Chapter 1
Greek Parliamentary Discourse in the Years of the Economic Crisis: Investigating Aggression Using a Corpus-Based Approach

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ABSTRACT

The present chapter deals with impoliteness and aggression in a parliamentary discourse. It is a corpus-based study and the language material examined consists of the Minutes of all Plenary Sessions of the Hellenic Parliament for the years 2011 to 2016. Impoliteness in the Parliament is defined as offensive verbal behavior contextualized by temporary breakdowns of formal procedures, intense protests by immediate recipients, the House Speaker and fellow parliamentarians and even the walkout of the sittings of offended parties. Reactions such as the aforementioned ones serve as markers of the unacceptable use of linguistic forms perceived as abusive which exceed the limits of politic speech in contexts of expected political rivalry. Detailed analysis of excerpts of discourse addressed to politicians reveals linguistic items that can serve as markers of aggression and facilitate analysis via corpus linguistics technologies and the statistic processing of findings which in our case confirms a shift towards more aggressive forms of speech in the Greek parliament after 2011.

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INTRODUCTION

Numerous studies on the rhetoric of political combat (Ilie, 2001), show that verbal attacks and offensive language choices are rather common in the context of highly competitive parliamentary systems such as the Greek (Tsakona & Popa, 2011; Georgalidou, 2011, 2016). In the present study, we apply corpus linguistics methodology for the investigation of verbal attacks used in Greek parliamentary discourse. We examine Greek parliamentary discourse in the years 2011-2016, six years in the core of the economic crisis.

Qualitative analysis preceding the analysis of corpora is based on Watts’ three-part distinction between im/polite and politic behaviour, i.e. socio-culturally determined behaviour designed to maintain a state of equilibrium during on-going processes of verbal interaction (Watts 1992, p. 50). Watts’ model seems to be applicable to speech events within parliamentary procedures (Christie, 2005) as it allows for the explanation of how polite and impolite verbal actions can be constructed as marked, whereas mutually acceptable interactive choices that maintain on-going communication, as unmarked. It also allows for the explanation of how threats to face can be seen not just as acceptable, but as desirable within parliament. Within this framework, analysis of discourse addressed to adversaries reveals aspects of the organization of rival political encounters. It also reveals aggressive and derogatory forms of speech that directly attack the integrity, the gender (Georgalidou, 2016) and/or other aspects of the identities of the addressees.

The theoretical issues addressed concern the impoliteness end of the politeness/politic speech/impoliteness continuum in the light of extreme cases of conflict in parliamentary discourse (Watts, 1992; Christie, 2005). Within both ethnomethodological (Arundale 2010) and social constructionist approaches (Culpeper, 2005; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2013; Watts, 2010), im/politeness is seen as an interactional construct accomplished by participants to discourse via concrete interactional action and reaction. Within this perspective, impoliteness comes about when the speaker communicates face attack intentionally and/or the hearer ostensibly perceives, therefore constructs, behaviour as intentionally face-attacking (Culpeper, 2005, p. 39). Constructions marked as dispreferred define the limits of rival discourse as a politic, therefore unmarked choice within political combat. The breakdown of communication, retrievable in the local context of conversation, can be considered a marker of dispreferred / aggressive communicative choices.

Moreover, this is a corpus-based study (Ådel, 2010; Baker, 2006). The corpus discussed today consists of the Minutes of all Plenary Sessions of the Hellenic Parliament1 for the years 2011 to 2016. AntConc2 has been used for the quantitative processing of the language material. Our data come from the official proceedings of parliamentary sittings for a period of six years (2011-2016). The corpus examined
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