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The regulation of linguistic quality in the official speech-to-text reports of the Finnish parliament¹

Abstract

In this article, I analyze the notion of linguistic quality in the making of the official speech-to-text report of a parliament, and how it is regulated and developed in the Finnish parliamentary reporting office. Linguistic quality is, by nature, dependent on context and affected by many factors, such as the expected needs of one or more target audiences, the genre of parliamentary report, values and aims of the reporting office, office guidelines, parliamentary reporting culture, and personal preferences and ideals of the reporter. The Finnish parliamentary reporting office has developed its own guidelines based on the principles of consistency, comprehensiveness, flexibility, and wide, sociolinguistic understanding of linguistic norms. These principles guide both the construction of concrete language-regulatory practices, as well as the dynamic and self-reflective tools for the development of these practices. This article discusses both perspectives and analyzes the cyclic nature of the Finnish language-regulatory devices.

Keywords: *Finnish, language regulation, linguistic quality, parliamentary report, speech-to-text report*

1. Introduction

Official speech-to-text reports, or full records of the proceedings, in the parliament are, like all forms of mediation from speech to writing, linguistic text artefacts. Linguistic principles and practices are therefore essential when the nature and quality of parliamentary reports are considered. In this article, I focus on the linguistic quality of the Finnish parliamentary reports. I describe how linguistic quality is defined in the Finnish parliamentary reporting office, and how this quality is consciously improved.²

International Organization for Standardization defines quality as "the degree to which a set of inherent characteristics of an object fulfills requirements" (ISO 2015). This definition is particularly useful because it acknowledges the importance of varying requirements assigned by different kinds of stakeholders. The quality of an object, or a product, such as a parliamentary report, should not be treated simply as given, or an objective notion. Instead, it depends on the many possible subjective or inter-subjective requirements and expectations that are contextually

¹The contents of this presentation are based on the presentation given at the 51st Intersteno congress in Berlin on 25th July 2017 (see VOUTILAINEN in press).

²My analysis of the Finnish case is based on participant observation as a parliamentary reporter in the Finnish parliamentary reports office since 2010. I want to thank all my colleagues in the Finnish parliamentary reporting office for countless valuable conversations on parliamentary reporting during these years. I also want to thank the anonymous referees of the CoMe Journal for many important remarks on the draft of this article.

attached to that particular product.

When looking at the linguistic quality of speech-to-text reports, this ISO definition can be modified as the degree to which a set of inherent linguistic characteristics fulfills the requirements assigned to the report by the people associated with it. Actions to codify and modify language according to different requirements, values and ideologies can be referred to as *language regulation* (e.g. SEARGEANT 2009; HYNNINEN 2013). This language regulation can be divided roughly into two distinct approaches: *top-down regulation* which is general, institutional and explicit (such as written guidelines and regulations), and *bottom-up regulation* which is situational, non-institutional, implicit and usually less conscious (such as modifying linguistic choices based on what feels suitable in a given situation). Top-down regulation can be presented as a prototypical example of language regulation. However, the acknowledgement of bottom-up regulation is crucial, because it has a considerable impact on how language is used and modified in micro-level interactions. It also has an impact on how top-down regulation is constructed and reproduced. (*ibidem*)

As in other fields of quality, the linguistic quality criteria are never universal or objective. They are essentially subjective, or intersubjective, and depend very much on interactional, situational and cultural context. Consequently, this means that there is no fit-for-all solution that would be applied identically to all cultures, languages, and parliaments.

2. The essentials of parliamentary reporting

The key elements of parliamentary reporting in Finland, as well as in the other major parliaments in the world, are essentially simple (VOUTILAINEN 2015). There is the parliamentary session that is the object of reporting, and the parliamentary reporter, or stenographer, with his or her tools, techniques, target-audiences, aims, values and ideals that guide the writing of the report (such as 'authenticity', 'understandability', 'readability', 'clarity', 'decorum', 'linguistic correctness' etc.). And finally, emerged through the interaction of the session and the reporter, there is the parliamentary report which strives to give a reliable account in written form on what occurred in the session.

The interplay of these three elements is where the linguistic and other aspects of quality come into play. The communicative resources of spoken and written language, as well as their interpretations, differ in many ways (e.g. ONG 1982; BIBER 1988; HALLIDAY 1989; LINELL 2005). Even the same linguistic features may be interpreted in a socially and stylistically different way in spoken and written interaction (TIITTULA & NUOLIJÄRVI 2013). Many features of speech are lost in speech-to-text reporting, such as intonation, emphasis, pauses, and gestures. At the same time, the features of written language, such as typography and layout, emerge in the process and activate interpretations of their own (TIITTULA & VOUTILAINEN 2016)³.

³When comparing speech and writing, it must be noted, however, that both spoken and written language have a considerable amount of internal variation, depending on, for example, the situation and the communicational genre (Biber 1988).

For example, if the spoken language is reported without any editing, the interpretation of the written report will often turn out different from the original spoken interaction, in a way that might be described by readers that are unaccustomed to linguistic transcriptions as 'chaotic', 'less dignified' or 'hard to read'. On the other hand, if the language is edited extensively, the speech will also be interpreted in a different way. For example, if everything is transformed mechanically into written standard language, the reported speech is likely to appear stylistically as much more formal and decorous than the original one. This might not be a problem with all speech-to-text reporting. In some forms of reporting, such as print interpreting, this might even be what the client wants. In the field of parliamentary reporting, however, it has been often pointed out that there should not be unnecessary changes to the content or style of the original speech (e.g. SCHWARZ 2017). Otherwise, there is the danger that the rhetorical and stylistic integrity of the speech is compromised. This, in turn, may give a wrong impression of the MPs political identity and public behaviour.

One key challenge in securing the linguistic quality in parliamentary reporting, therefore, is to edit the reported speech slightly, by making the right linguistic and editorial changes, so that the original speech is mediated reliably into the written mode of communication. In a way, it is about finding the balance between doing too much (failing up) and doing too little (failing down). It must be kept in mind, however, that social meanings and styles that are caused and altered by language regulation, are in reality much richer and more complex than simple notions of 'up' and 'down', or of 'high' and 'low' register (see AGHA 2007).

Here lies the paradox of speech-to-text reporting: something must be changed to keep things as they are. One has to make some carefully chosen linguistic changes – and avoid other, harmful ones – so that the parliamentary session is not changed too much in terms of content, rhetoric or style when it is reported in another form. It could even be argued that, when reporting speech into writing, things are altered especially in cases where all editions are avoided. This phenomenon arises from the fact that there is a shift between two semiotic codes, or modes, of communication with different interactional resources. Concepts that have been used to grasp this process theoretically include e.g. *intermodal and intralingual translation* (e.g. KRESS 2009; KORNING ZETHSEN 2009), *transcription* (e.g. JENKS 2011), *entextualization* (e.g. SUNG YUL PARK & BUCHOLTZ 2009) and *recontextualization* (e.g. LINELL 1998). Despite having different theoretical backgrounds, all of these concepts are used to describe what happens when a text is decontextualized from one semiotic channel, genre, and situation etc., and recontextualized into another, with different norms and expectations regarding typical or suitable linguistic behaviour (TIITTULA & VOUTILAINEN 2016). This phenomenon also affects many other types of speech-to-text reporting than just parliamentary reporting, such as subtitling, speech-to-text interpreting, automatic speech recognition, forming quotations, and the production of research transcriptions (TIITTULA & NUOLIJÄRVI 2016). Furthermore, it is relevant to linguistic mediation in general, because it involves interaction between two different contexts.

Additionally, parliamentary reporting is always affected by several background factors (cfr. HAAPANEN 2017; see also HELLE & TÖYRY 2009):

1. The expected needs of the target audiences – There are always one or more audiences that the parliamentary report is explicitly or implicitly directed to. These include, for example, "the public" (whatever requirements or expectations it is supposed to have in given contexts), media, MPs, administrators and researchers in different fields.
2. The genre of parliamentary report – Parliamentary report is a distinct communicational genre with its typical linguistic features, structural characteristics, and socio-rhetorical aims. These differ considerably from, for example, other administrative texts that do not report spoken language.
3. Values and aims of the reporting office – There are always some official or unofficial aims, purposes and values attached to the construction of the parliamentary report in the reporting office, whether these have been decided consciously or not.
4. The office guidelines – The office guidelines comprise all the explicit top-down norms, regulations and guidelines that apply to parliamentary reporting in a given reporting office.
5. Parliamentary reporting culture – There is usually a long tradition of constructing parliamentary reports with a rich array of implicit norms that have been passed on from reporter generation to another.
6. Personal preferences and ideals – Whether approved or disliked, it cannot be denied that the personal preferences and ideas of individual reporters also have an effect on how the report is constructed. This means that the reporter should be conscious about his or her preferences and ideals to be able to control their impact.

All these factors, and undoubtedly many others, vary across different countries, languages, parliaments and political cultures. This, in part, leads to the fact that there is, and most likely always will be, different conceptions of linguistic and other kinds of quality, as well as different editorial principles and practices, in parliamentary reporting both between and within parliaments.

3. Principles and practices of language regulation in Finnish parliamentary reporting

In the Finnish record office, the main principle of ensuring the linguistic quality of the report is that the speech of the MP is to be mediated reliably into readable form with as few and subtle alterations as possible.⁴ This main principle has led to some key notions that guide the formation of linguistic practices and guidelines in the office. The first of these is the wide understanding of linguistic norms and linguistic correctness. It means that, based on the current sociolinguistic understanding of language-use, there is conscious avoidance of the usual "written language bias" (LINELL 2005), i.e. the features of the spontaneous spoken language are not treated as "chaotic", "illogical", or "incorrect" just because they differ from the codified written standard language. Spoken language is not ungrammatical just because it differs from the written

⁴The main principle and the key notions behind Finnish parliamentary reporting described in this chapter have been agreed upon in a group discussion among Finnish parliamentary reporters on 28th June 2017

standard – because it has, to some extent, grammatical characteristics of its own. When spoken language is mediated in written form, there is not a reason to automatically remove its features of orality if the meanings and interpretations of the speech are not changed in the process, and if the readability of the speech as a text is not harmed. This wide understanding of linguistic norms also means a certain sensitivity towards the functions of linguistic variation: the use of non-standard linguistic features follows its own kind of linguistic norms (e.g. PIIPPO 2012), and it might have noticeable rhetorical, stylistic and interpersonal meanings in political interaction (cfr. AGHA 2007; COUPLAND 2007).

The other key notions that have been derived from the main principle include consistency, comprehensiveness, and flexibility. Consistency, in this context, means that all MPs and their speeches are, in principle, treated systematically and equally in the editing process, regardless of the reporter. Comprehensiveness is visible in the aspiration to create holistic and concrete guidelines that reduce the need of individual *ad hoc* decisions in the reporting process. Additionally, this commitment contributes to the consistency and effectiveness of the editorial work. Following these principles, the linguistic and editorial practices should also be flexible, so that the guidelines are easily applied to different situations. They are also under constant re-evaluation to keep them in balance with the changing parliamentary culture and linguistic attitudes.

These general principles have led to numerous linguistic and other editorial practices that are exercised in everyday parliamentary reporting. Some of the central practices are summarized briefly in Figure 1 (see VOUTILAINEN 2016):

What is changed	What is not changed
Regional dialect in phonological features <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>mä, mää, mie</i> → <i>minä</i> 'I' 	Regional and social variation in word choices <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>pönttö</i> 'podium' (low register)
Some morphological features more typical of spoken varieties <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>me mennään</i> → <i>me menemme</i> 'we go' 	Complex and obscure style <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • long, intricate sentences; semantically ambiguous expressions
Certain syntactic features of spontaneous speech <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>tääl oli edustaja Turunen epäili</i> 'here was MP Turunen suspected' → <i>edustaja Turunen epäili</i> 'MP Turunen suspected' 	Wrong facts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • wrong claims, names and figures
Self-corrections <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>päästöttö-... päästöllisen</i> 'one witho-... with emission' → <i>päästöllisen</i> 'one with emission' 	False citations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • incorrect formulations, missing words
Minor blunders and slips of the tongue <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>sukupuolenvaihdos</i> 'sex change' → <i>sukupolvenvaihdos</i> 'generational turnover' 	Inappropriate conduct <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • informal forms of address, swearing, accusing another MP of lying
Omission of selected particles <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>tota</i> 'kind of', <i>niinku</i> 'like' 	

Figure 1: Language-regulatory practices in Finnish parliamentary reporting

The main reason for the changes that are described above in the top-left column is that these linguistic features, according to the experience of Finnish parliamentary reporters, tend to attract more attention or activate different interpretations in the written report than in the spontaneous speech. For example, everyday particles that often go unnoticed in spoken interaction (e.g. *tota* 'kind of', *niinku* 'like'), can activate interpretations of insecurity or incompetence when they appear in writing. The same goes for, for example, many dialectal phonological features, certain morphological and syntactic characteristics of spontaneous speech, self-corrections, minor blunders and slips of the tongue. It is important to note, however, that these guidelines are only general practices. If, according to the reporter, a feature that is usually changed in the report has clear rhetorical or stylistic significance in a given context, it is not altered, so that the nature of speech does not change in the editorial process. A representative example of this is seen in, for example, cases where the regionally marked language of an MP emphasizes his or her background as a representative of a particular part of the country. A linguistic feature is also left unedited if another MP comments on it during the plenary session. This is particularly topical with blunders and slips of the tongue.

The top-right column above shows some of the features that are, by principle, not changed in the Finnish parliamentary report. Some small structural features are edited for the sake of readability, in order to prevent the report from becoming harder to read or to understand than the original speech which has, for example, prosody, emphasis, pauses and gestures to guide the interpretation. However, complex and obscure style is not edited out to make the report clearer or more pleasant than the original, because that would change the overall appearance of the speech. It would be a violation of what could be called 'the truth before beauty principle': a complex and obscure speech should not appear clear and simple in writing. Similarly, reporters are not supposed to edit out low-register words and replace them with high-register words, not even when the original linguistic choices by the MP might not feel suitable for the parliamentary session (cfr. SLEMBROUCK 1992; MOLLIN 2007). The reason for this is that low-register words do not disturb the readability or comprehensibility of the report. In the same vein, wrong facts, false citations and inappropriate conduct are not changed, because the MP has the responsibility for his or her speech, and their omission could be seen as decreasing the transparency and reliability of the report.

During the parliamentary session, one parliamentary reporter is always present in the plenary hall to take note of essential gestures, movements, interruptions, and events that are not recorded into the microphone. These features are usually added in brackets in the report where they originally occurred. Additionally, minor technical remarks (about e.g. the inactivity of the microphone) and routine turns by the chairman (such as assigning the turns to speak) are edited out, because the focus of the report has traditionally been on official speeches, not the administrative or technical talk in the parliamentary session. (For a more detailed presentation on the language-regulatory practices of Finnish parliamentary reports, see VOUTILAINEN *ET AL.* 2013; VOUTILAINEN 2016.)

4. Language-regulatory devices for the development of linguistic quality in the Finnish parliamentary reporting

In addition to the general principles and guidelines that were described in the beginning of chapter 3, several practical language-regulatory tools have been created to develop the linguistic quality of Finnish parliamentary reports. These include an editorial manual, a parliamentary term-bank, regular editorial meetings, in-service training, and a language team that is responsible for managing these tools. Additionally, many elements in the work process are designed to contribute to the linguistic quality of the report.

4.1 The editorial manual

The editorial manual provides systematic, concrete and detailed guidelines for parliamentary reporting in Finland, created and frequently updated by the Finnish reporting office. The manual consists of *grammatical principles* (e.g. how to report different linguistic structures of spontaneous speech in writing) and *other editorial practices* (e.g. how to report interruptions and forms of address). The manual aims to give a rich array of practical and authentic examples that provide concrete aid for editing the parliamentary report. Technically it is executed simply as a shared MS Word document (ca. 100 pages) that provides helpful tools for automatic search and simultaneous use.

4.2 The parliamentary term bank

The parliamentary term bank strives to list all the relevant and frequently occurring terms, names and expressions with difficult orthography which have been considered to need standardization in parliamentary reporting. As the manual, the term bank is a shared MS Word document (ca. 220 pages), and it is constantly updated with new additions based on the terms and names used in each session. Along with the editorial manual and the more general principles and guidelines, the parliamentary term bank for speech-to-text reporting may be considered as a representative example of top-down language-regulatory practices.

4.3 The editorial meetings

The editorial meetings between parliamentary reporters have been held regularly in the Finnish parliamentary reporting office every two or three weeks for several years. In these one to two hour meetings, the reporters have conversations on both general principles and individual practices that are linked to the linguistic quality of the reports and make joint decisions based on these conversations. There are also group discussions where linguistically challenging reporting cases are solved together. This means that the editorial meetings are a professional practice where both top-down and bottom-up language-regulatory processes are activated (creating new guidelines vs. solving individual cases). A relatively new activity has been a linguistic study circle where relevant linguistic articles and books, such as grammar guides, have been read and discussed critically with respect to speech-to-text reporting for one year, analysing

how they could be applied to the construction of parliamentary report.

4.4 In-service training

In-service training is arranged at least once a year by inviting external professionals to give linguistic lectures in the parliament on a current topic that is closely related to the quality of speech-to-text reporting. These trainings have also provided an opportunity to invite colleagues from related fields (e.g. subtitling and speech-to-text interpreting) to discuss professional matters. Past topics from recent years include, for example, automatic speech recognition, social norms and meanings in language use, the illusion of 'spokenness' in literature, quotations in journalism, the flexibility of standard language, and problematic names and naming in Finnish.

4.5 The language team

The language team leads the development of linguistic principles and guidelines in parliamentary reporting office. It suggests new and updated linguistic and editorial practices for joint discussion, introduces regular updates to the editorial manual and parliamentary term bank, prepares editorial meetings, and plans and arranges in-service training. The members of the language team are also prepared to help other parliamentary reporters with linguistic and editorial problems during reporting. The decisions based on the proposals are done together among parliamentary reporters.

4.6 The work process

In addition to these language-regulatory tools, the work process has been consciously organized by the parliamentary reporting office in a way that aims to promote linguistic quality in speech-to-text reports. For example, the reporters work together with typists, so that they may concentrate on editing an initial draft while listening to the audio record. Also, with very few exceptions, the reporters work with complete speeches from beginning to end without a fixed time-limit, to achieve systematic decisions within one speech. Other similar decisions to confirm linguistic quality include re-reading the reported speech without audio record before initial publication in order to detect possible problems with readability; post-editing after initial publication where the consistency and correctness of the whole report of one parliamentary session is ensured by reading without audio record; and low threshold in consulting colleagues and the MPs in problematic cases.

4. The dynamic cycle of language regulation

With the tools of language regulation mentioned above, one important aim of the Finnish reporting office is to achieve a dynamic, self-renewing cycle of top-down and bottom-up language regulation, illustrated in figure 2.

This figure illustrates the dynamic cycle of language regulation where institutional, explicit top-down regulation guides everyday reporting practices, whereas the implicit and situational bottom-up regulation provides ideas for new and updated top-down guidelines. Top-down

regulation in the Finnish reporting office includes such regulatory practices as outspoken general guidelines, editorial manual, and parliamentary term bank that provide schematic norms to apply in particular reporting situations. Bottom-up regulation, on the other hand, is manifested in, for example, this institutional application and modification of existing norms, joint editing decisions, and case exercises in the editorial meetings that challenge the current guidelines and produce material for their development. This way the guidelines are constantly renewed to match the changing parliamentary culture and the norms are updated to remain relevant for systematic and reliable parliamentary reporting.

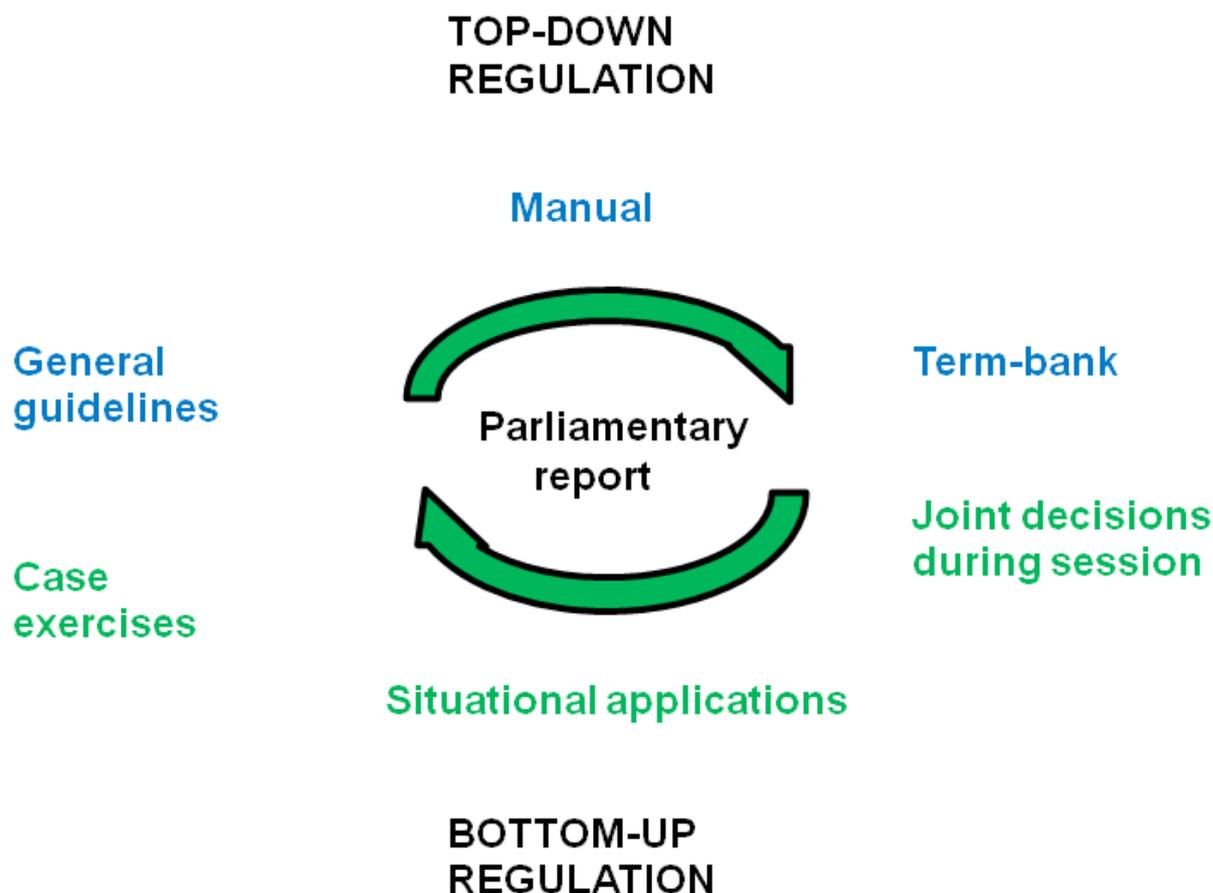


Figure 2: Cycle of language regulation in Finnish parliamentary reporting

5. Conclusions

In this article, I have analyzed how linguistic quality is seen, regulated and consciously developed in the official speech-to-text reports of the Finnish parliament. I have argued that linguistic quality is by nature context dependent and affected by many factors, such as expected needs of the target audiences, the genre of parliamentary report, values and aims of the reporting office, office guidelines, parliamentary reporting culture, and personal preferences and ideals of the reporter. I have described the principles, created by the Finnish parliamentary reporting office, based on the principles of consistency, comprehensiveness, flexibility, and wide, sociolinguistic understanding of linguistic norms and 'correctness'. These principles have guided the construction of concrete editorial guidelines and practices, discussed in chapter 3,

as well as tools for the continuous development of linguistic quality, discussed in chapter 4. The latter includes an editorial manual, a parliamentary term-bank, regular editorial meetings, in-service training, and a language team that is responsible for the development of linguistic quality in the reporting office. These tools have been created and adjusted to create a natural, self-reflective and dynamic interaction between top-down and bottom-up language-regulatory processes. In addition to these independent tools, a number of features in the work-process have been introduced to confirm linguistic quality in the reports, such as editing complete speeches, re-reading reports without audio, post-editing, and consulting colleagues during reporting and editing.

The norms of speech-to-text reporting in the Finnish parliament are the result of a long process from the end of the 19th century to the present day. A detailed diachronical analysis of this process in Finnish and other national parliaments would be an important topic for further study. Furthermore, the existing studies on parliamentary reporting are mostly empirical analysis of reporting and stenography in individual parliaments at different times (e.g. CORTELAZZO 1985; SLEMBROUCK 1992; HUGHES 1996; MOLLIN 2007; GARDEY 2010; HARVARD 2011; CUCCHI 2013; VOUTILAINEN 2016). However, although the parliamentary speech-to-text reporters from different parliaments have actively discussed and compared each others' principles and practices of reporting for decades, little academic research has been made on the relationship between the linguistic principles and practices of different reporting offices. Hereby, conducting a systematic comparison between reporters in different parliaments could provide important information for both professional and scientific community in the future.

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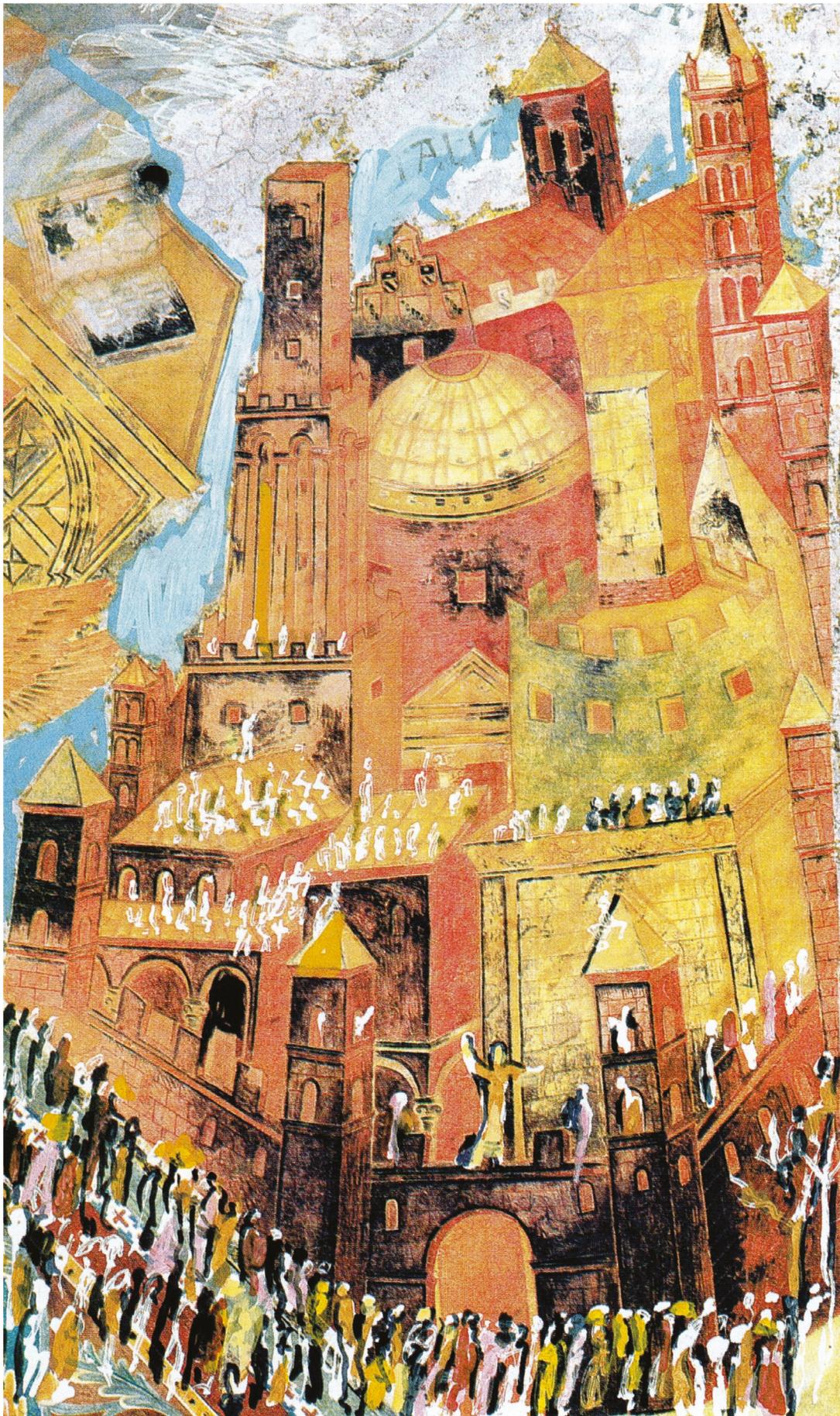
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