

The Stenographic Bias: Shaping Formulaic Language in the Swedish Parliament 1920–2020

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What a politician says in the parliament is not always what gets printed. In turning spoken words into printed records, the language changes, often towards formalization. The stenographers play a key role in this linguistic transformation. A spontaneous speech might result in grammatically incorrect sentences, wrong names of laws and authorities, and mistakes in following parliamentary procedures. The stenographers correct such deviations. Their job is to align oral speeches with linguistic norms and parliamentary nomenclature. In this context, the formulaic trumps the personal.

In our paper, we target these formulaic transformations, which we call the stenographic bias. Consequently, we are foremost interested in the procedural phrases governed by the parliamentary logic, and how the stenographers implement this rationality when transferring oral speech into printed records. However, we also pay attention to stylistic changes and other kinds of repeated phrases in parliamentary speeches, such as colloquial phrases, often tied to rhetorical techniques and bound to political positioning. Our analytical work is guided by the following research questions: In what ways are the printed records shaped by the stenographic bias? And what mechanisms are part of shaping this bias?

The paper is empirically based on stenographic guidelines defining language norms and procedural rules, primarily from the 1980s and 2020s, as well as supplemented parliamentary material. To study the formulaic language over time and how language norms and rules affected the printed debate records on the aggregated level, we make use of a recent annotated dataset of Swedish parliamentary speeches from 1920 to 2020. By combining close reading and distant reading we aim to identify and discuss cases and phrases that shed light on the way stenographic norms and procedures have influenced parliamentarians' speeches as they are recorded in the protocols.

Perspectives and previous research

According to Cornelia Vismann, a record preserves an action by writing it down at the same time as it occurs, and this simultaneity upholds the legitimacy of the record. The written word is thus guaranteed by the oral performance, and the act of writing it down makes it true.¹ As Brenda Danet notes, “our constitutive rituals are routinely performed in writing”.² Members of parliament (MP) might debate legislation orally, but its official enactment is a written record. Vismann further describes record-making as a performative fact-producing act: reality is what has been recorded, and to disrupt the veracity of the record you need to prove a discrepancy between the reality and the record. The burden of proof thus lies on reality, not on the record. Following this logic, the reliability of the parliamentary record rests on the ideal of a verbatim regime.³

The importance of the record’s accuracy is partly due to the authoritative force that words can have in the parliament. They resemble speech acts and the idea that words can entail something beyond their semantic meaning. MPs intend something with the words they use: they indicate what they will vote for, eloquently distance themselves from sensitive issues, and use politically loaded words – language practices whose meanings are deeply embedded in their context, including how these are played out physically. In this sense, as put by Quentin Skinner, “words are also deeds”.⁴ However, the verbatim transcript of parliamentary utterances – from speech to text – is more of a cultural fiction than a transparent process. Often, the stenographers need to edit the colloquial language of the MPs into a readable and – somewhat ironically – transparent record. The stenographic practices thus constitute a special mode of discourse production,⁵ or what Danet calls “the transfer of performativity from speech to writing”.⁶

¹ Cornelia Vismann, *Files: Law and Media Technology*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 53–54.

² Brenda Danet, “Speech, Writing and Performativity: An Evolutionary View of the History of Constitutive Ritual,” in *The Construction of Professional Discourse*, ed. by Gunnarsson, Britt-Louise, Per Linell and Bengt Nordberg (London: Routledge, 1997), 13.

³ Vismann, *Files*, 52, 56.

⁴ Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 103.

⁵ Miyako Inoue, “Word for Word: Verbatim as Political Technologies,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 47 (2018), 218.

⁶ Danet, “Speech, Writing and Performativity,” 14.

Sources and data

The speeches held in the Swedish Riksdag are found in the parliamentary records (kammarens protokoll), which comprise two types of sub-records. Firstly, the body record (stomprotokollet) contains various descriptions of activities in the chamber, such as roll-call results, written questions, and sometimes supplements such as committee reports, proposals, and motions. Secondly, the debate record (debattprotokollet) comprises the speeches and is later merged with the body record in the order in which events and speeches occurred.⁷ For our analysis, we use a novel corpus – the so-called Swerik corpus – of all annotated speeches in the Swedish parliament, connecting each speech to its corresponding MP with attached metadata, from 1920 to 2020.⁸ This refined corpus is based on the digitized version of the preliminary records. While this corpus is still under development, it has a 95 percent estimated accuracy for speaker identification since the 1920s. In total, the speech corpora contains some 850,000 utterances, comprising 383 million tokens.⁹

The stenographic bias and the adjustments to the records

It is fairly easy to identify the most frequent formulaic phrases, alluding to the parliamentary work, in the debate records – many of them are among the most common expressions overall. The most common phrases are used when MPs want to move the adoption of (in Swedish: yrka bifall till) committee proposals, motions, et cetera. A few type phrases occur in speech after speech, over several decades. In Figure 1, the trendlines for four such phrases are shown (defined as 7-gram word window, hence seven words in a row). The mechanisms behind the stenographic bias, however, are more difficult to identify. The results of it are seen in the printed records, but to track this bias in action we need to consult other kinds of sources. The language guidelines for the stenographers are one such source.

⁷ Rolf Nygren, “Det svenska riksdagstrycket,” in *Handbok i nordiskt parlamentstryck*, ed. Rolf Nygren (Stockholm: Sveriges riksdag, 1985).

⁸ Absolut the Swerik project see <https://swerik-project.github.io/> (accessed 4 January 2024).

⁹ Väinö Yrjänäinen, Fredrik Mohammadi Norén, Robert Borges, et al., “The Swedish Parliament Corpus 1867–2023,” submitted to the *LREC Conference Proceedings* (forthcoming 2024). The data is based on version 0.10.0 of the Swerik corpus. For more information about the corpus, and to freely download the current version, see <https://github.com/welfare-state-analytics/riksdagen-corpus> (accessed 4 January 2024).

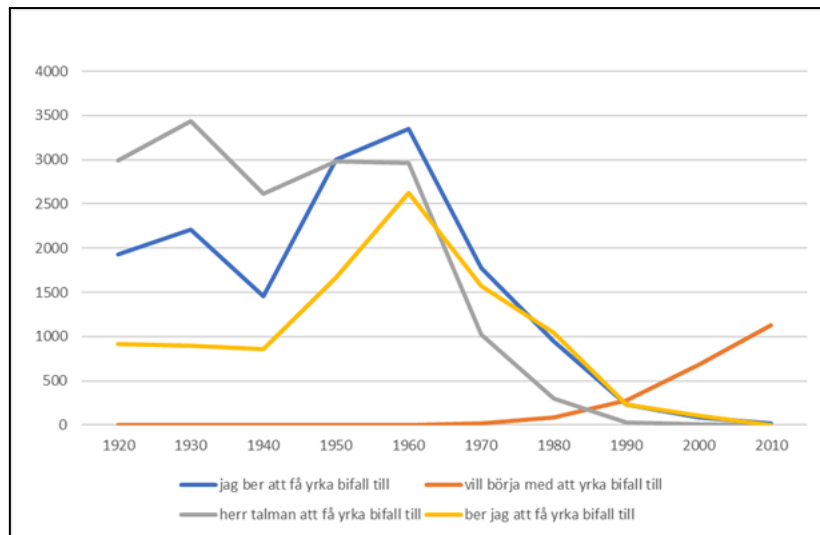


Figure 1. Four common phrases used when MPs move the adoption of a proposal. The trendlines show the total frequency per decade.

The guidelines state repeatedly that the general rule is to be true to the spoken word. In the early 1980s, for example, stenographers were told to “Follow the language of the speaker”.¹⁰ In the guidelines from the early 2020s, it is stated that “The spoken word is followed”, and “In the record, we should write what the speaker is saying”.¹¹ Yet, despite this general rule, most of the recommendations in the guidelines concern issues where stenographers *should* edit and reformulate what speakers have said. All kinds of issues are covered, from interpunctuation, grammar, and references to written sources, to the use of titles and how to deal with idiomatic expressions mixed up by the speakers. That there are differences between oral and written language is recognized throughout the guidelines. For example, in the early 2020s, it is explained that:

The biggest difference between speech and writing lies in the word order. In the spoken language, a word order is often used that does not follow the rules of the written language. In writing, such a sequence of words looks backward. Editing from speech to writing must therefore primarily mean normalizing the word order.¹²

According to the guidelines, the transcriptions should do justice to what the speakers

¹⁰ “Anvisningar för stenografiarbetet,” 1983, section 1.5.4. This folder with language guidelines was borrowed by us authors from the Record Unit at the Swedish Riksdag.

¹¹ “Skrivråd,” “Anförandemanus,” n.p., 2023, The language guidelines from 2023 are extracted from a database that we authors accessed through the Record Unit at the Swedish Riksdag.

¹² “Skrivråd,” “Ordföljd och syftning,” n.p.

have said, but they should also be grammatically correct, clear, and easy to read. The duty of the stenographers is thus to “translate” spoken words into written language.

Since an MP’s speech is often altered by the stenographers, the parliamentarian has the right to go through and adjust the changes. Especially in the nineteenth century, this could cause significant discrepancies, both in terms of style and meaning.¹³ Even after speeches started to be recorded on tape in 1966, differences could still be significant, both for the interpretation of the textual meaning and of the intention of the MP who held the speech.¹⁴ The variable of adjustment adds an extra layer of complexity when it comes to assessing how and why a speech has been changed.

In Figure 2–4, the underlined text extracts in the images (added by us authors) show an example of how a speech – by the Social Democrat Krister Wickman, then Minister for Foreign Affairs – changed from, according to the parliamentary archive, a verbatim transcript (Figure 2) to a version edited and with the changes suggested by the stenographers (Figure 3), and finally to the printed record (Figure 4). In the passage, Wickman complains about too much speculation in the domestic and foreign press about whether a European Economic Community ratification would fail to pass the parliament in West Germany, and the negative consequences this would have for the nation and the political collaborations. The quote below displays the differences between the verbatim (Figure 2) and the edited (Figure 3) transcript, where text in bold indicates words that have been edited and crossed out words that were erased by the stenographers. The differences are here due to grammatical changes, reducing colloquial language, and tightening the text:

Det förekommer, tycker jag, **alltför** mycket spekulationer **om** detta i både svensk och utländsk press. **Men** det är också viktigt att ~~samtidigt som det ser~~ detta allvarliga bakslag ~~det~~ kommer att drabba ~~hela inte bara~~ **inte bara** den tyska nationen, det kommer att drabba det politiska samarbetet i många andra fora också.¹⁵

¹³ Göran Ljusterdal, ”Språkvård i riksdagsprotokollet?,” in *Språkvårdsstudier*, ed. Bertil Molde (Stockholm: Norstedt, 1974); Jonas Harvard, ”Riksdagsprotokollen som medium,” in *Dolt i offentligheten: Nya perspektiv på traditionellt källmaterial*, ed. Staffan Förhammar, Jonas Harvard and Dag Lindström (Lund: Sekel, 2011).

¹⁴ Gunnar Richardson and Karl Axel Wengström, ”Riksdagsprotokollen som historiskt källmaterial,” *Historisk tidskrift* 95, no. 4 (1975).

¹⁵ PM ”Till stenografiutredningens ledamöter”, 18 October 1972, F 8 Administrativa handlingar, stenografi m.m., vol. 5, Stenografiutredningens handlingar med register 1972–1973, Kammaren och kammarkansliet 1971-2011/12 (KK), Riksdagens arkiv (RA); Parliamentary Record (PR) 1972:47, 54.

1972
23/3

Anförande nr 14

utrikesministern WICKMAN:
Herr talman!

Herr talman! Ja, jag vet ordningen för de här debatterna, och så där för skall jag säga vilket jag heller inte behöver, ^{föra} in något ^{och} i debatten, ^{över} att inte herr Bohman behöver beklaga sig ^{över} att replikrätten är uttömd.

Det står i utrikesdeklarationen att det vore ett allvarligt bakslag för avspänningspolitiken ifall ratifikationen skulle falla igenom i den tyska förbunds dagen. Det kan jag gärna upprepa, och det står det står verkligen fast. Jag bedömer samtidigt inte detta som den sannolika utgången av omröstningen. Det förekommer, tycker jag, en rätt alltför mycket spekulationer i detta i både svensk och utländsk press, men det är också viktigt att samtidigt som det ser detta allvarliga bakslag det kommer att drabba hela, inte bara den tyska nationen, det kommer att drabba det politiska samarbetet i många andra fora också. Med det skall inte, det (jag har) sagt vidare, ^{det} vill jag upprepa, det skall ^{inte} dröja för oss att det finns det finns en fortfarande en grundläggande grundläggande trend till avspänning som är baserad på

*OB.
utrikesminister
säg ja med hänsyn
till detta*

1972
23/3

Anförande nr 14

utrikesministern WICKMAN:
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Herr utrikesministern WICKMAN:
Herr talman! Jag känner till vår debattordning och skall därför inte föra in något nytt i diskussionen – vilket jag heller inte behöver göra. Då slipper ju herr Bohman att beklaga sig över att replikrätten är uttömd.

Det står i utrikesdeklarationen att det vore ett allvarligt bakslag för avspänningspolitiken om ratifikationen skulle falla igenom i den tyska förbunds dagen. Det står klart utsagt, och det vill jag gärna upprepa en gång till.

Bakslaget skulle komma att drabba inte bara den tyska nationen utan också det politiska samarbetet i många andra fora. Den trend till avspänning som vi i dag iakttar är baserad på tänkta faktorer. På sikt skulle därför t. o. m. det allvarliga bakslag som vi här riskerar sannolikt övervinnas.

Sedan förstår jag inte varför herr Bohman beklagar sig så mycket över att han blir kritiserad. Det vore väl mera egendomligt om herr Bohman inte blev kritiserad, mot bakgrund av vad herr Bohman anför i denna debatt. Herr Bohman kan ju inte på allvar mena att jag inte betraktar alliansfriheten som ett nödvändigt inslag i svensk neutralitetspolitik. Vad jag sade var, att det inte räcker med en formell alliansfrihet. Naturligtvis behövs det först och främst – det sade inte herr Bohman, men det var väl ett förbiseende – ett starkt försvar. Vidare behövs det -- och det är utförligt redovisat i utrikesdeklarationen – en politik som hos våra motparter i utlandet skapar förtroende för att vår alliansfrihet är allvarligt menad. Och trovärdigheten i vår alliansfrihet skulle, menar jag, gå förlorad vid ett medlemskap i EEC.

Figure 2-4. The three images show how the speech was edited at different stages. The underlined passage (in red) illustrates the linguistic and semantic transformation. The margin notes in the first two images are from the stenographers.

Hence, despite the stenographic edits, the semantic meaning of the passage remains more or less the same. In the printed record, however, the first sentence, about speculations in the press, has been deleted. Although the archival material does not tell the whole story, it is likely that Wickman for some reason erased this

The edited speech passages could be translated to “There is, I think, too much speculation about this in both the Swedish and foreign press. But it is also important that this serious setback will affect not only the German nation, it will affect political cooperation in many other fora as well.”

passage in the adjustment process.

These examples show how language norms and adjustments by MPs pushed speeches toward a semantic reduction and away from what was actually spoken. Another aspect that adds to this reduction is standardized phrases that stem from parliamentary procedures, which are upheld by the stenographers – even if they are not spoken by the MPs.

The guardians of procedural phrases

The speeches given by MPs are not speech acts in the sense that they are legally binding (in contrast to MP votes). However, what they say and how they say it does have a meaning, and for the sake of democratic transparency their reasoning should be traceable. This is especially important in the context of procedural phrases: “For the reader of the record to be able to follow an issue through the parliamentary process, the right words must be used for the right thing”, as stated in the contemporary language guidelines.¹⁶ The parliamentary and governmental catalog of texts – the committee reports, motions, debate records, bills, et cetera – can be understood as a vast and complex network of various semantic references to different documents, which thus need to be named and indexed correctly to be findable. Besides fixing grammatical errors and adapting to stylistically preferred phrasings, this constitutes arguably the bulk of work for the stenographers. For example, if MPs use incorrect or abbreviated names of state agencies, the stenographers simply add the full and correct name in the record,¹⁷ and likewise make sure that committees and reports get a coherent name structure.¹⁸

A similar logic applies when MPs want to move (yrka) the rejection or adoption of a proposal, as well as its related actions. Since parliamentary debates often concern a bill, motion, reservation, or some other issue that MPs then take a stand on – by rejection, adoption, or abstain from voting – the phrases containing the word “move” are among the most common. Despite their frequency, however, move-phrases are also a recurrent problem for MPs to say in the correct formal way. In the language guidelines from the 2020s, the section about moves is sorted under the headline “About proposals for parliamentary decisions, suggestion points,

¹⁶ “Skrivråd,” “Om förslag till riksdagsbeslut, punkter, yrkanden, reservationer och andra formaliteter,” n.p.

¹⁷ “Skrivråd,” “Lista över myndigheter,” n.p.

¹⁸ “Skrivråd,” “Namn på utredningar,” n.p.

moves, reservations, and other *formalities*” (italics added), indicating that such phrases have a parliamentary logic built into them. This section of guidelines is also among the most lengthy and detailed, which further indicates the scope of stenographic rephrasing. In fact, at the beginning of this section, it explicitly says: “This guideline lists things that speakers often get wrong and that we should edit”, in order to “make the parliamentary process more understandable for the reader of the record”.¹⁹ Three examples of common mistakes related to such formal phrases are listed below, with the suggested guidelines for editing:

Before editing: “I move the adoption on” (jag yrkar bifall på).

After editing: “I move the adoption of” (jag yrkar bifall till).²⁰

Before editing: “I move the adoption of the committee report” (Jag yrkar bifall till utskottets betänkande).

After editing: “I move the adoption of the proposal in the committee report” (Jag yrkar bifall till förslaget i utskottets betänkande).²¹

Before editing: “The Left Party has placed a committee initiative in front of the Committee of Finance” (Vänsterpartiet har lagt ett utskottsinitiativ i finansutskottet).

After editing: “The Left Party has proposed a committee initiative in front of the Committee of Finance” (Vänsterpartiet har föreslagit ett utskottsinitiativ i finansutskottet).²²

As indicated earlier, if you study the most common phrases in the parliamentary vocabulary you quickly notice that the used language is very formulaic and bound to the procedural workflow of the legislation process. The four frequent phrases in Figure 1 relate to the two first edited examples above (yrka bifall till). The stenographers thus make sure that such phrases do not deviate from the procedural

¹⁹ “Skrivråd,” “Om förslag till riksdagsbeslut, punkter, yrkanden, reservationer och andra formaliteter,” n.p.

²⁰ According to the guidelines, MPs should differ between how they articulate adoption and rejection (yrka *bifall till* vs. yrka *avslag på*).

²¹ Since a committee puts forward proposals, MPs should move the adoption of proposals and not for the report (or the committee) itself.

²² According to the Swedish parliamentary rules, a committee can put forward a committee initiative while a party only is allowed to put forward a *proposal* to a committee initiative.

logic. Studied together, the top list of the 100 most common phrases (e.i. 7-gram word windows) and the language guidelines indicate how the stenographic bias is implemented in the printed records. The procedural rules of the legislation process can here be understood as a mechanism that is part of shaping the stenographic bias, pushing the parliamentary language toward another kind of semantic reduction: repetitive procedural phrases.

While move-phrases are very common they are decreasing over time. In fact, as shown in Figure 5, the relative frequency based on the total count of each move-phrase found in the top 100 overall common phrases, the share shrinks from above 80 % in the 1920s to below 30 % in the 2010s (and down to 12 % in the 2000s). At the same time as move-phrases decrease, other expressions enter the top 100 common phrases. In particular, phrases containing words like “think” (tycker) and “believe” (tror) increase over time, as displayed in Figure 6. These phrases often emphasize things that MPs argue are important and are formulated in various similar ways, for example, “I think it is important that” (jag tycker det är viktigt att), “I think it is extremely important” (jag tror att det är oerhört viktigt), and “I think it is good that” (jag tycker att det är bra att). These phrases have less to do with formulaic procedures connected to the legislation process. Rather, they signal how everyday parliamentary rhetorics get more popular in the MP lingo, which does not necessarily have anything to do with the stenographic bias.

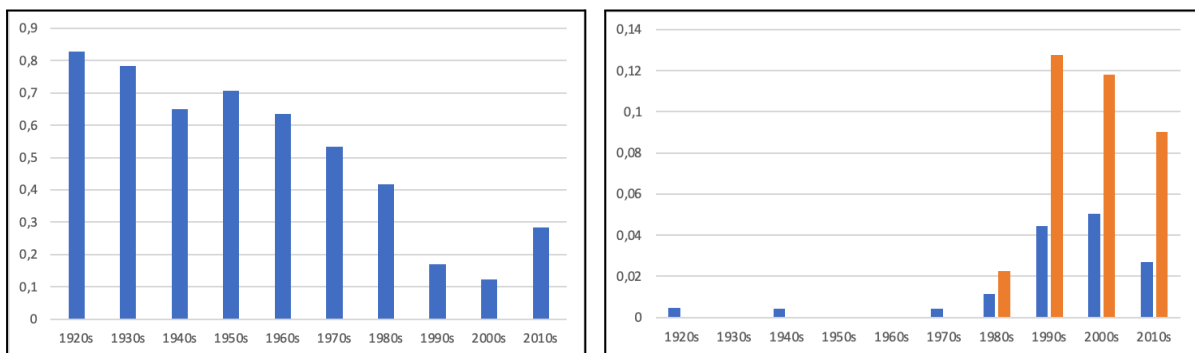


Figure 5. The proportion of the total count of each move-phrase (yrka) found in the list of the 100 overall most common 7-gram phrases for each decade. **Figure 6.** The proportion of the total count of each think-phrase (tror) in blue, and believe-phrase (tycker) in orange.

Resistance to the stenographic bias

The Riksdag Act does not explicitly state that MPs should direct their speeches to

the Speaker of the Riksdag, rather than other MPs part of the same debate. Still, when several party leaders addressed each other directly in a debate in 2022, the Speaker interrupted:

I would like to remind you that according to Swedish parliamentary tradition, the speaker formally addresses his speech directly to the Speaker of the Riksdag and thereby indirectly to the members of the chamber. This means that direct address between the speakers, such as saying 'you' [Swedish: du, ni] to each other, should not occur.²³

The frequencies of “you” (du) in the protocols, however, tell another story. Occurrences were low up until the 1970s and became gradually higher in the following decades. The so-called you-reform in the late 1960s, establishing “you” (du) as an accepted way of addressing individuals also in formal contexts (your=ni),²⁴ had a marginal effect on speeches in the parliamentary records, if any effect at all. Yet, in the early 2000s, there was a dramatic increase, as displayed in Figure 7, from 287 cases in 2000 to 4075 cases in 2006.

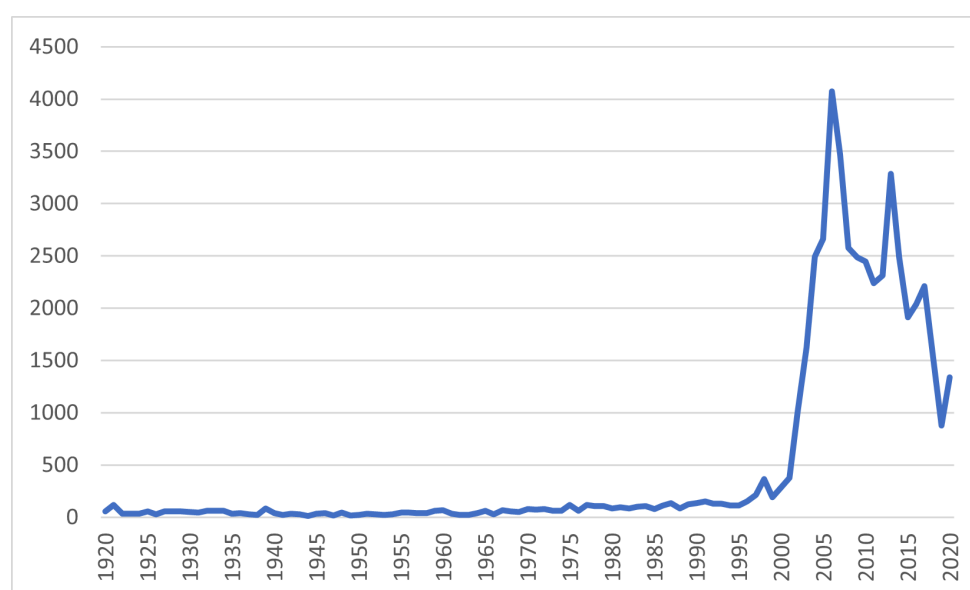


Figure 7. The total frequencies of “you” (du) in the parliamentary records, 1920–2020.

In the stenographer guidelines from the early 1980s, the direct address using “you” was not banned, but stenographers were advised to consult with the head

²³ PR 2022/23:14, 24.

²⁴ Ulf Teleman, *Tradis och funkis: Svensk språkvård och språkpolitik efter 1800* (Stockholm: Norstedts ordbok, 2003).

stenographer from case to case. The guidelines from the 2020s – in use when the Speaker of the Riksdag made his remark in 2022 – notice that many MPs break the rule and address each other using “you”. The guidelines state that “you” could be used in the protocol, as long as it is clear who is being addressed. This is especially important if “you” is used directly after the mandatory initial address, “Madam/Mister Speaker”.

An episode from a debate between party leaders on the 11th of October 2006 can be used to illustrate the difficulties of turning speech into text. The leader of the Center Party had referred to statistics on rape victims. The leader of the Left Party replied that the figure she had mentioned was wrong. This is his speech introduction in the printed record: “Mister Speaker! The figure has been proven wrong. You refused to appear on a radio program where it was discussed”.²⁵ In the video recording of the debate, we see the Left Party leader pointing at the Center Party leader when he says “You refused...” This is natural in oral contexts. A text, however, is always decontextualized in this respect. As Walter J. Ong once phrased it: “To make yourself clear without gesture [...] you have to make your language work so as to come clear all by itself, with no existential context.”²⁶ Moreover, Delphine Gardey notes that this is a challenge that parliamentary stenographers have battled with at least since the late eighteenth century, with different degrees of success.²⁷ In the record, for example, the party leader’s visual clue was left out, and read in isolation it can be interpreted as if his accusation was directed towards the Speaker and not his opponent in the debate. This confusion is what the guidelines for the stenographers are meant to prevent. Still, many instances of “you” have slipped through.

Most cases of “you” from the 1920s to the 1970s do not refer directly to other MPs part of the debates. Instead, “you” appears in stories and sayings refereed by the speakers, as in this proverb quoted by Prime Minister Olof Palme in 1969: “You should not answer fools when they speak foolishly, or you will be just like them”.²⁸ In the 1980s, the internal policy concerning the use of “you” became more liberal, at least according to the speeches in the printed protocols. Still, not liberal enough,

²⁵ PR 2006/07:8, 19.

²⁶ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982), 104.

²⁷ Delphine Gardey, “Turning Public Discourse into an Authentic Artifact: Shorthand Transcription in the French National Assembly Delphine,” in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 838.

²⁸ PR, Second Chamber, 1969:18, 91. Sweden had a bicameral system between 1867 and 1970, and since 1971 a unicameral system.

according to one MP representing the Green Party. In a handwritten note addressed to the Speaker he stated: "I demand the right to my own words. If I have said 'you' I demand that my speech is recorded in that way. A deliberate censorship is offensive."²⁹ The same MP signed a motion in 1989 with a similar demand: to end the so-called stenographic censorship.³⁰ In the written statement from the committee, where the motion was processed before the vote in the chamber, it was said that the use of "you" would create uncertainties about who was being addressed.³¹ In the debate that followed it was also claimed that the use of "you" would diminish the status of the parliament and the respect for the democratic system. The debate record should therefore reflect "debates at a high level". The motion was voted down.³² A second motion on the same topic was voted down one year later,³³ and a third one ten years later.³⁴ The attempts to change the standards failed, but indicates that the formulaic language, taken for granted by many, could be seen as political by others. When "you" became more frequent in the 2000s, MPs from every party used the address. Still, as shown in Figure 8, MPs from the political left were more prone users compared to MPs representing the right.

²⁹ Handwritten note signed Birger Schlaug (Green Party), ca. 1988, F 8 Administrativa handlingar, stenografi m.m., vol. 6, Om stenografi, 1975–1989, KK, RA.

³⁰ Motion in Committee on the Constitution (CC) report 1988/89:K315.

³¹ CC report 1989/90:KU10.

³² PR 1989/99:40, 65.

³³ Motion in CC report 1989/90:KU36.

³⁴ Motion in CC report 2000/01:KU4.

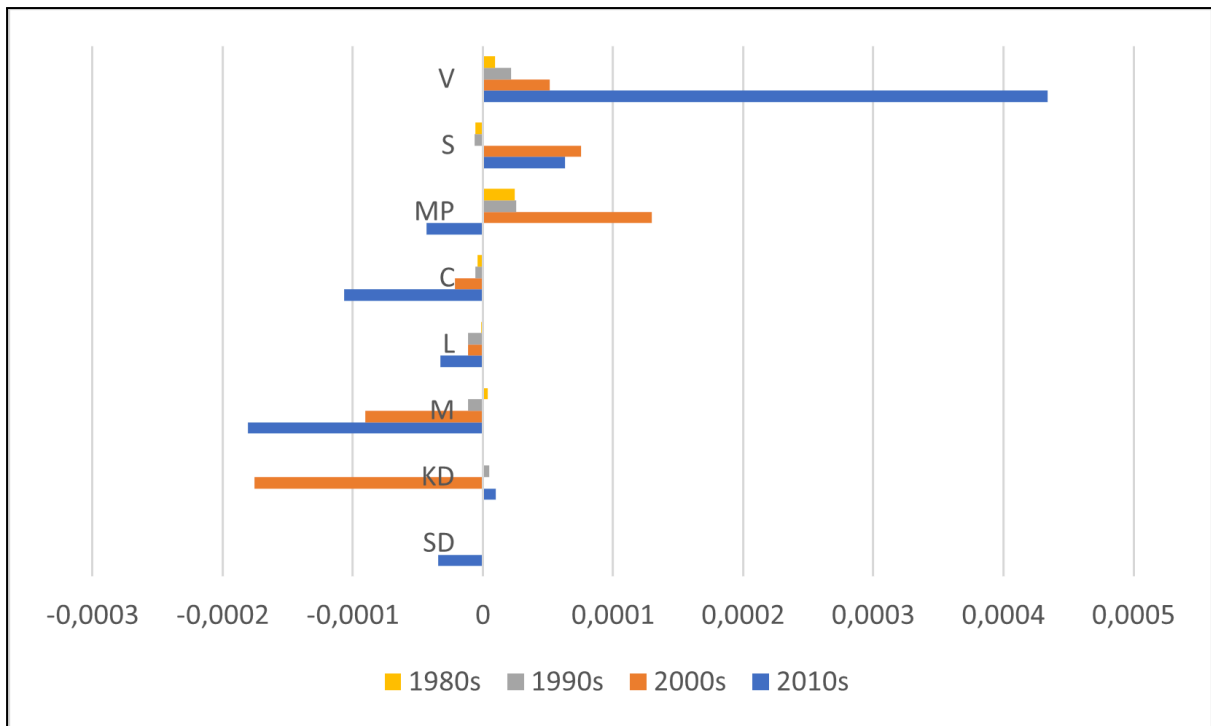


Figure 8. Party based deviation from the mean use of “you” (du) per decade. V=Left Party, S=Social Democratic Party, MP=Green Party, C=Centre Party, L=Liberal Party, M=Moderate Party, KD=Christian Democrats, and SD=Sweden Democrats.

What explains the many cases of “you” in the protocols from the 2000s? There are no traces of a fourth motion or any explicit debate on the topic in the protocols themselves. One possible explanation is that a new Speaker of the Riksdag was elected in 2002. He initiated a rebuilding of the chamber to create more “engaging debates”.³⁵ One of the features of the refurbished chamber opened in 2006 was two lecterns facing each other instead of only one. The physical layout of the old chamber put the Speaker’s desk at center stage, facing the assembly, with the lectern located at the side. In the renovated chamber, the two lecterns were placed in front of the Speaker’s desk (see Figure 9). This setup made it natural for an MP to address the opponent in the other podium rather than the Speaker behind his or her back. When the Deputy Speaker interrupted two MPs engaged in a debate in 2007, she commented that “it sounds a bit like you [ni] have a confidential dialogue when you [ni] constantly say you [du] to each other. We have the jargon in the parliament that we address each other by name”.³⁶ Still, all the instances of “you” were kept in

³⁵ TT, “Riksdagen möblerar om,” *Svenska Dagbladet*, March 16, 2005; Joakim Scherp (ed.) *Riksdagen i tid och rum: Historien, husen och arbetsplatsen* (Stockholm: Sveriges riksdag, 2023).

³⁶ PR 2007/08:24, 62.

the record. The debates had to meet certain standards, but the stenographic practice had become more generous towards the actual oral statements.



Figure 9. Two MPs engaged in “a confidential dialogue” on the 14th of November 2007. The Deputy Speaker is seated to the right. Image taken from the video recording.³⁷

Concluding remarks

While the principle of staying true to the spoken language applies in the parliamentary records, there are different, and sometimes conflicting logics that interfere. The analytical discussion in this paper has revealed three mechanisms that are part of shaping the stenographic bias in the Swedish parliament: (1) stylistic and grammatical language guidelines, (2) the formal workflow of how an issue proceeds through the legislative process, and (3) internal praxis of the parliamentary debates, negotiated by the MPs themselves. The mechanisms are partly interrelated and mainly a result of issues arising when oral statements are turned into written words. The spoken language, also in a formal setting such as the parliament, is often characterized by wordy repetitions, grammatical mistakes, misleading references, as well as tonalities and gestures that make sense to an audience present in the room. A true representation of such a speech in written form would be difficult to accomplish – and hard to read and understand. This is why stenographers polish the

³⁷ https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/webb-tv/video/debatt-om-forslag/vissa-sjukforsakrings-och-pensionsfragor-m_m_gv01sfu3?pos=2009&autoplay=true (accessed 4 January 2024).

language and make the changes needed to produce intelligible records true to the legislative process and the parliamentary praxis. In most cases, this stenographic bias has been non-controversial and has gone unnoticed. Yet, in some cases, MPs have made it a political issue, complaining about and trying to counter the so-called stenographic censorship. The stenographic bias should also be taken into account by scholars using the protocols as sources. Whether one should regard the records as primary or as secondary sources does not have a straightforward answer, and one must keep this source-critical fact in mind in the research process.³⁸ The written words are not always identical to those once spoken.

³⁸ Richardson and Wengström, “Riksdagsprotokollen.”