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Abstract

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Parliamentary talk, despite its central place in politics, has not been the focus of many qualitative studies. The present study investigates how parliamentary talk emerges in a dialogue between different arguments in the parliament. At the same time, this is a study of politics, of how human interaction gives birth to laws that regulate life in two contemporary democracies, Slovakia and Poland. It provides a close-reading of two political debates: on the state language in Slovakia and on gender parity in Poland.

This study draws on hermeneutic and semiotic thinkers such as Gadamer, Bakhtin and Lotman to elaborate a dialogical understanding of language that can provide the basis for a method of textual analysis. The dialogical understanding of language emphasises that text and talk must be studied in the context of an interaction. The unit of analysis is a pair of utterances, a question and an answer. Until an utterance has been interpreted, it carries only the potential of meaning; its meaning is materialised by the responses it receives.

The study further argues that conversation analysis and its tools can usefully be applied to the study of political debate. The method provides for the analysis of the dynamics between micro-scale interaction in the parliament and the macro-scale dynamics of culture. These dynamics assume two different forms that Lotman termed as “translation” and “explosion”.

The study shows that parliamentary debate is characterised by a constantly evolving topic of discussion, namely that the meaning of the bill at the start of the debate and at the end of the debate are really two different bills. This is not because the content of the bill has undergone changes, but because in the course of the debate, the bill has generated new cultural connections. Casting a vote in support of the bill does not approve just the bill itself but a whole set of interconnected political, social and cultural values—what Lotman approached as the semiosphere. This study suggests Lotman’s cultural semiotics can provide for “imperfect hermeneutics” that is sensitive to the dynamic and contested nature of tradition in politics whilst acknowledging the inevitability of culture in mediating political talk.

Keywords: language, dialogicality, parliamentary talk, Mikhail Bakhtin, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Yuri Lotman, Poland, Slovakia

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