

# **Black-boxing and the politics of parliamentary oversight in South Africa**

Ian Siebörger and Ralph Adendorff  
Department of English Language and Linguistics, Rhodes University

This is a copy of the author accepted manuscript of this chapter. The citation for the published version is:

Siebörger, I. and Adendorff, R.D. 2015. Black-boxing and the politics of parliamentary oversight in South Africa. In Dedaic, M. (ed.), *Singing, Speaking and Writing Politics: South African Political Discourses*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. 43-66.

The published version can be accessed via the following URL:  
<https://benjamins.com/#catalog/books/dapsac.65.03sie/details>

This chapter is under copyright and the publisher, John Benjamins, should be contacted for permission to re-use or reprint the material in any form.

## **Abstract**

We investigate a parliamentary committee meeting overseeing a randomly chosen state-owned entity, in order to track the processes of knowledge production that occur in parliamentary oversight. The entity's representatives use "epistemological condensation" (Maton 2014:130) to present the information they give to the MPs as incontestable, effectively "black-boxing" it. "Black-boxing" (Latour 1987) is a process which presents knowledge in such a way that very little room is left for questioning it. The committee members also use "epistemological rarefaction" (Maton 2014:130) to open the black box of the presentation and question its contents, challenging the practices of the entity.

**Key words:** black-boxing, parliamentary oversight, Legitimation Code Theory, Appraisal, Interactional Sociolinguistics, recontextualization, semantic density, epistemological condensation, epistemological rarefaction

## **1. Introduction**

A chief function of any national parliament is oversight of the government's executive arm. This parliamentary oversight entails monitoring the actions of government and state-owned entities, particularly in their budgeting, management practices and carrying out of the law (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa 2013). South Africa's first democratic parliament (1994-1999) was regarded by many as a 'golden age' for parliamentary oversight, in which members from different parties worked together in holding the executive arm of Mandela's government to account (Hasson 2010). By contrast, a gradual decline in the quality and rigour of committee discourse was perceived under the Mbeki administration (1999-2008). The Fourth Parliament, elected in 2009 at the beginning of the Zuma administration, was seen by some as signalling a new commitment to strengthening parliamentary oversight in general and parliamentary committees in particular.

However, the Fourth Parliament was not marked by an atmosphere of confrontation between the ANC and opposition parties to the extent that the Fifth Parliament is. In the Fifth Parliament, elected in 2014, this

confrontation has been precipitated largely by the presence of Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) members in Parliament, who have emboldened the opposition with strident protests in the National Assembly (Joubert 2015).

In the Fourth Parliament, before the advent of the EFF, some saw younger MPs from the established parties as leading a charge toward stronger oversight of government. In an interview with one of the authors,<sup>1</sup> an African National Congress (ANC) MP who is referred to as ‘C’ in Section 4 of this chapter expressed this view, saying:

This fourth democratic parliament is much more vibrant, and it’s activist in nature... For a very long time, at least for the past 16 years, you found a contingent of old people coming to parliament. You know, the first time that you’re getting, well not so many, but a couple of young people in parliament, and we bring so much vibrancy in the politics. Because departments would come to committees, and you know, they would just present in a very funny way... When departments come to present to committees these days, they make sure that their work is well-researched, it is balanced. They are taking parliament seriously for the very first time.

However, some opposition party members seemed sceptical as to whether there had been any real change in Parliament’s oversight culture. When asked in 2010 how he thought the quality and tone of debate had changed since the beginning of the Fourth Parliament, an MP from the Democratic Alliance (DA) said:

When you ask whether there’s any difference between this administration and the previous administration, the words are very good; you know, the soundbite is very strong that we’re not going to tolerate corruption and where it is we’ll wipe it out, but yet there are still some problems.

In this chapter, we study the processes by which parliamentary oversight

---

<sup>1</sup> All data collection for this study, including interviews, was conducted by Ian Siebörger as part of his research towards his MA thesis (Siebörger 2012).

was carried out in the Fourth Parliament, in order to investigate what is required for parliamentary oversight to be strengthened. The extent to which this strengthening has occurred in the fourth and fifth parliaments is yet to be researched.

Much of the day-to-day work of parliamentary oversight occurs in parliamentary committees, which review the budgets and strategic plans of government departments and state-owned entities. In this chapter, we report on linguistic ethnographic research on spoken, written and multimodal communication in the committee process of the South African parliament (Siebörger 2012). This research builds on previous work by Wodak (2009) on discourse in the European parliament, and Hibbert (2003) on the South African parliament, in order to give fresh insights into the processes of knowledge production in parliamentary oversight. We outline our theoretical perspective on the role of discourse in parliamentary oversight (Section 2), describe our analytical tools (Section 3), and report on our investigation of the discourse in a committee meeting and the communication difficulties that hinder parliamentary oversight in it (Section 4). We summarise our findings and suggest a difference in understandings of the parliamentary oversight process which might underlie them (Section 5). We then conclude by showing how our analysis has contributed to the building of a tentative model of the role of discourse in knowledge production, and has practical applications for the ways in which parliamentary committee meetings can be structured so as to encourage strong oversight (Section 6).

## **2. Multimodal literacies, recontextualisation, knowledge and power**

Most parliamentary oversight in committees takes the form of presentations followed by question-and-answer sessions. Thus the truly important linguistic units of analysis for studying parliamentary oversight are questions and answers, which have been analysed in political discourse from a range of theoretical perspectives. In her research on debates in the British House of Commons, Ilie (2003, 2006) adopted a rhetorical perspective, showing that these questions are multifunctional: they often give information that attacks the answerer's position as well as requesting information. Others, such as Rasiah (2010), investigating the Australian parliament, and Galasinski (1996), examining British political discourse, have used semantic and pragmatic perspectives to explain how politicians evade questions. While these approaches are valuable, they tend to view individual question/answer pairs in isolation. We offer a fresh perspective which focuses instead on how questions and answers help to produce particular knowledge about the overseen entities and activities.

We view the parliamentary oversight process as a chain of texts, that is, as part of a *genre chain* (Fairclough 2003). Figure 1 depicts a section of this genre chain.

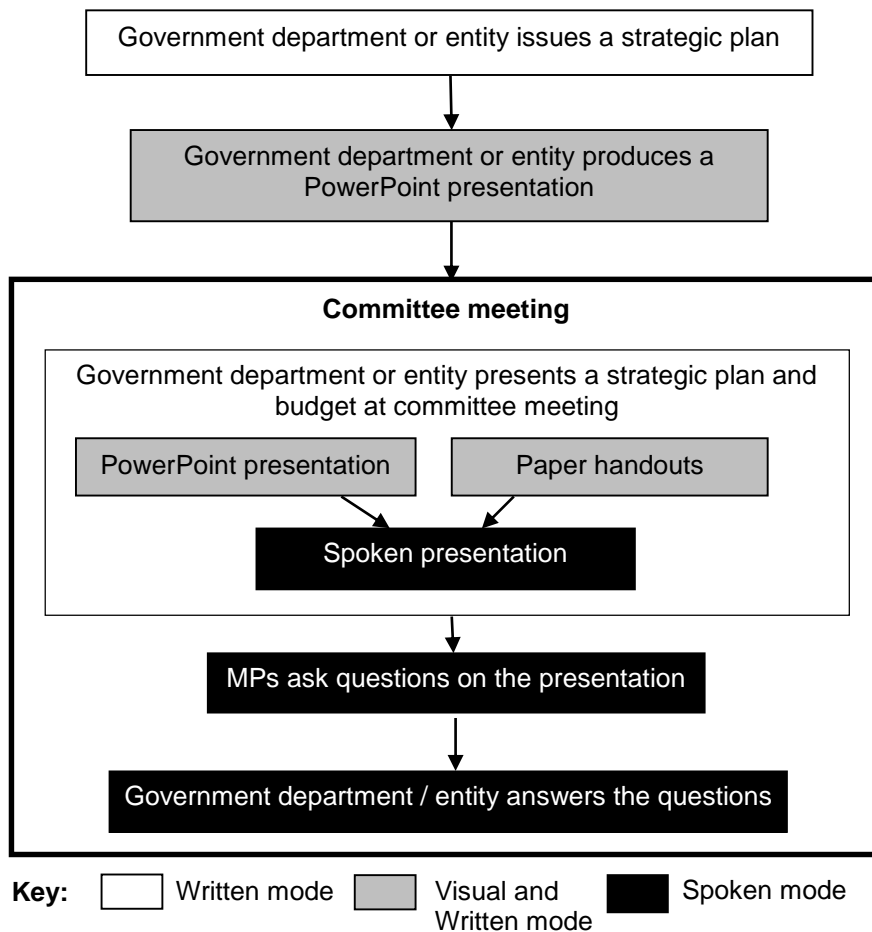


Figure 1: A section of the parliamentary oversight process genre chain

To negotiate this genre chain, all participants in parliament require “multimodal literacies”, since committee meetings constitute a multimodal literacy event, according to theorists from the New Literacy Studies (Pahl and Rowsell 2005). Participants need to rely on a shared understanding of the roles and meanings of the different texts used in this genre chain. When this shared understanding falters, it will often lead to communication difficulties. We analyse these communication difficulties using the concept

of recontextualisation, which refers to the process of taking information out of one context and placing it in another (Bernstein 2003). Communication difficulties often manifest themselves as failures in recontextualisation from one text to another, or in other words, as difficulties with taking information out of the context of one text and placing it in a new one.

Iedema (1999) sees recontextualisation as constituting institutional discourse and as legitimising and institutionalising certain meanings. He shows, using a case study of meeting discourse around the planning of renovations to a mental hospital, that ideas are often recontextualised from thoughts to spoken expressions to written ones, and then on from less 'authoritative' to more 'authoritative' genres. Ultimately, these ideas are presented in what Latour (1987) in his study of knowledge production in the sciences, terms a "black box", a system considered to work so well as a coherent whole that there is no need to open it and pull out its contents to question them; in fact, if one does, one will upset the complex and delicately-constructed system. This process, "black-boxing", is similar to that which underlies government departments' and state-owned entities' presentations to parliamentary committees. However, Latour (1987) explains that recontextualisation can be used not only to black-box information in the way described above, but also to open black boxes and question their content. When a participant in a committee meeting questions a presentation or a report, (s)he is effectively opening a black box in a way which may result in a change in others' perception of the status of the

information in the black box.

Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) provides tools for describing how this process of black-boxing takes place. LCT is a theory describing how knowledge is produced and recontextualised. While it was originally developed within the sociology of education, it is being applied successfully to non-educational contexts, such as youth justice hearings (Martin 2009).

Two important concepts that LCT uses to describe processes of recontextualisation are “epistemological condensation” and “axiological condensation” (Maton 2014:130). Epistemological condensation, which we focus on in this chapter, entails condensing meanings into progressively shorter stretches of text or sets of symbols (Maton 2014). For example, in a laboratory a scientist might take a hundred readings of a particular thermometer in the process of an experiment. She would then produce a graph of fluctuations in temperature over time, which would condense those readings into one single curve. When added to other similar graphs from other experiments, this would give her evidence to propose a theory which condenses all the readings from all the experiments into a single mathematical formula. Meanwhile, axiological condensation is a process of grouping people and objects together in different ways, and then attaching a particular emotion or moral evaluation to each grouping (Maton 2014). A good example of this is George W. Bush’s well-known labelling of a variety of countries opposing his agenda as part of an “axis of evil”.

Both of these processes strengthen the “semantic density” (Maton



2014:123) of knowledge. Semantic density (SD) is the extent to which knowledge is condensed into a relatively small number of words or symbols. Knowledge with stronger semantic density (SD+) tends to be the preserve of specialists, and is typically transmitted through writing, while knowledge with weaker semantic density (SD-) tends to be associated with laypeople and spoken transmission. Figure 2 illustrates how epistemological condensation, our focus in this chapter, strengthens semantic density, sometimes black-boxing content in the process, and how this affects the ways in which knowledge is built.<sup>2</sup> In parliament, we view the representatives presenting information about a state-owned entity to the MPs as building knowledge in particular ways that present their entity in a favourable light.

---

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that not every instance of epistemological condensation can be labelled as 'black-boxing'. Although the term 'black-boxing' is applicable in the analysis presented in this chapter, it has negative connotations which do not apply to every instance of epistemological condensation, which is a value-neutral process.

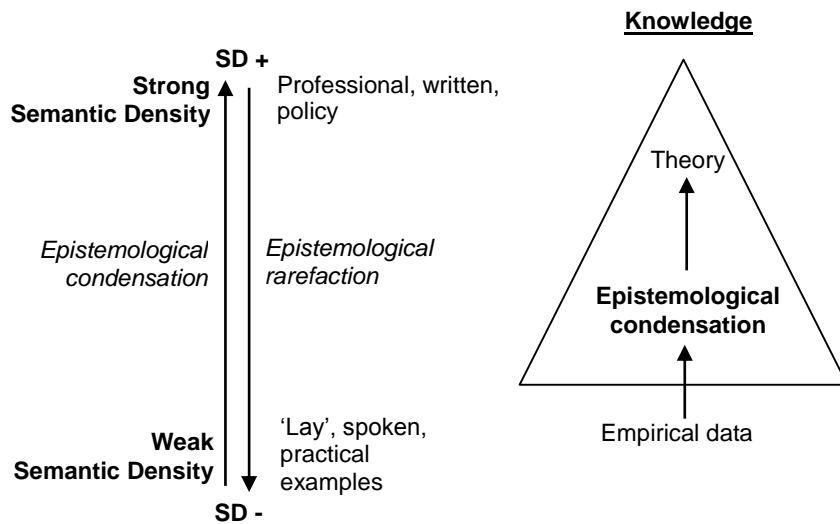


Figure 2: Epistemological condensation and rarefaction in the production of knowledge. Adapted from Maton (2011)

Black-boxing is reversible (Latour 1987), and so it is important to study the reverse of axiological and epistemological condensation, that is from SD+ to SD-. This is named epistemological and axiological rarefaction (Maton 2014). When MPs question what is presented to them, they engage in epistemological or axiological rarefaction, challenging and unpacking the knowledge that presenters are trying to build for them.

Axiological condensation tends to appeal to social power by associating socially powerful individuals and groups with particular clusters of ideas and evaluations. Meanwhile, epistemological condensation is used to generate epistemic power: the type of power that certain knowledge claims have relative to others by virtue of being supported by (apparently) coherent knowledge structures (Maton and Moore 2010). Thus one can speak of

black boxes as epistemically powerful bodies of knowledge that resist attempts to interrogate their contents. Opposing individuals or groups may use epistemological condensation to black-box their knowledge claims in the most epistemically powerful form available to them, and may use epistemological rarefaction to open others' black boxes, thereby undermining their epistemic power.

In the sections that follow, we examine an example of how epistemological condensation is used to black-box knowledge in a budget presentation made by representatives of a small state-owned entity, Agrément SA, to parliament's Portfolio Committee on Public Works. We trace how the committee members use epistemological rarefaction to open the black box of the presentation and question its contents, thereby undermining the epistemic power of the presentation and reclaiming epistemic power for the committee and for parliament in general.

### **3. Studying black-boxing in the committee process of the South African parliament**

We chose linguistic ethnography as an appropriate "point of view" (Scollon 1998:276) or overarching framework with which to study communication in parliament, since it "holds that language and social life are mutually shaping" (Rampton et al, 2004:2). This allowed us to examine how the

micro-context of parliamentary debate, the meso-context of parliament's institutional structure and the macro-context of South Africa's contemporary socio-political situation shape the communication under study and its effectiveness.

Linguistic ethnography, as an inherently interdisciplinary approach, lends itself to use with other frameworks, which we have used to form a multi-stranded theoretical foundation for this study. We have used LCT as an “explanatory framework” (Archer 1995) to explore the ways in which knowledge is produced and critiqued in parliament, as explained in Section 2. Linguistic ethnography also values the “close analysis of situated language use” (Rampton et al 2004:2), through using linguistic tools of analysis. The two specific tools of analysis we have used are interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz 1982) and the Appraisal framework from SFL (Martin and White 2005). Figure 3 illustrates the relationship between these frameworks as used in our study.

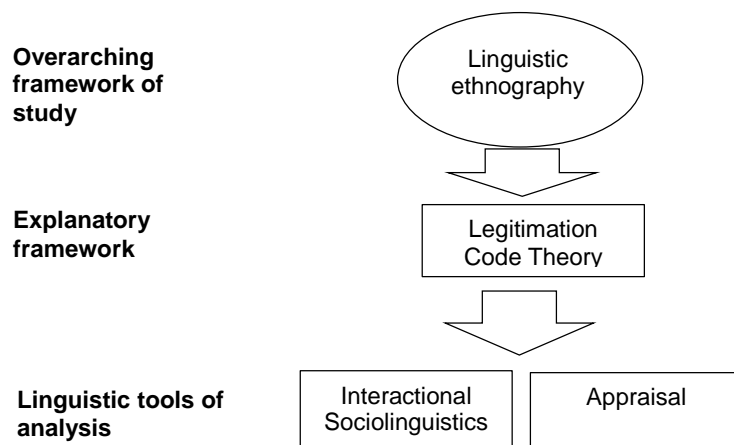


Figure 3: The multi-stranded theoretical foundation used in this article

Interactional sociolinguistics was used to trace how differences in understanding between the state-owned entity’s representatives and those of the MPs led to communication difficulties in spoken conversation. We also employed the Engagement system of the Appraisal framework (Martin and White 2005) to track the ways in which participants open and close the black box of the budget presentation, and, more particularly, to trace how speakers refer to or recontextualise the voices of others in their own speech or writing. The Engagement system distinguishes between “dialogic contraction” and “dialogic expansion” (Martin and White 2005: 102). Dialogic contraction decreases the space given for alternative voices to be heard, either by disclaiming the validity of these alternative voices, or by proclaiming the speaker’s view as the only valid one. Dialogic expansion, by contrast, increases the space given to other voices either by entertaining

alternative views, or by quoting and attributing what others have said. Dialogic contraction can indicate an attempt to close a black box by diminishing room for disagreement over it, while dialogic expansion can be used to open a black box by creating room for alternative views of its contents. A wide variety of resources for dialogic expansion and contraction are described in the Engagement system. Here we briefly introduce the ones found in the data analysed in the following section, drawing on Martin and White (2005). Figure 4 shows how these resources fit into the broader Engagement system. All Appraisal labels in this chapter, including Engagement resources, are written with an initial capital letter.

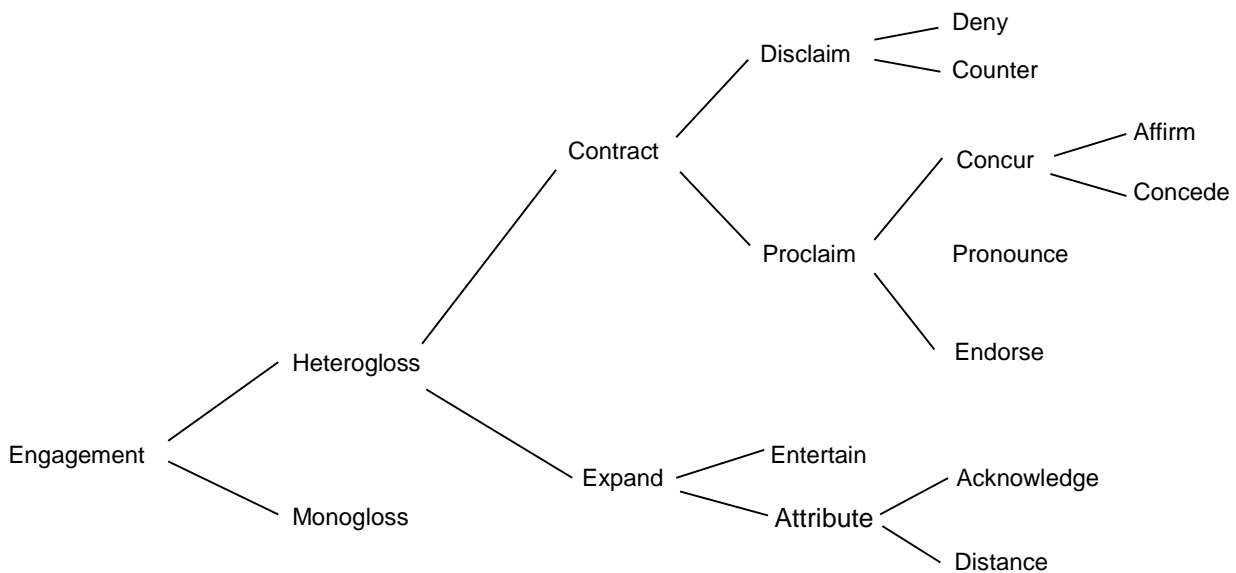


Figure 4: The Appraisal system of Engagement. Adapted from Martin and White (2005).

In the data analysed in the following section, two resources for dialogic

expansion are found:

- Entertain is used to introduce a particular idea as being a possibility, such as “I don’t know whether they are going to cut employees.”
- Acknowledge introduces an idea without indicating whether or not the sender agrees with that idea. An example of Acknowledge is “You are saying you are going to reduce your percentages.”

Additionally, five resources for dialogic contraction are found:

- Deny is used where the sender openly disagrees with the idea that is introduced. An example of Deny is “We’re not passing the budget.”
- Counter is used where the sender expresses an idea that replaces another, opposite meaning. An example of Counter is “When we adopt a report we accept it as we see it here, but to pass a report is a different story.”
- Pronounce heightens the emphasis placed on a particular idea, for example, “In fact, each hand can have many questions.”
- Endorse is used in cases where the sender acknowledges the source of ideas in a way that implies a commitment to the truth of these ideas. For example, the locution “The committee observed that this function was not implemented to its maximum” implies that the sender agrees that the function truly was not implemented to its maximum.
- Concede indicates the points on which a sender agrees with an

opposing argument, for example, “I agree with what you are saying; the Appropriation Bill will be... passed on Tuesday.” This resource is often closely followed by an instance of Counter, to introduce an assertion that, according to the sender, still holds despite what (s)he has conceded.

The meeting of the Portfolio Committee on Public Works that we describe in this chapter was observed during a five-week ethnographic field visit made to parliament in July 2009. In this meeting, Agrément SA, a small state-owned entity responsible for assessing and certifying innovative construction materials before they appear on the market, presented their strategic plan and budget to the Portfolio Committee on Public Works. The selection of this state-owned entity as a subject of study was random.

#### **4. Epistemological condensation and rarefaction in a budget presentation**

The meeting begins with a lengthy presentation on Agrément SA’s vision, mission and strategic plan by its Chief Executive Officer (CEO). Following this, he hands over to his Chief Financial Officer (CFO), who speaks on the entity’s budgets. Thereafter, the chairperson (C) opens the floor for what is called “a round of questions” from MPs, which are answered by the CEO. The episode we concentrate on occurs in the form of a second “round of



questions”, which mainly concerns Agrément SA’s budgets.

This second “round of questions” can be divided into three distinct stages:

1. An opposition DA MP (whom we refer to as MD1) and a ruling-party ANC MP (referred to as MA1) ask initial questions on the CFO’s budget presentation. These are discussed in 4.1, in conjunction with a brief analysis of part of the CFO’s presentation.
2. The CFO attempts to answer MA1 and MD1’s questions. These answers are discussed in 4.2.
3. Some MPs ask follow-up questions, discussed briefly in 4.3.

We conducted interviews with some of the MPs at this meeting to elicit their perspectives on the interaction, as these play an important role in interactional sociolinguistic analysis. These revealed some important contextual factors affecting the meeting’s discourse. First, an opposition Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) MP (referred to as MI1) mentioned that the committee had had trouble with Agrément SA concealing unflattering information about its budget in the past, leading him to suspect that they were concealing information in this budget as well. This suspicion appears to have been shared by other members, as reflected in the way in which MPs questioned the budget in the meeting.

Second, as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, several MPs reported that the new parliament (inaugurated barely two months before this meeting) had brought with it a re-energised commitment to more rigorous

parliamentary oversight, particularly among ANC members.

These two contextual factors predisposed the MPs to view Agrément SA's budget as a black box that needed to be opened and interrogated, as we now show.

#### *4.1. Stage 1: Opening questions*

This stage shows how two MPs, MD1 and MA1, seek to open the black box of the CFO's presentation by using dialogically expansive resources to entertain certain interpretations of what the CFO has said, and point out the problems with these interpretations using dialogically contractive resources.

Figure 5 shows an example of one of the PowerPoint slides presented by the CFO to give information about Agrément SA's financial position and budget. In this slide, a large amount of information is condensed into four numbers and a total, giving it a strong semantic density (SD+).

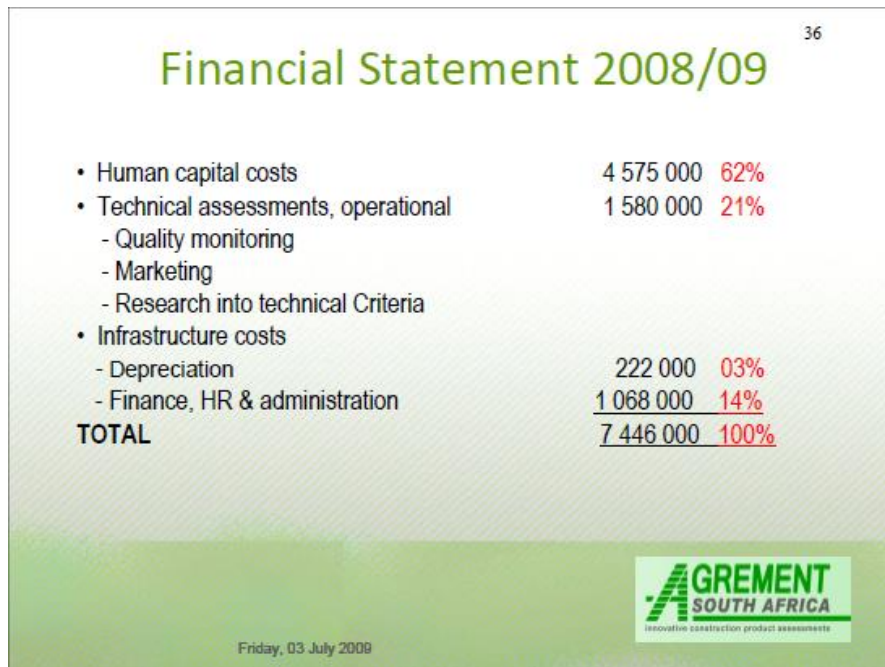


Figure 5: Sample slide from Agrément SA’s presentation

The CFO’s presentation of Agrément SA’s budget is composed of eight slides similar to Figure 5 in format. He reads off these slides verbatim for the most part, with very few comments explaining what was covered by each of the budget items. Thus his spoken recontextualisation of the slides does not help to weaken the strong SD of the budget presentation. This means that the presentation has all the characteristics of a black box.

The first substantive question concerning Agrément SA’s budgets comes from MD1, an opposition MP. This question, which is part of a much longer utterance in which essentially four questions are asked, is reproduced below:<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Transcription conventions for the extracts reproduced in this chapter are as follows:  
 <...> Softer “off-microphone” utterances

- (1) But I just want to ask on the financial financial one (1.55) manpower (0.47) to me it means (0.27) salaries actually (0.02) I don't know what else they could put under that one (0.51) and if it is salaries (0.44) sixty two percent (0.4) of the money go to salaries (0.32) which doesn't sound alright (1.34) and I can see they are trying to cut it down (0.03) but cutting it down I don't know whether they are going to cut me-eh- employees (0.14) that's another thing that we don't want to see

MD1's reference to "manpower" refers to the first budget line item on the slide reproduced in Figure 5 and others like it.

When he says, "I can see they are trying to cut it down" he is recontextualising the fact that on slides showing Agrément SA's budgets, this amount decreases from 62% to 43% of total expenditure. Table 1 presents the Engagement choices made in Extract 1, enabling one to see the patterns of dialogic expansion and contraction in it.

---

[.....]	Overlaps
(0.9)	Pauses (measured in seconds)
( )	Unclear speech on recording
(( ))	Non-linguistic sounds
U:	Unidentified participant

Instantiation	Expand / Contract	Resource	Meaning expanded / contracted
but	Contract	Counter	I just want to ask on the financial one
I just	Contract	Counter	want to ask on the financial one
I just want to ask on the financial one	Expand	Entertain	manpower (0.47) to me it means (0.27) salaries actually (0.02) I don't know what else they could put under that one
to me it means	Expand	Entertain	salaries actually
actually	Contract	Counter	salaries
I don't know	Contract	Deny	what else they could put under that one
if	Expand	Entertain	it is salaries
is	Contract	Pronounce	salaries
doesn't	Contract	Deny	sound alright
I can see	Expand	Entertain	they are trying to cut it down
but	Contract	Counter	cutting it down I don't know whether they are going to cut me- eh- employees
I don't know	Expand	Entertain	whether they are going to cut me- eh- employees
we don't want to see	Contract	Deny	another thing (i.e. "they are going to cut me- eh- employees")

Table 1: Engagement choices in Extract 1

In his question, MD1 appears to be contesting the meaning of “manpower”, which appeared next to the first budget item on some of the slides. After the initial instance of the dialogically contractive Engagement resource of Counter which marks that MD1’s question may come somewhat unexpectedly, he opens the black box of the budget using the dialogically expansive resource of Entertain twice: in “I just want to ask on the financial financial one” and “to me it means”. This allows him to insert his own interpretation of the budget line item: that it refers to “salaries”. In this way he begins to use semantic rarefaction to open the budget as a black box.

After MD1’s comments, a ruling-party MP, MA1, adds to his question

about the amount allocated to “manpower” and relates this to an earlier question he asked about “variable percentages” in the budget. This is what he says:

- (2) ...And also (0.78) specifically you know that the issue of the percentage eh (0.41) I think (0.06) (MA3) or other honourable member has just asked that question (0.5) when you are taking as I said your percentages (1.03) what what do you make exactly (0.03) because (0.98) when you are saying you are going to reduce your percentages trying to manage (0.85) but still ehm (0.24) you your financial costs (0.96) eh ranges above (1.54) eh you must you must give clarification where is the (0.52) eh you going to decrease your percentages instead of sixty-two percent (0.02) to fifty-six percent (0.59) I'm just looking at the ones that I am having (1.4) of of of of your your financial eh eh (0.45) manpower human capital (1.04) but your your your your amount there is also increasing (0.66) we understand that it might also (0.41) help to deal with (0.16) additional amounts of (0.05) implemented staff but you must be able to clarify to us (0.32) as I asked earlier the percentage (0.04) the variable percentage that you use (0.12) thank you

MA1 recontextualises MD1's initial question as being on “the issue of the percentage”, using the definite article to index that the matter is already given information.

Once he has opened the black box of the budget by referring to MD1 and the CFO's earlier utterances, MA1 uses the dialogically contractive resources of Counter and Concede to express problems and contradictions that he sees in the budget, and to black-box the information he would like the CFO to give in response to his comments (See Table 2.).

Instantiation	Expand / Contract	Resource	Meaning expanded / contracted
you know	Contract	Endorse	that the issue of the percentage eh
I think	Expand	Entertain	(MA3) or other honourable member has just asked that question
(MA3) or other honourable member has just asked	Expand	Acknowledge	that question
as I said	Expand	Entertain	your percentages
you are saying	Expand	Acknowledge	you are going to reduce your percentages trying to manage.
but still	Contract	Counter	you your financial costs (0.96) eh ranges above
BUT	Contract	Counter	your your your your amount there is also increasing
we understand that	Contract	Concede	it might also (0.41) help to deal with (0.16) additional amounts of (0.05) implemented staff
but	Contract	Counter	you must be able to clarify to us as I asked earlier the percentage (0.04) the variable percentage that you use
as I asked earlier	Expand	Entertain	the percentage (0.04) the variable percentage that you use

Table 2: Engagement choices in Extract 2

MA1 has effectively strengthened the SD of the discourse, moving from the more concrete details pertaining to one particular budget line item, “manpower”, to general principles that govern the manner in which all the amounts on the budget are adjusted from year to year (“variable percentages”).

These initial questions are fairly typical of the textual structure of most of the questions raised by MPs in the committee meetings we observed. Such questions are often vague and ungrammatical, and are combined with

several additional questions within the same utterance, which does not make for easy decoding and answering.

The aim of these initial questions is to request further information from the CFO so that his budget can be scrutinised, or in other words, so that the presentation can be opened as a black box, allowing epistemological rarefaction to take place. This challenges the coherence of the knowledge that the CFO has presented, and seeks to increase the power of the MPs.

#### 4.2. *Stage 2: The CFO's answers*

When the CFO attempts to answer MD1 and MA1's questions, he does so without opening the black box of his original presentation greatly.

He addresses the question about "manpower" at the beginning of his utterance:

- (3) Eh the first one (0.05) from the honourable member that side eh (0.04) on manpower we are not actual cutting on manpower when you look at the figures they are actual increasing (0.41) the percentages what is happening we are taking (0.04) percentage of that particular manpower (0.04) in the total budget (0.41) so it's actually reshuffling the money of the total budget costs (0.85) so you might think percentages are going down but when you look at the figures actually we are forecasting more...

It is clear that the CFO uses dialogically contractive resources intensively here to defend his presentation against MD1 and MA1's questions (See Table 3.). At the beginning of his answer, the CFO recontextualises the word "cutting" from MD1, who said "I can see they are trying to cut it [the percentage of the budget allocated to salaries] down".



Instantiation	Expand / Contract	Resource	Meaning expanded / contracted
not	Contract	Deny	actual cutting on manpower
actual	Contract	Counter	cutting on manpower
when you look at the figures	Contract	Endorse	they are actual increasing
actual	Contract	Counter	they are... increasing
actually	Contract	Counter	it's... reshuffling the money of the total budget costs
you might think	Expand	Acknowledge	percentages are going down
but	Contract	Counter	when you look at the figures actually we are forecasting more
when you look at the figures	Contract	Endorse	actually we are forecasting more
actually	Contract	Counter	we are forecasting more
we are forecasting	Expand	Entertain	more

Table 3: Engagement choices in Extract 3

Superficially, the CFO responds favourably to the concerns MD1 raised: the percentage of the budget allocated to “manpower” is decreasing, and despite this, Agrément SA is not cutting down on salaries. However, he does not give MD1 and MA1 any new information to address their concerns.

The CFO’s reference to “the percentages” in Extract 3 may mark an attempt by him to address MA1’s question about what “variable percentages” were used to calculate the amounts on the budgets. However, MA1 does not view the CFO’s utterance in this way and so, after the CFO has finished speaking, he prompts him again to answer this question:

- (4)  
CFO: ...To what our forecasting (0.69) should be on (0.05)  
(2.9)  
C: <Thank you is there anything>=

MA1: The percentage variable  
(3.13)

CFO: (Sorry what I said) the perce- the document has fixed percentages (0.43) you're saying if I increase in this particular (0.52) eh (0.56) budget line is so much percentage (0.92) the percentages that are put in here mean that (0.77) on the total budget we've got hundred million (0.55) right (0.67) manpower (0.52) might go down by so much percent (0.45) in relation to total budget the bottom line ( 2.29) manpower for this (0.6) stadium (0.35) eh (0.23) expenditure compared to the (0.23) forecast expenditure (0.39) or the- eh- eh- (0.54) previous expenditure compared to the forecast i-budget (0.26) no (0.35) it's actually percentages (0.92) in the total budget (0.8) it's the percentages of everything (0.87) so we might have increased costs on running increased costs on manpower (0.52) and then we will find that then the percentages change (0.53) but (answering my) question on how we go on that (0.47) we look at the business plan (1.04) if there is- the business plan is focusing more on these (then percentages they might increase on that line) (0.76) thank you

C is about to ask if there are any other new questions, or if there are any questions that the CFO has not yet answered, when MA1 reminds the CFO to speak about the variable percentages by saying “The percentage variable”. The fact that MA1 prompts the CFO to address his question about “variable percentages” demonstrates that he is not afraid to hold the CFO accountable for answering all the financial questions he asks.

The dialogic expansion here (See Table 4.) recontextualises four different “voices” in this utterance:

1. The CFO's own voice earlier in answer to the questions (e.g. “what I said the perce- the document has fixed percentages”)
2. The “voice” of the PowerPoint slides and handouts, which the CFO attempts to explain
3. The voice of MA1. “You're saying” projects his explanation of MA1's type of percentages: “if I increase in this particular (0.52) eh (0.56) budget line is so much percentage”.

4. A hypothetical “voice” which entertains particular scenarios and explains how they would be presented on the budgets (e.g. in “manpower (0.52) might go down by so much percent (0.45) in relation to total budget the bottom line”). This hypothetical “voice” is used to weaken the SD of the CFO’s answer, by illustrating it through use of some more concrete examples.

<b>Instantiation</b>	<b>Expand / Contract</b>	<b>Resource</b>	<b>Meaning expanded / contracted</b>
what I said	Expand	Entertain	the perce- the document has fixed percentages
the document has	Expand	Acknowledge	fixed percentages
you’re saying	Expand	Acknowledge	if I increase in this particular (0.52) eh (0.56) budget line is so much percentage
if	Expand	Entertain	I increase in this particular (0.52) eh (0.56) budget line
the percentages that are put in here mean	Expand	Acknowledge	that on the total budget we’ve got hundred million (0.55) right
manpower (0.52) might	Expand	Entertain	go down by so much percent (0.45) in relation to total budget the bottom line
no	Contract	Deny	manpower for this (0.6) stadium (0.35) eh (0.23) expenditure compared to the (0.23) forecast expenditure (0.39) or the- eh- eh- (0.54) previous expenditure compared to the forecast i-budget
actually	Contract	Counter	it’s percentages (0.92) in the total budget
we might	Expand	Entertain	have increased costs on running increased costs on manpower (0.52) and then we will find that then the percentages change
but	Contract	Counter	answering my question on how we go on that
if there is- the business plan is focusing more on these	Expand	Entertain	then percentages they might increase on that line

Table 4: Engagement choices in Extract 4

The CFO presents two possible meanings of the percentages on the budget slide, namely “expenditure compared to the (0.23) forecast expenditure” and “the- eh- eh- (0.54) previous expenditure compared to the forecast i-budget”. He then uses a simple “no” to Deny both of these options (See Table 4), Countering them with what he conceives of as the correct interpretation of the percentages: “it’s actually percentages (0.92) in the total budget”. However, we cannot find any evidence in MD1 or MA1’s questions that they interpreted the percentages on the slides in either of the ways disclaimed by the CFO.

Nevertheless, the CFO must have realised that MA1 was asking a question about the composition of the budget because, at the end of his utterance, he says “but (answering my) question on how we go on that”. What follows is the only new information that the CFO introduces in his entire turn at speaking, and this information weakens the SD of the CFO’s answer very slightly to give a short account of the processes involved in drawing up the budget.

Thus, the overall impression given by the CFO’s answer to the discussion on “variable percentages” is that he is evading the question. This analysis has shown how the CFO closed the black box of the budget which was opened by MD1 and MA1’s questions, through using two strategies to index the idea that the information on the budget slides is sufficient and no further investigation into the contents of this budget is necessary:

1. Using dialogically contractive resources to close the black box: In

Extract 3, the CFO makes heavy use of these to close the black box of the entity's spending on "manpower", keeping his discourse at a strong level of SD.

2. Using dialogically expansive resources to interpret the presentation rather than offer new information: In his explanation about "variable percentages" (Extract 4), the CFO uses a predominance of dialogically expansive resources that make it appear that he is opening the black box of the budget and weakening the SD of the discussion. In actual fact, he provides a brief qualitative answer to a question in which quantitative information was requested. The name we give to this strategy is "pseudo-opening".

Using these strategies, the CFO avoids giving specific information in response to two of the eight questions raised by MD1 and MA1. He addresses one other question, leaving the other five unanswered because he deems them not to be financial in nature, and thus outside his sphere of expertise. These five questions are never answered in this meeting, because after the CFO speaks, the rest of the meeting is taken up by follow-up questions on the three topics he did address in his answers. C could possibly have avoided this by asking the CEO to address the questions that had not yet been answered before allowing any follow-up questions on the CFO's answers.

To summarise, the CFO's answers demonstrate how MPs' questions can be either misunderstood or deliberately evaded in a committee meeting. He

interprets MD1 and MA1's questions as requesting more careful interpretation of the information he had already presented, rather than requesting additional information not included in the presentation. This may be because he views his role as being to present the budget as a black box that does not require opening.

#### *4.3. Stage 3: Follow-up questions*

The follow-up questions show the MPs' dissatisfaction with the CFO's answers to their questions by reiterating their demands that financial information be supplied at a weaker level of SD, to allow the budget to be interrogated further. These demands are marked by a growing asynchrony between the MPs and the CFO, which according to interactional sociolinguistic theory, indicates an increasing rift in understanding between them. In the following section, we postulate what the sources of this rift might be.

### **5. Differing understandings of the presenters' role in parliamentary oversight**

In the meeting discussed in the previous section, a presenter from a state-owned entity presented his report to the committee as a black box.

Meanwhile, the MPs sought to gain power by opening the black boxes of

this presentation in order to critique their contents. This was a common pattern in the oversight meetings observed in our study in the South African parliament. This tendency is not restricted only to opposition party MPs; in fact this analysis has shown how MD1, an opposition MP, works in tandem with MA1, a ruling-party MP, to open up the black box of Agrément SA's budget presentation.

The CFO appears to conceive of his role as being to interpret the presentation as it stands, rather than giving additional information that would open the black box of the presentation further. Interactional sociolinguistic theory suggests that this conception of his role forms part of his background knowledge, or "schemata" (Widdowson 1983:37) by which he interprets the interaction in the committee meeting. Meanwhile, the MPs' questions and their dissatisfaction with the CFO's answers clearly indicate that they expect him to be able to give additional information about how the budget was compiled. Hence, they rely on a different set of schemata.

The differences in understanding between the MPs and the presenter are realised through a number of different strategies. The MPs use dialogically expansive resources, particularly Entertain, to pinpoint areas of the budget they believe lack detail and request that information at a weaker level of SD be supplied in these areas to undo some of the epistemological condensation of the budget presentation. By contrast, the presenter uses dialogically contractive resources to close the black box of the budget presentation, and when that does not succeed, uses dialogically expansive resources to

accomplish pseudo-opening and weaken the SD of the presentation by interpreting it, rather than by providing the additional information the MPs are seeking.

Ultimately, despite the large number of questions asked in the initial round of questions, the CFO is held accountable by the MPs to answering the “financial” questions separately, rather than black-boxing them together. However, the proliferation of follow-up questions on these financial matters means that the remaining five questions which the CFO deems not to be “financial” are not addressed.

## **6. Conclusion: Theoretical implications and practical applications**

This research has integrated diverse bodies of theory in order to form a unified impression of how recontextualisation works in the parliamentary oversight process. Our analysis has theoretical implications and practical applications, which we describe in this section.

Theoretically, this study has allowed us to begin the process of constructing a model of how knowledge is produced in political discourse, using LCT. It was demonstrated that attempts to question the content of a particular text, or to open black boxes produced in the text and weaken SD, often involve dialogically expansive resources of Engagement. By contrast, attempts to resist such interrogation, or to close the black boxes, often involve dialogically contractive Engagement resources. However, in his answers to the MPs’ questions, the CFO at one point used dialogically



expansive Engagement resources to make it appear that he was opening the black box of his budget presentation, although he was for the most part simply repeating information already known to the MPs. This we referred to as an example of a “pseudo-opening” strategy, where a speaker appears to open a black box, but in effect closes it.

Maton and Moore’s (2010) social realist account of power, referred to in Section 2, provides a useful way of showing how epistemological condensation and rarefaction have an effect on the distribution of power. This account enables this study to adopt a critical perspective on the communicative practices in parliament. Epistemological condensation can be used to increase the epistemic power of a particular body of knowledge, and the stronger the links are between data at a weaker level of SD and theory at a stronger level of SD in any given knowledge structure, the stronger that knowledge structure is.

Figure 6 gives a rough diagrammatic representation of the partial model of knowledge production in discourse we have arrived at by integrating some of the concepts used in our study. In this diagram, the words at the ends of the central pairs of arrows indicate the linguistic resources which we have used to analyse how recontextualisation affects the strength of SD. “Dialogic contraction” and “dialogic expansion” both refer to the use of Engagement resources.

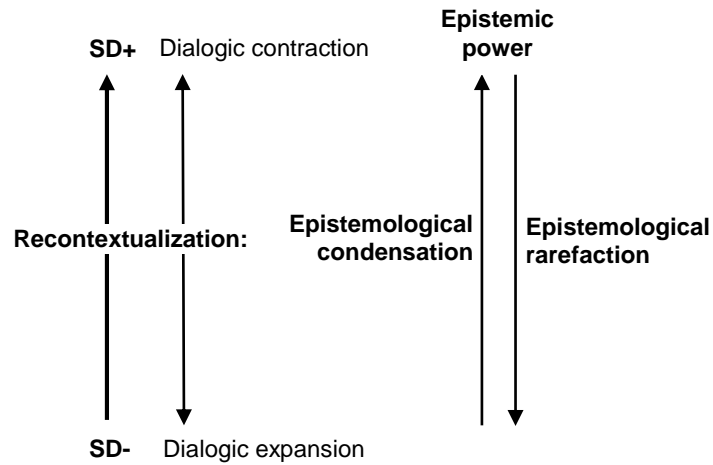


Figure 6: Partial model of knowledge production in discourse

This model places recontextualisation at the centre of the production of knowledge, since Maton's (2011, 2014) concepts of epistemological and axiological condensation, which we enact as processes of recontextualisation, were devised to describe how knowledge is produced.

Much further research is required to refine this model and establish how other linguistic resources can be used to enact SD. The model also needs to be extended to take axiological SD into account as well as epistemological SD. This research is progressing rapidly (e.g. Martin 2014), and we are continuing to contribute to it. Viewing political discourse as a process of knowledge production, as we have done, has the potential to describe how processes of recontextualisation have an influence both on language and on society. Linguistically, they demonstrate how speakers manipulate their engagement with prior texts to produce new knowledge. In society, this new knowledge can be built into powerful knowledge structures that ultimately

may entrench the practices of government and its state-owned entities, or in the case of successful parliamentary oversight, challenge and transform them.

Practically, our research has generated many recommendations about how oversight can be strengthened by improving communication in parliamentary committees. In Section 4.3, it was noted that while the MPs were expecting the presenter to furnish them with further information that would allow them to subject the entity's budget to greater scrutiny, the presenter understood his role to be simply one of interpreting the information that he had already presented. This gave the committee chairperson the impression that the presenter was unprepared for the meeting. This type of misunderstanding could be prevented by more careful briefing of presenters in advance of committee meetings: presenters should be told that they may be asked for additional information that is not in their presentations or the related documents, and be encouraged to have such information about their budgets and strategic plans at the ready in order to answer requests for further information.

In the same way, MPs could benefit by understanding that presenters will naturally tend to regard their presentations as complete, cohesive knowledge (black boxes) and thus resist attempts to probe these presentations or elicit additional information not found in them. This resistance should not necessarily be interpreted as evidence that the presenters have something to hide, as was done in the episode discussed in Section 4. MPs could be made

aware of this by introducing some basic material on the nature of black-boxing into their information sessions at the beginning of each term of parliament.

This leads on to the topic of the number of MPs who should be allowed to speak in a round of questions before the presenters are called on to answer these questions. All MPs should be trained in the management of follow-up questions, so that these are not raised when there are still outstanding questions which have not been answered by the presenters, as occurred in the episode described in Section 4. However, such careful chairing may still not prevent situations in which committee meetings run out of time as happened in the meeting discussed in Section 4

In the period at which data for this study was collected, the time slot allocated to committee meetings was from 10:00am to 1:00pm on days when these meetings are scheduled, although at times other meetings impinge on this time slot. We would recommend that the period between 9:00am and 1:00pm be ring-fenced during days in the parliamentary programme allocated to committee meetings, so that more time is afforded to committees for their oversight meetings.

The politics of oversight in parliamentary committees such as the one discussed in this chapter may not seem too significant when compared to the “grand politics” (Wodak 2009:194) of sittings of the houses of parliament. However, our broader study of parliament’s committee process shows that it requires careful attention because it has a significant influence on

parliament's ability to hold government departments and state-owned entities to account for their actions, and to cut their purse strings if their performance is found wanting. We have shown that a close analysis of the ways in which language is used to produce knowledge in an oversight meeting can generate theory on how knowledge production is enacted in discourse and useful recommendations on how parliamentary oversight can be strengthened. As a result, our understanding of parliamentary discourse is deepened and elected public representatives can engage more effectively with government departments and state-owned entities, so that the South African parliament works better for the people it is meant to serve.

### **List of references**

- Archer, Margaret. 1995. *Realist Social Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bernstein, Basil. 2000. *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity: Theory, Research, Critique (Revised Edition)*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Bernstein, Basil. 2003. *Class, Codes and Control Volume IV: The Structuring of Pedagogic Discourse*. London: Routledge.
- Fairclough, Norman. 2003. *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Galasinski, Dariusz. 1996. "Pretending to cooperate. How speakers hide evasive actions." *Argumentation* 10 (3): 375–388.
- Gumperz, John. 1982. *Discourse Strategies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Halliday, Michael and Christian Matthiessen. 2004. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: Arnold.
- Hasson, Victoria. 2010. "Rules and rituals: the case of the South African Parliament's new committee system." *Journal of Legislative Studies* 16 (3): 366–379. doi: 10.1080/13572334.2010.498104.
- Hibbert, Liesel. 2003. "Changing language practices in parliament in South Africa." *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies* 21 (3): 103–117. doi: 10.2989/16073610309486334.
- Iedema, Rick. 1999. "Formalizing organizational meaning." *Discourse & Society* 10 (1): 49–65. doi: 10.1177/0957926599010001003.

- Ilie, Cornelia. 2003. "Histrionic and agonistic features of parliamentary discourse." *Studies in Communication Sciences* 3 (1): 25–53.
- Ilie, Cornelia. 2006. "Parliamentary discourses." In *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics 2nd Edition (Volume 9)*, ed. by Keith Brown, 188–197. Oxford: Elsevier.
- Joubert, Jan-Jan. 2015. "Order! Order! Can Zuma steal the SONA show from Malema?" *Times Live*. February 5, 2015. Accessed February 6, 2015. <http://www.timeslive.co.za/politics/2015/02/05/order-order-can-zuma-steal-the-sona-show-from-malema>.
- Latour, Bruno. 1987. *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Martin, James. 2009. "Realisation, instantiation and individuation: some thoughts on identity in youth justice conferencing." *DELTA – Documentação de Estudos em Lingüística Teórica e Aplicada*, 25: 549–583. doi: 10.1590/S0102-44502009000300002.
- Martin, James. 2014. "Revisiting field: 'semantic density' in Ancient History & Biology discourse." Paper presented at the 41st International Systemic Functional Congress and X Latin-American Systemic Functional Congress, Mendoza, Argentina, April 14–19.
- Martin, James and Peter White. 2005. *The Language of Evaluation: Appraisal in English*. Melbourne: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Maton, Karl. 2011. "Theories and things: The semantics of disciplinarity." In *Disciplinarity: Systemic-Functional and Sociological Perspectives*, ed. by Frances Christie and Karl Maton, 62–84. London: Continuum.
- Maton, Karl. 2014. *Knowledge and Knowers: Towards a Realist Sociology of Education*. London: Routledge.
- Maton, Karl and Rob Moore. 2010. "Introduction: Coalitions of the mind." In *Social Realism, Knowledge and the Sociology of Education: Coalitions of the Mind*, ed. by Karl Maton, and Rob Moore, 1–13. London: Continuum.
- Pahl, Kate and Jennifer Rowsell. 2005. *Literacy and Education: Understanding the New Literacy Studies in the Classroom*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Parliament of the Republic of South Africa. 2013. "Oversight." Accessed June 4, 2013. [http://www.parliament.gov.za/live/content.php?Item\\_ID=27](http://www.parliament.gov.za/live/content.php?Item_ID=27).
- Rampton, Ben, Karin Tusting, Janet Maybin, Richard Barwell, Angela Creese, and Vally Lytra. 2004. "UK Linguistic Ethnography: A Discussion Paper." Accessed 4 April 2009. [http://www.ling-ethnog.org.uk/documents/discussion\\_paper\\_jan\\_05.pdf](http://www.ling-ethnog.org.uk/documents/discussion_paper_jan_05.pdf).
- Rasiah, Parameswary. 2010. "A framework for the systematic analysis of evasion in parliamentary discourse." *Journal of Pragmatics* 42: 664–680. doi: 10.1016/j.pragma.2009.07.010.
- Scollon, Ron. 1998. *Mediated Discourse as Social Interaction: A Study of News Discourse*. London: Longman, 267–291.
- Siebörger, Ian. 2012. "Literacy, Orality and Recontextualization in the

- Parliament of the Republic of South Africa: An Ethnographic Study.” MA thesis, Rhodes University.
- Widdowson, H.G. 1983. *Learning Purpose and Language Use*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wodak, Ruth. 2009. *The Discourse of Politics in Action: Politics as Usual*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.