

Interjections inside [and outside] Parliamentary Debates

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1. This is a talk about interjections. However, I am going to start with something totally different: office work. One could say: invisible work as well. My few remarks on this are based on just a month of fieldwork.



2. I recently started my research on the MP's offices. How, I ask, do the offices and their teams and workers contribute to the parliament in general and to legislative processes in specific?

The office-days and -weeks (ordered in electorate-weeks and plenary-weeks) entail various **operational demands** ranging from isolated acts to extended, pursued, and often interrupted sequences. The following classification can show how parliamentary work is distributed temporally and personally:

- a) The office hours are filled with countless **routine operations** such as archiving incoming information, answering a local citizen's request, or inquiring into a more or less urgent matter by phone. The clerk carries out the necessary work routinely without the MP getting involved at all. I was impressed by the speed and agility of the office-workers to tackle all these bits and pieces; how they freed themselves especially when they were snowed under with work.
- b) **Work sequences** are interrupted by these routine executions. The office workers learn to continue with a task after having been interrupted several times. A work sequence includes several operational steps in order to be completed: like collecting questions for a minor interpellation or putting together the weekly email-newsletter.¹ The clerk carries out the work by informing and, at times, by consulting the MP and/or specialized fractional subject specialists. A task often accompanies the clerk during a day or two, some even a week or two.
- c) An **extended project** involves various sequences and a strategy to direct them. The project integrates past performances and future expectations. The project necessarily involves the MP and, at one point, a fraction. The strategy may culminate in a position paper, a legislative initiative, and/or public campaign. After all, the MP and some of his or her colleagues serve as initiator. During my stay in the first office, there were no projects going on whatsoever. The clerks only referred to some taking place elsewhere, such as in the office that I am going to visit next.
3. The heuristic classification resembles practical orientations of the members including the necessary techniques of memorizing and recall, planning and continuation. The levels/extensions of work find their expression in a **series of selections**.
- The clerk excludes most incoming messages as irrelevant, wrongly addressed, repetitive, etc. – and she does so after a brief, fleeting glance

¹ From the statistics: "In the electoral term from 2005 to 2009, the Members of the Bundestag put 12,789 written and 2,703 oral questions to the federal Government. More than 14,000 printed papers were discussed in the Bundestag, 616 laws were adopted, and there were 233 regular plenary sittings."

at them. However, a lot of messages are collected, ordered, and dealt with one after the other later on. The office workers are happy once they get rid of all this routine stuff that is of little topical interest.

- Some of these bits and pieces may as well relate to an ongoing work sequence: an awaited answer, some missing information, a potentially important contact. The same is true for the operations. What looks like routine office work might be an interim step or even the completion of a whole sequence, such as inquiring into a study that was quoted by an incoming 'lobbyist' report.

- Some topical sequences are archived, while others (and all the related drafts) end up in the bin. In turn, a sequence may as well add to a larger project aiming e.g. at a legislative initiative and/or political campaign. Some information may enter a plenary speech or a program paper. Most will not even make it into the MP's newsletter.

The MP fully delegates all the cleanup work (1), while delegating steps in more complex sequences (2) according to her special areas (her seats in standing committees "traffic" and "interior affairs"). (3) Some routine work is only completed jointly such as formulating press messages. For most operations and sequences, the MP – although she remains "the principal" – is no more than the 'return address' for outgoing letters, emails, and telephone calls. How, we can ask contrary to the political scientific literature², does the MP remain involved in what her office is producing.

All this in mind, MPs' offices may differ in their involvement in and ability for strategizing. My MP explained in a recent interview, that she would share my view about the absence of long-term orientations. This is why she is going to develop a general and an operational strategy in October, soon after her first anniversary. The whole office will meet with a political consultant in order to discuss a long term strategy for the

² Impact or "Einfluss" is rarely specified. What is it and why would it be allocated to individuals (not to groups, hierarchies, or positions)? See Susan Webb Hammond (1996) "Recent Research on Legislative Staffs", *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, XXI, 4, November. See as well Helmar Schöne (2010) *Ungewählte Repräsentanten? Aufgaben, Selbstverständnis und Karrieren von Fraktionsmitarbeitern im Deutschen Bundestag*. In: Klemens H. Schrenk und Markus Soldner (hg.) *Analyse demokratischer Regierungssysteme*. VS-Verlag.

office (focusing on the next election campaign). So far, she wanted to get to know how to run the office, how she and her three (out of three) female assistants work as a team, and how much would be doable at all.

4. This first broad distinction of the MPs'/staff's background activities seems somehow unconnected with the debates and fights in the plenary sessions. Interjections, in particular, seem unconnected to these routine grounds of professional, political work. Accordingly, the mainly discourse analytical research on interjections³ does not draw on ethnographic insights of how the public contributions come about. The research on interjections in parliamentary debates can be ordered according to this double nature of interjections:

- a) Interjections serve as **indicators of a lively debate** and, in general, of a functioning democracy. The politicians fight for their ideas and engage with the adversaries' opinion. In this wisdom, vice-chair of the Bundestag concluded at the end of a debate at 0:52 on the 16.9.1999:

"I would like to thank all colleagues, who stayed until now (...) for their patience and, also, for their passion by which they delivered their interjections."

The current vice-chair said in interview on the 1st March this year:

"I am a fan of interjections that cause a dialogue proper... Debate means, to relate to the previous speaker and on contributions that occur during my own speech."

The same commendation can be found in newspaper essays or in researchers' comparison of the debate-friendly or unfriendly architecture of parliamentary buildings; or in historical comparisons of plenary sessions (sophisticated vs. boring) and the politicians' craft (rhetoricians vs. technocrats). In sum, they serve as part of the institutional self-description. Accordingly, plenary debates are not just series of scripted speeches, but contingent events.

³ Scholars typify interjections by their *content* (personal attack, material critique, adversarial blame), *style* (aggressive, humorist, standard), or *interactional status* (provocation and reaction; provocation ignored). They study how (types of) interjections are distributed along the interjectors' gender, fraction, status, etc.

- b) Interjections serve as well as indicators for the political situation, both thematic-wise and personal-wise. They can do so even in the case of their absence. And they can do so, even if just rudimentary. Two examples from the press:

"Only one MP of the coalition, the liberal democrat Jörg van Essen, did – according to the protocol – defend the environment minister against verbal attacks of his pre-predecessor, Jürgen Trittin from the Greens. Trittin shouted out: "Dear Mr Röttgen, one can be wrong of course, but putting forward an unconstitutional law on purpose, that's just not done Mr. Minister...." Only Jörg van Essen interjected "embarrassing" in Trittin's direction. The members of the CDU/CSU remained silent." (FAZ 17.9.2010)

The Greens are leading the protests against the rail-project "Stuttgart 21" as well. ... "The greens are always for the rail system, but if it's about a new train station, they are against it." Accompanied by sarcastic yells of the fraction leader of the Greens, Jürgen Trittin ("not station, underground-station"), the chancellor explained that she would like to start a "big debate about the country's potentials". (FAZ 17.9.2010)

In this line, interjections inform interpretations of a debate. They show how the parliament 'thought' about this or that issue or person.

- c) Interjections – as interruptions or hecklings – have a rather **bad reputation**. They live an illegitimate life since they do appear while they are not allowed to. No safe, legitimate ground is preserved. No turn is taken in full with all its inherent obligations. Interjections seem the *illegitimate child* of a contribution proper. They gain legitimacy only, when the latter lacks legitimacy itself: if a speech is too long, monotonous, far away from the thematic agenda, etc. Interruptions might be, in such cases, a *regulatory mechanism*, which is generally assigned to certain authorities (such as teachers, judges, or chairs).
5. How can we connect these fleeting plenary utterances and the steady workings of the institution? Is there any connection apart from their close proximity in the parliament-building? This question may utilize the basic distinction of the parliament as **theatre and machine** (see YARON EZRAHI's *"The Theater and Machine as political Metaphors"*). I use these

two metaphors as points of departure in order to relate invisible work and interjections.

When preparing for this talk and throughout my ethnographic fieldwork in the German parliament, I was astonished about the omnipresence of interjections in the parliament's natural data: Interjections are shown in the protocols, as historic quotes in pieces of art, as documents of famous debates. They are used and reappear in classical interpretations of the Grundgesetz, in reconstructions of what the "father's of the Grundgesetz" really wanted. Interjections seem the natural siblings of the parliamentary speeches and the plenary deliberation. Only exceptionally, one would find protocols that do not entail any interjections whatsoever. They represent speeches that were never given, but that were just handed in on paper. They are put to the protocol. These protocols are printed italic.⁴

The omnipresence is an expression of the efficacy of the parliament that produces masses of paper: minutes, protocols, reports, etc. The MPs' words are turned into accessible, lasting archival entries (see the webpage www.bundestag.de), which may signify their central material power position. Interjections are symptoms of this institutional adoration of the MPs' words – a certain manifestation of what JACQUES DERRIDA called "archive fever". The democratic institution seems proud of it.

But rarely, it is asked, how interjections on stage are linked with the parliamentary machinery.

⁴ [See Endre and his literature hint]: memories of a MP who entered interjections into his scripts to make them more natural.



6. One link is obvious or even too obvious: Interjections are made available for us (and for me as the analyzing scholar) by the TV-cameras feeding into the public channel or by the official shorthand-writers⁵ preparing the protocols. The latter sit in front of the speaker and listen to the speech and to the reactions in the plenary hall or chamber.⁶



“Shorthand writers include interjections, as well.” (BT)

⁵ From the facts: “The proceedings at every plenary sitting are recorded by the parliamentary shorthand writers, who can write an average of 400 syllables per minute—faster than anyone actually speaks. Thanks to the shorthand writers, all the speeches and interventions can be read in the printed or online version of the minutes of plenary proceedings only 24 hours after the end of a sitting, including precise descriptions of reactions (prolonged, sustained, or isolated applause, shouts of approval, heckling, etc.) from all the sides of the House.”

⁶ The protocol entails more interjections than the videos of the speeches. The shorthand writers seem to hear more of them than the camera microphones.

The availability is restricted, despite the impressive archive fever. Four classes of reactions appear on this mediated level:

(a) **General nonverbal reactions** as in [*applause or: Beifall bei der FDP und der CDU/CSU*];

(b) **generally identified, collateral comments** as in [*Zurufe von der SPD: Oh!*];

(c) **personally ascribed nonverbal reactions** as in “Beifall bei der LINKEN sowie des Abg. Hans-Christian Ströbele [Bündnis 90/Die GRÜNEN]“;

(d) **personally ascribed verbal reactions** [*Marianne Schieder [SPD]: „Und das ist unbürokratisch meinen Sie?“*]

The short-hand writers obtain an extended range of possibilities to include **whatever audible reaction** on identified statements within the course of the speech. [*This is different, e.g., in New Zealand where only those interjections are written down that manage to cause reactions by the speaker.*]

This range is limited of course: (a) they do not include purely visible reactions such as ‘nodding the head’ or ‘standing up’; (b) the ‘reaction’ requires the location of the reaction at one point within the course of the speech⁷; (c) the speech offers statements that allow for meaningful reaction statement-by-statement; (d) in this way, the interjection extend the ‘relevant’ speech: the protocol aggregates an amount of statements that an/other member/s of parliament did comment on.

Some scholars explain the **amount of interjections** with these wide practices of documentation (*e.g. in the Knesset-study*). MPs are busily interjecting in order to (and because they can) leave traces in the archive. In turn, the absence of interjections is explained by the regular practice of not including them in the protocol as it is the case for most parliaments. As for my observations of committees without these far

⁷ This differs from interjections in standing committees. They would be recorded only exceptionally (especially expert hearings) and often just as a fact *that* there was one. Only officially allowed requests via the microphone would enter the verbatim record.

documentation rules, the last hypotheses do not hold. The members busily interject while knowing that none of this would appear in the protocol.

7. There are a number of **career-stages** that an interjections needs to pass:
- a) An utterance that the recorder does not hear or include: *"Oh!"*
 - b) A quasi-interjection is audible, but remains unidentifiable, such as *"From the SPD: Oh!"*
 - c) An utterance that is recorded and accounted for by an MP's name assigned to it: *"Marianne Schieder (SPD): And this is unbureaucratic you think?"*
 - d) An utterance that is recorded, accounted for, and reacted upon by the speaker: *"- Yes, this is unbureaucratic. It works without application, without much of ado ..."*
 - e) A recorded, authorized, and reacted upon utterance triggers a fully fledged dialogue: *"In our opinion, this would invalidate the bureaucracy claim. (Marianne Schieder [SPD] And the train conductor pulls this simply from his pocket – if he is there at all.) Every taxi driver has to make out a receipt. Where is problem? (Julia Klöckner [CDU/CSU] But there would be 300 people on the taxi!) The third requirement ..."*⁸
 - f) The dialogue would circulate further than just in the archival debate. It would appear on TV, in the news, or in a newspaper article (which happens rarely). At times, dialogues represent the legislative motives in law courts or for a legal assessment of the laws.
8. Are there – apart from the administrative verbatim records - other links between the parliament as machinery and as theatre? A general answer is NO. The interjection, it seems, comes from nowhere. It is performed as a **spontaneous impulsive act**; a minor event that is cut off the other processes that are by the complex bureaucratic and professionalized machinery. This might be one aspect of the interjection that resembles what Victor Turner called – in his book "the ritual process" (1969) - the

⁸ Or another one: "... schon gar nicht (Matthias Weisheit [SPD]: FC Bayern München!) durch eine aufgeblähte Bürokratie. – Ich hatte heute befürchtet, dass wieder ... Ich sage dass, weil Ihr Zwischenruf kam. Herr Kollege Weisheit, Sie haben einen schönen Namen, aber der Zwischenruf ist unverfroren. (Dagmar Freitag [SPD] Rose ist auch schön!)"

“anti-structure”. In what ways do interjections add anti-structure to the parliamentary business? We need to combine machinery and theatre in order to understand:

The interjector turns into a liminal subject that is “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (Turner 1969: 95). I suggest that interjections enact liminal components in the process of legislation. Interjections are liminal in the following respects:

- they “represent the unity and continuity of the community” (Deflem 1991: 14) (*here: the members of parliament that remind each other of ‘their debate’, their standards, their history together etc.*);
- they provoke “reflection on the basic values of their social and cosmological order” (ibid.) [*here: the ‘wrong’ assumptions of the political position*];
- they “simplify the relations of the social structure”. “Between the ritual subjects the socio-structural distinctions disappear in favor of an absolute equality” (ibid.) [*here: the adjacent and disrespectful turns*].

The interjection allows the MP to invoke a sense of communality (especially through humorist or comical reactions) crisscross the hierarchy (especially when backbenchers comment on flagships), to simplify political positions (through us/them-constructions). The interjection is a quick-witted counter-attack. Different to the speech, it bypasses scripts, co-authors, the fractions’ compromises, the colleagues caution etc. Its father/mother is not the carefully preparing representative, but a committed and devoted MP.

9. However, just like the liminal phase and the ritual process for Victor Turner, the anti-structure is to some degree denied by the ways interjections are organized. Due to my relatively brief fieldwork, I can enumerate only a few points that undermine the anti-structure:

- Although spontaneous, the interjection would mobilize a number of points that the office workers would collect in advance and hand over to the MP.
- Positions are spontaneously uttered (waiting for the right moment to throw them in), but they are not new. They rest on positions that have been stabilized during the debates in the leading standing committee.
- Often only those MPs enter injections that are assigned for this due to the thematic division of labor. This could be the spokesperson of a work group or the rapporteur of the legislative process.
- There is an urge to interject because of various reasons: some MPs try their best to appear in the verbatim record (e.g. in order to avoid paying the fine of € 100 for not signing the participation list, or to appear as committed and dedicated in relation to a 'burning issue').

Hence, the interjection is part of a ritual process that includes elements of liminality. In the German Parliament, the ritual process includes a number of pragmatic rules that require recognition in order to deliver orderly intersections:

- There are speeches that pass without interjections: first speeches, so called "Jungfernreden", should not be disturbed by interjections. Not to 'disturb' those who are insecure is part of the parliamentary decorum.
- One would not interject in a speech given by a member of the own fraction or the coalition partner. Reactions here are restricted to applause and other signs of enthusiasm. Interjections are (meant to be) adversarial.
- The interjection is preferably given by the spokesperson on the debated policy area. Other MPs may enter interjections nonetheless: my MP ensured that there is no script or agreement. However: the fraction counts on the enthusiasm and eagerness of a few (who would always through in something).

10. I conclude: Interjections construct the (here: political) *comunitas* that Victor Turner had in mind when studying the liminal phases in a huge variety of ritual processes. In this phase, members of a culture would meet as equals, all bound to the transcendental ceremony. The measure for this equality is free/shared access to the public domain, to the

historical archive (the minutes), to the judicial interpretation (the articulated spirit of the house). In general, this access is far from equally given, which is already implied in the basic distinction of front- and backbenchers. Those from the back would hardly appear as actors in the (important) plenary debate. The rationale is simple: While the right to speak is assigned to just the front figures, back benchers must use these 'grey contributions': this eruptive contribution that allows only for short and immediate reaction. To interject in the plenary debate seems like a short cut, a trick of the trade. Only by doing so, back benchers directly participate - somehow freed from the manifold institutional and fractional constraints. They might experience themselves as full member of the plenary. It is interesting to see that even this 'anti-structure' is under threat from pragmatic rules that turn interjections into values that are again hierarchically distributed. And NO: the interjections on stage have no or only loose connections to the machinery. This is why they are available to the public (better: journalists) for seismographic diagnostics of the plenary's sentiments. The plenary speaks in various voices on various layers!