5.2.3. *Parliamentary Question Time*

One of the prototypical forms of parliamentary dialogue is Question Time, which is devoted to questioning the foremost representatives of the Government, namely the Prime Minister and/or Government Ministers, by their fellow MPs. The order in which the questions are asked is previ-



ously established by a process of random selection. The Speaker calls the first MP who is to ask the first question. The first question, about the Prime Minister's engagements is always predictable. The addressed Minister is expected to reply, after which the MP is normally entitled to a supplementary question arising from the answer. The Minister answers that as well, and other MPs are then called by the Speaker to ask supplementary questions. Then the Speaker calls the next question, and so on.

Government members are held accountable for their political intentions, statements and actions by fellow MPs. Particularly confrontational is the questioning carried out by members of the Opposition. The sequencing of question-answer adjacency pairs exhibits to a large extent the agonistic nature of parliamentary debates, especially because many of the questions are meant as criticisms and accusations, as illustrated in (11) below:

(11) Mr. William Hague (Con): It is no good the Prime Minister [Tony Blair, Lab] wriggling off the point because he does not know the answer to the questions. [...] Does it not tell us something when the people who know the Prime Minister best say that he does not listen, that his policy is utterly cynical and that he is interested only in publicity? Have they not got it in one? (Hansard, 14 February, 2001, Col 307)

In spite of their interrogative form, Hague's last two utterances are not meant as questions, but as indirect, but powerful, statements. What he wants is to embarrass the Prime Minister by attacking the latter's earlier declarations in order to argue that "it [the Prime Minister's not knowing the answer] tells us something" and that "they [Labour] have got it in one". Two essentially histrionic aspects of parliamentary questions like these are their challenging force and their ironical tone. Many of these questions belong to the category of rhetorical questions because their functions are primarily rhetorical force-enhancing, and not information-eliciting (Ilie 1994).

In parliamentary debates rhetorical questions are frequently used as strategies of singling out, attacking and counter-attacking political adversaries, whereas in theatre plays rhetorical questions have a wider range of uses intended to reveal the characters' own feelings and psychological evolution, as well as their relations to each other. In theatrical dialogue, rhetorical questions add to the dramatic impact by emphasising the tension between the characters on stage, the interrelation between these characters and the particular onlooking audience, as well as between the

first two participant categories and a universal audience (that the playwright had in mind). Consider the illustration in (12) below:

(12) Bernard: Why does scientific progress matter more than personalities?

Valentine: Is he serious?

[...]

Bernard: [...] We were quite happy with Aristotle's cosmos. Personally, I preferred it. Fifty-five crystal spheres geared to a God's crankshaft is my idea of a satisfying universe. I can't think of anything more trivial than the speed of light. Quarks quasars - big bangs, black holes - who gives a shit? How did you people con us out of all that status? All that money? And why are you so pleased with yourselves? (from Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*, 1993: 61)

Another rhetorical strategy that occurs in the discourse of MPs is the strategy of surreptitiously introducing controversial comments as rhetorical parentheticals. These parentheticals correspond quite closely to what rhetoricians call parenthesis, "a word, phrase or sentence inserted as an aside in a sentence complete in itself" (Lanham 1991). Parliamentary parentheticals represent instances of rhetorical metadiscourse (Ilie 2003a) used to signal a switch towards interlocutor-oriented, message-oriented, and/or multiple audience-oriented talk, as in (13), or an evaluation of the tone, style and content of other MP interventions, as in (14) below:

(13) Mr. William Hague (Con): The Minister responsible is the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the hon. Member for Neath (Mr. Hain, Lab), who said:

I don't like the idea of this programme, limited or unlimited.

The programme to which he referred was the ballistic missile defence system. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament -- I do not know whether the Prime Minister [Blair] remembers CND, but it certainly remembers him -- said:

we are currently campaigning against American plans to set up a missile defence system. (Hansard, 17 January, 2001, Col 341)

(14) Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): Can I associate myself entirely with the sentiments that have been so properly and well expressed? In terms

of our national transportation policy, if that is not a contradiction in terms, we have chaos on the railways, gridlock on the roads and parliamentary revolts over air traffic control. If the Prime Minister wins a second term, will the Deputy Prime Minister still be in charge of all those things? (Hansard, 29 November, 2000, Col 955)

The discursive functions of parentheticals can be summed up as follows:

By means of parentheticals, speakers adjust their ongoing discourse to the situation, to their interlocutors and to their audiences, as well as to their own end-goals. In doing that, their discourse shifts from the role as speakers to the role as observers and commentators. (Ilie 2003b)

Metadiscursive parentheticals help to situate MPs' standpoints with respect to their own (present and past) discourse, their interlocutor's discourse, and/or other interactants' discourse. For example, they enable the speaker to convey simultaneously self-presentations and other-presentations, as illustrated in (15) below:

(15)Mr. Brown (Lab): The table entitled "Net taxes and social security contributions" - I do my homework, even if the Opposition do not - shows figures of 37.4, 37 and 36.8 per cent. The corrolary - what the Conservatives would have done - is 37.2 per cent, rising to 37.7 and 38.1 per cent. That is the true position of what would have happened under a Conservative Government. (Hansard, 24 November, 1999, pt 7)

Unlike corresponding rhetorical devices used in theatre, parliamentary parentheticals convey information and/or opinions that both speakers, on the one hand, and interlocutors and audience members, on the other, are expected to be or become aware of. Parentheticals are meant to put forward further evidence that reinforces the ideological position and the political authority of speaking MPs in contrast with those of their political adversaries.

The closest counterpart of parliamentary parentheticals in theatrical discourse is the aside. In a theatre play, an aside is meant, among other things, to reduce the distance between actors and the audience and to increase audience involvement. This type of aside is normally included in the script of the play, as part of the author's directions to the actors and the stage director. This is why a theatrical aside is generally defined as a part of the character's discourse that is uttered by the respective actor and

is intended to be heard by the audience, but not by the co-performers on stage, as illustrated in (16) and (17) below:

(16) Ross: My worthy Cawdor! (Exit Ross and Banquo)  
 Macbeth: (Aside) Stars hide your fires,  
 Let not light see my black and deep desires. (Exit Macbeth.)  
 (from Tom Stoppard's *Cahoot's Macbeth*, 1980: 49)

(17) Vera: Fool, is it so hard a thing to kill one's enemy?  
 Prince Paul (aside): This is the ninth conspiracy I have been in in Russia. They always end in a 'voyageen Siberie' for my friends and a new decoration for myself.  
 (from Oscar Wilde's *Vera, or the nihilists*, 1986/1948: 681)

In both examples above, the characters who are uttering the asides, i.e. Macbeth in (16) and Prince Paul in (17), intend to conceal from the collocutors their most intimate feelings, as Macbeth does, or their private reasoning process, as Prince Paul does. The characters' feelings and thoughts are instead revealed to the members of the theatre audience, who are thus enabled to follow the plot without being in a position to intervene or change the unfolding events.

The actors' asides are targeted exclusively at the audience (and not at the other actors), whereas an MP's aside, i.e. parenthetical, may target simultaneously a specifically addressed interlocutor, fellow MPs and/or the wider audience (whether they are in the Strangers' Gallery or in front of the TV). In parliamentary debates, parentheticals assume institution-based rhetorical functions and, as such, they fit the following two definitions best: "a straying from the theme, digression" (Longman 2001) and "a parenthetical comment or remark" (Webster 1996).

Current parliamentary regulations allow members of the public to be present at its debates. Historically, this was not always the case. The right to debate a matter in private is at least theoretically maintained. Should an MP wish a debate to take place in private, s/he was formerly entitled to call out "I Spy Strangers" and the Speaker had to put forward the motion "that strangers must withdraw" without debate. These ritual formulae have been recently replaced by an equivalent and simpler one based on the motion 'that the House sit in private'. For obvious reasons, there is no such option in the case of theatrical performances.

### 5.3. *Participant frames in Parliament*

A useful classification of participants in a conversation was proposed by Clark (1996). A first distinction is made between participants and non-participants. The participants include the speaker and the addressees, as well as others taking part in the conversation but not currently being addressed, i.e. side participants. All other listeners are overhearers, who have rights and responsibilities in it. Overhearers come in two main types. Bystanders are those who are openly present but not part of the conversation. Eavesdroppers are those who listen in without the speaker's awareness. As Clark observes, "there are in reality several varieties of overhearers in between" (1996: 14).

Clark's classification can roughly apply to the House of Commons, which exhibits different types of participants and audiences. The MPs who are taking the floor to address the House, as well as those MPs who are being directly addressed and act as interlocutors, can be regarded as active participants. The rest of the MPs who are not actually involved in the current debate can be regarded as side participants. Other listeners, such as the Hansard reporters, the members of the press, or members of the public at large present in the Strangers' Gallery, can be regarded as bystanders. It seems rather difficult to designate a prototypical category of eavesdroppers in the House. However, the category that comes closest to it is represented by the outsiders, or visitors, in the Strangers' Gallery, since MPs cannot have control over the size of the audience.

In theatre, on the contrary, eavesdroppers represent the most interesting category of characters, i.e. active participants, who are supposed to contribute to revealing to the audience unexpected moves in the development of the plot. Depending on the play, however, even audience members themselves may be symbolically ascribed the role of "official" eavesdroppers with respect to the plot unfolding on the stage.

MPs are involved in a co-performance which is meant to both address and engage (sometimes even co-act with) an audience of MPs as active participants, who are expected to contribute explicit forms of audience-feedback, e.g. questions, responses, interruptions. As far as stage performances are concerned, audience-feedback may occur in certain theatrical experiments or in ritualistic theatre, such as Christmas pantomimes. A prototypical drama has at least two levels of discourse, the author-audience level and the character-character level (Leech and Short 1994/1981; Short 1996). A third, overarching level of discourse is that



between the playwright and the audience. Character talk is embedded in that higher discourse, allowing the audience to 'listen in' to what the characters say. The dramatic frame exhibits a 'doubled' structure which gives rise to the notion of dramatic irony, that typically occurs when the knowledge of some of the characters is less than that of the author and audience at level one, producing tension for the audience as they wonder what will happen when that knowledge is revealed to these characters.

In Parliament there is an awareness of and a tolerance for the audience of outsiders, i.e. others than MPs. But no effort is made to get the onlooking audience's approval or to fulfil the expectations of this audience, which is a random audience that happens to be in the Strangers' Gallery on a particular day at a particular time. What is important for MPs is to consistently promote a political line which meets the general wishes of the voters (as expressed at general elections), to put certain issues on the political agenda, as well as to take desirable initiatives and effective measures. In theatre, on the contrary, the opinions and evaluations of the onlooking audience are given high priority. The end-goal of interacting stage actors is to stimulate and gratify the audience both spiritually and emotionally, by enabling them to experience artistically a fictional world and to discover parallels with the real world.

Like actors on a stage, MPs are impersonating several roles which belong to two main spheres, the public and the private. Unlike actors on a stage, who are expected to suppress their private identity in favour of their characters', MPs are expected to perform in a double capacity, as institutional representatives, on the one hand, and as private persons, on the other, while carrying out their institutional commitments. MPs have to perform publicly for a wide audience according to parliamentary rules, while constantly oscillating between the two poles of their multiple roles, the public one as representatives of a part of the electorate, and the private one, as members of the same electorate that they represent. Consider examples (18) and (19) below:

(18)Mr. Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley): As will be clear from my accent, I, like my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North (Mr. Henderson), will be concentrating on the north-east of England. (Hansard, 24 Nov 1999, Col 676)

(19)Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North): I am grateful for the chance to speak in this debate, because the economy is of central importance to my constituents. I, too, represent middle England. The right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) said

that those whom Labour persuaded to vote for us last time would be the worst affected by the economic measures in the Queen's Speech. There are many of them in my constituency. I recognise in the Queen's Speech a continuation of the economic policies that have greatly benefited my constituents. (Hansard, 24 Nov 1999, Col 681)

Unlike theatre actors who must follow closely a specific script, MPs are free to make spontaneous and unpredictable contributions to the debate, sometimes by literally reacting to their fellow MPs' interventions, as was shown in section 5.2.1. Moreover, MPs can also influence their interactants' subsequent interventions by asking questions that require explanations, by producing new evidence, by calling into question their opponents' statements, etc. The MPs' manifestations of spontaneity are often accompanied by role shifts, as illustrated in (20) below:

(20) Mr. William Hague (Con, Richmond, Yorks): For once, I begin with congratulations--I congratulate the Prime Minister and his wife on their happy family news. In future, when the Prime Minister hears the sound of crying in the next room, it will not be the Chancellor wishing that he had his job.

The Prime Minister and the Chancellor have stated in the House in the past two weeks that the tax burden is falling. Now that the Office for National Statistics has joined a long list of organisations in showing that the opposite is true, who agrees with the Prime Minister that the tax burden is falling?

The Prime Minister: First, I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his congratulations. Secondly, the answer is in the figures that we have published, which were, of course, checked by the National Audit Office. [...] (Hansard, 24 Nov 1999, Col 608)

Hague, the Opposition leader, starts by acknowledging the Prime Minister's private role as a father and a husband, but afterwards switches over to treating him as a fellow MP and a political adversary. It is, after all, the institutional role that takes precedence in parliamentary dialogue and MPs are basically expected to carry out their professional commitments on the "political" stage. In theatre, the characters' different roles (private, social and institutional) acquire varying degrees of emphasis depending on the playwright's intentions.

## 6. Conclusions

The verbal interaction carried out in Parliament is generally associated with political decision-making, whereas the verbal interaction carried out



on stage during a theatre performance is generally associated with public entertainment and cultural education. Like actors, and unlike other professionals, MPs (= members of Parliament) perform out a major part of their work in "the public eye", namely in front of several kinds of audiences made up of politicians and/or laypersons. As instantiations of collective undertakings, parliamentary debates display not only an agonistic interaction, but also cooperative discursive contributions that are orchestrated institutionally and performed histrionically.

It is significant that both terms, parliament and theatre, have three roughly corresponding references, namely a spatial frame, i.e. the place where parliamentary and theatrical activities are carried out (see 5.1), an interaction frame, i.e. the type of activity that is carried out (see 5.2), and, finally, a participant frame, i.e. the category of agents that initiate and/or perform a particular type of activity (see 5.3). These three distinctive frames have been investigated in this study in order to reveal the histrionic and the agonistic features of parliamentary dialogue, as well as relevant similarities and differences between parliamentary dialogue and theatre dialogue.

As far as the the spatial frame is concerned, the physical setting of the House of Commons, with the Government MPs and Opposition MPs facing each other as members of two competing camps, has undoubtedly played an important role in fostering a confrontational tone of debate. No such adversariality is fostered by the physical setting in theatre halls, where placing the stage in front of the audience is meant to include, rather than exclude, their mental and emotional participation. An important temporal element should also be taken into account in connection with the spatial frame. Unlike the dialogue of theatre plays, parliamentary dialogue has no fixed or pre-established duration. The starting times of parliamentary sittings are designated beforehand, but the finishing times are not fixed and are often later. In theatre, all performances of one and the same play are normally expected to take roughly the same amount of time.

Parliamentary interaction can be regarded as a sub-genre of political discourse, which includes a number of rhetorical devices that are adjusted to specific institutional forms of verbal interaction, such as speeches, (see 5.2.1), debates (see 5.2.2) and Question Time (see 5.2.3).

As far as the interaction frame is concerned, several aspects have been found relevant. A major distinction between a theatrical drama and an oratorical debate consists in the latter's agonistic nature. The prospect of

winning, rather than losing, a debate motivates the MPs' competitive spirit and the polarisation of political forces in Parliament. It is precisely these two elements of winning and losing as outcomes of parliamentary dialogue that are missing from the dialogue in theatre.

Another distinction concerns the source and orientation of the two types of interaction. In theatrical dialogue, a playwright's manuscript is performed live, whereas in parliamentary dialogue, a live performance is eventually turned into a transcript, i.e. the Hansard records. MPs can be regarded as rule-followers, rather than as script-followers, like the actors who enact a theatrical scenario on stage. Parliamentary interaction can be regarded as a convention-based and rule-regulated dialogue. Parliamentary rules stipulate and reinforce the MP role hierarchy, the role of the Speaker of the House as moderator, the turn-taking order, the address forms, the tone and style of the interaction.

In spite of their institutionalised rules and conventions, parliamentary interactions display instances of spontaneity as well. However, spontaneous interventions in Parliament tend to be restricted to the interaction among fellow MPs and do not involve the audience of outsiders, i.e. visitors. In theatrical performances even apparently unprepared disruptions are usually carefully planned, for example by having one or several actors/actresses sit among audience members and interacting with them in a seemingly spontaneous way. Parliamentary interruptions may be perceived as histrionic features, but unlike interrupted speech in theatre performances, they are totally spontaneous, and not pre-planned.

Two rhetorical strategies used both in parliamentary and theatrical interaction have been examined more closely, namely rhetorical questions (that are characteristic of both parliamentary and theatrical dialogue) and rhetorical parentheticals, i.e. metadiscursive parentheticals characteristic of parliamentary dialogue, and theatrical asides characteristic of dramatic dialogue. In parliamentary debates rhetorical questions are frequently used as strategies of singling out, attacking and counter-attacking political adversaries, whereas in theatre plays rhetorical questions have a wider range of uses intended to reveal the characters' own feelings and psychological evolution, as well as their relations to each other. The closest counterpart of parliamentary parentheticals in theatrical discourse is the aside. The actors' asides are targeted exclusively at the audience (and not at the other actors), whereas an MP's parenthetical may target simultaneously a specifically addressed interlocutor, fellow MPs and/or the wider audience (whether they are in the Strangers' Gallery or in front of the TV).

As far as the participant frame is concerned, several participant roles may be theoretically comparable in Parliament and in theatre, such as the audience role, although their functions differ significantly. For example, while the speaker's role displays certain expected similarities in the two types of interaction, there are major differences with regard to the nature and goals of his/her message. While conveying their own ideas and disputing their adversaries' ideas, MPs deliver their own messages, i.e. they are their own messengers. Basically, actors are not delivering their own messages, i.e. their own thoughts and ideas, they are primarily the messengers of the playwright, on the one hand, and the interpreters (and thus messengers) of particular characters in the play, on the other.

Unlike actors on a stage, who impersonate other roles than their own, MPs are expected to reveal a role shift between their real-life roles, i.e. institutional and private. MPs are performing publicly for a wide audience according to parliamentary rules, while constantly oscillating between the two poles of their double roles, the public one as representatives of a part of the electorate, and the private one, as members of the same electorate they represent.

In Parliament there is an awareness of and a tolerance for the audience of outsiders, i.e. whose members are others than MPs. But no effort is made to get the onlooking audience's approval or to fulfil the expectations of this audience, which is usually a random audience that happens to be in the Strangers' Gallery on a particular day at a particular time. In theatre, on the contrary, the reception and evaluation of the onlooking audience are given high priority. The end-goal of the performance of stage actors is to stimulate and gratify the audience both spiritually and emotionally, by enabling them to experience artistically a fictional world and to discover parallels with the real world.

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