DOCTORAATSONDERZOEK - DOCTORATS

Kaspar Beelen

Between "I" and "We": Self-representations in parliamentary discourse

University of Antwerp, Department of History, 2014.
Supervisor : Marnix Beyen.

Introduction

Democratization fundamentally changed the form and function of parliamentary representation. From an assembly dominated by a class of notables, parliament evolved to an arena where socio-economic antagonisms became more and more explicitly articulated by parties and their leaders. In "The Principles of Representative Government" Bernard Manin described how deliberation in these representative institutions changed from an open discussion between independent MPs to a confrontation between more or less disciplined party formations. Put differently, the deictic center of parliamentary discourse shifted from an independent "I" to an exclusive "we". Inspired by Manin and others I investigated to what extent parliamentary deliberation in the Belgian "*Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers*" changed in times of democratization by looking at the linguistic behavior of MPs through the prism of pronominal selection. Instead of basing the analysis on theoretical texts or the perception of politics, this thesis studied the transformation of political culture by scrutinizing evolutions in the "daily" discursive practices of MPs from a longitudinal perspective, the years between 1844 and 1940.

Methodologically, the doctoral thesis was conceived as an interdisciplinary (linguistic-historical) investigation into the use of personal pronouns in parliamentary discourse. The need for an interdisciplinary approach stemmed from a certain dissatisfaction with the linguistic turn. Although historians were eager to adopt the term "discourse", and many articles centered on language use in specific historical contexts, there still exists a gap between the priorities of linguists and historians. Starting from this observation, this thesis applied concepts and techniques from different linguistic disciplines – ranging from pragmatics to computational linguistics – to historical data. These different perspectives were compressed into one research goal : to discern how shifts in language use were related to changes in parliamentary representation.

The pronouns "I" and "we" were chosen as the objects of historical-linguistic investigation. Most of the material was obtained from the proceedings of the Belgian "*Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers*", although in some cases a comparative analysis was made between the Belgian and the Dutch lower houses ("*Tweede Kamer*"). In order to discern patterns in the use of highly frequent words in a text corpus consisting of more than 137.000 pages, all the Belgian proceedings were digitized and, in a later stage, published online on www.plenum.be.

Imagining what is "ours"

The first part of the doctoral thesis focused on patterns of identification by analyzing the use of the first person plural possessive pronoun "us" ("*notre*" in French, "*onze*" in Dutch) in combination with nouns. I defined phrases such as "our people" or "our laws" as *points of identification,* the central elements around which the parliamentary community imagined the national "we".

In both the Netherlands and Belgium a shift could be observed from abstract, juridical patterns of identification to more democratic motives. During the nineteenth century, the national "we" was mostly anchored in "*le pays légal*" ("our laws", "our institutions"). Nineteenth-century parliamentary politics was characterized by a rational culture of deliberation in which MPs had to appeal to juridical, legal points of unity in order to convince the bystanders and survive the "trial by discussion". Around the turn of the century, when in Belgium the Beernaert-government introduced universal plural suffrage, the use of the possessive pronoun signaled a growing orientation to "*le pays réel*", expressed by the more frequent occurrence of phrases such as "our people", "our workers" etc. In both countries the deputes began increasingly underlining the democratic identity between the representatives and those represented, putting "our people" instead of "our Constitution" at the center of the national "we".

Although at first sight the same tendencies characterized the use of the possessive pronoun "us" in the Belgian and the Dutch Parliament, a contrastive analysis pointed to significant discursive differences in the way the nation was imagined in parliamentary rhetoric. In Belgium, references to "our people" or "our fatherland" were less likely to occur with high frequency, while they played a very prominent role in the speeches of Dutch MPs. The overall pattern suggested that in Belgium a feeling of national belonging remained more restricted to the legal level. Moreover "our People" existed mainly as a subnational point of identification, in the sense that it referred to the Flemish and not to the Belgian people. In the Netherlands these expressions proved to be less problematic and were used frequently.

The results tie in with recent historiography that underlines the "tragically modern" character of Belgian political culture. Disappointed by the authoritarian rule of Willem I, the revolutionaries of 1830 searched for freedom in a solid constitutional framework that deliberately denied the state leverages for nation building. Politics focused mostly on the contestation of a legal framework and less on the creation of national homogeneity. Belgian deputes predominately understood national unity in terms of legal unity, but when democratization put "the people" more and more in the center of politics, the lack of homogeneous extra-parliamentary points of identification became more and more apparent as they were quickly claimed by subnational forces. The relative absence of a "we, the People" in Belgian parliamentary discourse, explained partly why democratization at the end of the nineteenth century proved to be one of the first crucial steps in the disintegration of the unitary state.

From "I" to "we"

In the second part of the thesis, I investigated to what extent a shift from an "I" – to a "we" –centered deliberative culture did occur in the Belgian "*Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers*"? Manin's observations were partly confirmed by my analysis. After 1893 and 1919, when the electoral system was reformed, the use of the first person plural increased significantly. Still the frequency of "I"-statements remained more or less stable over the studied period and even showed a slightly upward tendency.

The "I" remained by far the most important discursive actor and instead of resolving into a "we", the political "ego" became more expressive. What changed was the way in which representatives articulated their individuality. From a Goffmanian perspective, their speech acts consistently narrowed down their "negative face" or freedom of action. During the nineteenth century the frequency of mental state verbs such as "*croire*" and "*penser*" systematically decreased. "*Je pense*" and "*je crois*" signify commitment to a proposition but leave room for deliberation by specifying the personal point of view of the claim. In this respect they belong the most "deliberative" class of first person expressions as they leave room for negotiation.

While these deliberative phrases were decreasing in frequency, "I"-references embedded in discursive processes ("*je dis*", "*je demande*") were on the rise. The same was true for cognitive processes that signified a higher degree of epistemological certainty ("*je sais*") or stronger emotive commitment ("*je veux*", "*je tiens à*"). All of these combinations left less room for negotiation and on a metadiscursive level parliamentary language resembled more and more written discourse. The political "I" moved from a "negotiator" to a "writer" and instead of deliberation, the expression of a fixed opinion gained in importance. Although these findings partly confirmed Manin's conclusion, they warned against overemphasizing the influence of parties on processes of identity formation. Despite the increase of collective forms of identification, parliamentary debates remained principally a discussion between individuals. Also, the transformation of the parliamentary "ego" was part of a longitudinal process, which started in the middle of the nineteenth century, well before the introduction of universal suffrage.

The pronouns of power/The power of pronouns

Besides explaining how pronominal selection changed over time, I also studied how function words like "I" and "we" were structurally embedded in the parliamentary debates, by examining how they related to the ideology or the power status of the speaker. Previous research has suggested that pronominal selection often correlates with specific attributes of the speaker, such as gender, age or social status. In the context of parliamentary debates however, only the power status of the representative significantly correlated with certain pronominal patterns. MPs belonging to the parliamentary majority used the first person singular significantly more, especially in combination with mental state verbs such as "*je crois*" and "*je pense*". Closer inspection indicated that MPs with more institutional power left more room for negotiation when stating their personal opinion, thereby displaying greater respect for the negative face of the speaker and the audience. In parliament, politeness and power seemed to correlate positively.