

# Knowledge in parliamentary debates

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Parliamentary debates, like all discourse, presuppose vast amounts of knowledge of their participants. MPs need to know about parliamentary procedures, about parties and other MPs, the political system, current social events, and of course the details of ongoing business and the current context of parliamentary interaction, among many other types of knowledge. Within the framework of a new, multidisciplinary epistemology, this paper first explores the many dimensions of knowledge, both in terms of mental representations as well as socially shared Common Ground. Then it examines how these kinds of discourse influence discourse production and comprehension, in general, and of parliamentary debates in particular. The chapter concludes with an “epistemic” analysis of the speech by Tony Blair held in the British House of Commons on the occasion of the September 11 attacks in the USA.

**Keywords:** Knowledge, parliamentary discourse, political discourse, epistemology, common ground, Tony Blair, September 11

## Aims

Within the framework of a multidisciplinary project on discourse and knowledge this paper explores some of the ways various types of knowledge are brought to bear in parliamentary debates. The fundamental presupposition of this exploration is that the well-known insight that engaging in meaningful discourse requires that participants share vast amounts of knowledge.

Since the early 1970s, the cognitive psychology of text processing as well as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and psycholinguistics have shown that and how knowledge of language users is fundamental in text, talk and interaction (Clark 1995; Schank and Abelson 1976; Van Dijk and Kintsch 1983; Van Oostendorp

and Goldman 1999). However, although important advances have been made, and we now know much more about for instance knowledge representations and the processes involved in the uses of knowledge in understanding, there are still vast areas of inquiry that remain virtually unexplored. Thus, our insights into the detailed mental structures of knowledge representation remain very sketchy. We may have an idea of the knowledge representation of mundane events in terms of scripts, or of objects in terms of frames, and more generally may represent knowledge in terms of schemata, but these are formats that hardly apply to all knowledge. Secondly, within a more general theory of knowledge, we need to develop a theory of different *types* of knowledge, and each of these types may have a different influence on discourse production and understanding. Thirdly, also the processes involved in the activation and application of discourse in processing are only understood in quite general terms. Indeed, how *much* knowledge may or must be activated for people to understand discourse, how do they de-activate knowledge items that are no longer relevant, and how is activated knowledge combined with semantic discourse representations? These are only some of the many problems that still need detailed investigation.

In the framework of this paper, I shall ask some of these questions in relation to a theory of political discourse in general, and with respect to a theory of parliamentary debates in particular. In earlier work, I have argued that a multidisciplinary genre theory of parliamentary debates prominently features a theory of context (Van Dijk 2003). This means that it is not merely the discursive structure of such debates that uniquely characterizes them, but rather also the structures of their context, such as its setting, its participants (and their different roles), and the ongoing (political) action. Part of such context is also the (mutual) knowledge speakers have. This means that in their mental models of the social situation of the communicative event, that is, in their context models, participants have a device, which I call K-device, that regulates the way their knowledge is brought to bear in their discourse, for instance in the complex interplay of presuppositions and implications and their manifestation in various discourse structures. In parliamentary discourse this obviously means special knowledge about the political process, besides more general knowledge about society.

### Towards a new epistemology

It hardly needs to be argued that knowledge needs to be studied in a multidisciplinary framework, in which discursive, cognitive, social and cultural dimensions

need to be made explicit and mutually related. In this respect we go beyond the classical approach in epistemology, whose conceptual definition of knowledge in terms of “justified true beliefs”, and some of its more sophisticated modern versions, barely do justice to the complexity of the concept (for recent collections of relevant studies, see, e.g., Bernecker & Dretzke, 2000; Greco & Sosa, 1999).

This paper is not the appropriate site to challenge classical epistemology, and I shall simply state that we need a new epistemology that is in tune with developments in the humanities and the social sciences. Thus, we obviously need a cognitive account of the structures and processes of knowledge, as mentioned above, a social account of the ways knowledge is used and spread by groups and cultures and their members, and a discursive theory of the way knowledge is being expressed and reproduced in text and talk, among other approaches.

One of the first changes with respect to the classical definition is to get rid of the concept of “truth”, which I shall reserve for statements, but which is irrelevant for a theory of knowledge, at least under the more usual understandings of the notion of “truth”. More generally, I reject an absolute concept of knowledge as it is related to truth, and prefer to work with more relativistic ideas of knowledge, taking into account concrete “knowers” and epistemic communities in which knowledge is being shared and used. In this framework, then, knowledge is defined as the beliefs shared by the competent members of epistemic communities and which have been “certified” as such on the basis of the knowledge criteria of an epistemic community.

### *Relativism*

Obviously, such criteria are different in the everyday life of citizens, in scholarly communities, or within social movements. This means that the criteria may change historically, and hence also the knowledge based on them. What is considered to be mere belief today, may have been accepted as knowledge yesterday. And what is knowledge in one epistemic community may be considered mere beliefs or superstition by another community. In other words, such relativism is related to both contextualism and a social approach to knowledge, which hold that truth or rather truth or justification criteria depend on the social situation and social conditions, as is for instance the case in feminist and social epistemology (Longino 1990, 1999; Schmitt 1994). Such relativism may seem unacceptable for an epistemology that also wants to be able to speak about absolute or universal knowledge, but this is an abstract ideal that is inconsistent

with the nature of real knowledge of real people. This is not only true for moral philosophy, but also for a theory of knowledge.

It should be noted, however, that this relativism itself is also relative, as it should be. Although knowledge may be relative to epistemic communities and hence may appear as mere belief in other periods or from the perspective of other communities, this does not mean that *within* an epistemic community such knowledge is seen and used as being relative. Indeed, within epistemic communities, knowledge may be as absolute as can be, and people may speak and act accordingly. That is, within an epistemic community, as well as in its commonsense thought and language use of everyday life, people do make a distinction between (mere) belief and (“true”) knowledge. One of the many problems of classical epistemology is that it mixes up such common-sense notions of knowledge with abstract, scientific or philosophical ones.

### *Types of knowledge*

Knowledge, thus briefly defined as the certified beliefs shared in an epistemic community, is hardly a unified phenomenon. Although in psychology as well as in linguistics and discourse analysis, we are used to speaking rather vaguely of “knowledge of the world”, it should be emphasized that there are many types of knowledge. Thus, we have the usual distinction between procedural and declarative knowledge (knowing *how* vs. knowing *that*), although even that distinction is not without problems when one thinks of many of the rules of discourse, which often are located in between knowing *how* (e.g., to be polite in conversation) and knowing *what* (e.g., (not) to say in order to be polite in conversation).

Similarly, knowledge may be shared by one or several persons, by groups, nations, societies or cultures. That is, different kinds of knowledge may be distinguished depending on their *scope*. Since epistemic communities are a crucial aspect of the definition of knowledge, it is obvious that we can distinguish as many types of knowledge as we have types of epistemic communities. That is, personal (private) knowledge and interpersonal knowledge are quite different in scope and uses. For instance, interpersonal knowledge can be presupposed in conversation among people who share such knowledge, whereas personal (private) knowledge by definition needs to be asserted in conversation, for instance in stories. And we may define general, sociocultural knowledge as being shared by all members of a culture, that is, across different social and ideological groups. It is this cultural Common Ground that is presupposed in

all discourse in a given culture. Here we also see a first systematic link between discourse and knowledge, in which knowledge is defined as the shared beliefs presupposed in discourse (for details, see Clark 1996).

Knowledge not only varies as to its scope, but also as to its level. Thus, it may be very general or very specific, with various intermediate levels. That is, it may be knowledge of a very specific, unique event, with unique persons, or may be more general about such a type of events, or about more general properties of participants. Psychologically, such a difference is usually also associated with different kinds of memory, namely between episodic memory and semantic memory (Tulving 1983). Often knowledge of a broad scope, as widely shared in a major epistemic community, also tends to be quite general, simply because it can then be used in many situations. In discourse, specific vs. general knowledge is also systematically different, for instance in the way it is expressed in stories, histories or more general discourse forms, such as in scientific discourse.

We have seen that the classical definition of knowledge implies the notion of truth. Although we have rejected the notion of truth as an element of a theory of knowledge, this does not mean that we reject an account of the relation between knowledge and what is intuitively called “the world” or “reality”. And although this paper, as said before, cannot be the place to discuss questions of ontology, I shall again assume that common-sense epistemic communities in various ways operate with some notion of “world” or “reality” as distinct from our beliefs. That is, members usually assume some kind of correspondence between beliefs and reality, and often associate such a relationship with the concept of “truth”. For our typology, then, we assume that knowledge can be further analyzed in terms of such a correspondence. We thus distinguish between facts versus fiction, fantasy, etc., and between knowledge that corresponds to events or situations that are necessary, probably or possibly the case.

Closely related but conceptually distinct, finally, is the typological criterion of certainty. That is, our beliefs may be more or less certain, and we may be 100% sure of something, very sure, pretty sure, and less sure. Much of what we call knowledge in everyday life is mere PSK, that is “pretty sure knowledge”, and that is good enough for all practical purposes. Most of us know that Paris is the capital of France, but if pressed and asked to bet our yearly salary on it, we might reason that maybe for some strange historical reason some other French city might after all be capital, and probably the odds would go down to about 95% sure. Indeed, when asked the same question about Holland and given the options The Hague or Amsterdam, many people may feel even less sure.

Although this brief typology may not be exhaustive, it does capture at least some important aspects of the diversity of knowledge in everyday life, and how this also may affect the way knowledge is related to discourse. The various types combined yield many subtypes, such as specific private knowledge (about what I did this morning), more or less sure, specific, socially shared historical knowledge (e.g. about the events of September 11, 2001), general personal knowledge (e.g., what I know about my partner), and so on. Although far from perfect, this flexible and diverse way of dealing with knowledge allows a much more interesting study of the way such *knowledges* are related to text and talk. In the framework of this paper, for instance, we should ask ourselves what kind of *political knowledge* is acquired, shared and used by members of parliament.

## Discourse and knowledge

The point of this discussion on knowledge is that knowledge fundamentally influences many aspects of text and talk. Meaning and understanding in general depend on what speech participants know about the world, each other and the other aspects of the context. Indeed, it is their mental model of the context, featuring their own knowledge as well as their knowledge about the knowledge of the recipients, that is the controlling interface between knowledge and discourse (Van Dijk 1999). It is here that language users represent which parts of their huge amounts of knowledge is actually *relevant* for the ongoing discourse (see also, Sperber and Wilson 1995).

In the last 30 years, cognitive psychology and AI have made many contributions to the study of the relevance of knowledge in the study of discourse processing. They have shown that in order to understand words, sentences or sequences of sentences, people need to activate knowledge, for instance in order to establish local coherence between propositions, to derive overall topics, to infer implicatures, to make presuppositions explicit, and so on (Britton and Graesser 1996; Graesser and Clark 1985; Graesser and Bower 1990; Van Dijk and Kintsch 1983). Understanding often involves the construction of a mental model of the events the discourse is about (Johnson-Laird 1983; Van Dijk and Kintsch 1983; Van Oostendorp and Goldman 1999). This mental model is constructed with the help of the propositions expressed in the text, plus a selection of the relevant knowledge items derived from the participants' general knowledge. Thus, when reading about actions, our general knowledge about such actions allows us to infer reasons or consequences of actions that may be

relevant for the understanding of the rest of the text. How much knowledge will be activated and integrated in such a mental model also depends on the context, for instance on our intentions, that is, on our context model.

It obviously also depends on our context model, namely on the knowledge about the knowledge of the recipients, how we make explicit the knowledge we have. The coordination of this kind of knowledge-context interface is the task of the K-device mentioned above. The general strategy is, of course, that we tend to leave implicit the knowledge we think that the recipients already have. But this general strategy may be flouted in many ways, depending on context. Thus, in educational contexts, but also in any other situation in which we need to be sure that the recipients know and memorize something, we may repeat the same information more than once. Sometimes, we do not know for sure whether recipients know something, and in that case, we may follow specific moves, such as those of ascertaining or reminding that do not actually (re)assert information, but more indirectly make sure that the recipients have the information we want them to have (“As you know, Amsterdam is the capital of the Netherlands”, “Amsterdam, the beautiful capital of the Netherlands”, etc). And even if we know that recipients do not have some knowledge item, we may be quite discreet in the way we assert such knowledge, for various reasons of politeness or social appropriateness. And finally, we obviously may have knowledge that we want to hide from the recipients, and in that case they should not even indirectly be hinted at, for instance by the use of presuppositions.

Instead of detailing these various strategies and moves in terms of their more specific cognitive operations, let us now move to a more concrete discussion of the role of discourse in parliamentary debates.

## **Politics and knowledge**

There is a vast literature on political cognition, focusing on how citizens acquire and use political knowledge and beliefs, e.g., in the selection or voting for candidates, or how political beliefs are formed and changed as a consequence of political persuasion (Lau and Sears 1986; Kublinksi 2001, 2002; Van Dijk 2002). Indeed, how is our knowledge about politics, politicians, elections, parliaments, etc., organized? What kind of knowledge schemata do politicians use? These and other questions have been dealt with in the field of political cognition, of which this paper will only select one aspect for further exploration: strategies for the use of various kinds of knowledge in parliamentary debates.

In the same way people need knowledge to produce and understand discourse MPs need general and more specialized knowledge to be able to participate as competent members in parliamentary debates. They need knowledge about politics in general, more special knowledge about the issues at hand, knowledge about parliamentary procedures, knowledge about other MPs and their parties, and knowledge about the current parliamentary session, among other forms of knowledge.

Of course, MPs not only have knowledge but also other beliefs, such as personal opinions, group attitudes and ideologies. Indeed, what they express or presuppose as knowledge, may well be considered an ideological opinion by their political opponents.

We have seen above that only general, cultural Common Ground is presupposed by all members, independent of their political or ideological orientation (Van Dijk 1999a). In parliament, also specialized, professional knowledge is presupposed, as is the case in all epistemic communities. Members have to learn parliamentary procedures (Griffith, Ryle and Wheeler-Booth 1990), and gradually, and more or less explicitly (through other members, manuals and the usual institutional lore and socialization strategies) they acquire such knowledge. Only when conflicts or other problems appear, such knowledge will be made explicit for explicit commentary or in normative argumentation, e.g. when some member breaks the rules. Certain kinds of knowledge are virtually implicit, and MPs barely aware of them.

In the same way as the distinction between knowledge and mere beliefs is scalar, so is the distinction between “factive” and “evaluative” beliefs such as opinions. That is, even when MPs think or intend to tell the “facts”, they may be heard by other MPs as giving an opinion about the facts. This is not surprising, of course, because beliefs about events are represented in mental models of such events, and such mental models also feature people’s opinions and emotions about such events. This means that when such mental models are used as the input information for a discourse, the evaluative and emotional dimensions may also enter the process of discourse production. This may show in explicit opinion markers such as specific lexical items (such as in the well-known *terrorist* vs. *freedom fighter* pair) to describe groups, their properties or their relations, but also in intonation, rhetorical devices (such as metaphors, etc., discourse formats, and so on. Despite these gradual differences between knowledge and opinion, this paper will focus on the knowledge side of beliefs.

It is this knowledge that MPs bring to bear in their discourses, and which is needed in order to understand the discourses of their fellow MPs. Such



understanding is not only more or less literal understanding of what is being said, but involves several levels or layers of implications, implicatures or other forms of implied meaning, only some of which may be intentional. Given my contention that many properties that distinguish different discourse genres are in fact contextual, and assuming that knowledge is an important category of context we must conclude that also the different ways knowledge is managed in parliamentary debates is probably an important aspect of such debates as a genre. Let us examine such K-strategies in somewhat more detail.

## Analysis

We shall do so by analyzing some fragments of a parliamentary debate in the British House of Commons, namely the debate held on Friday September 14, 2001 on “International Terrorism and Attacks in the USA” on the occasion of the attacks in the USA. The debate is published in the House of Commons Hansard Debates for 14 September, on the internet site of the House of Commons. The size of this 5 hour debate is over 36,000 words.

Rather than the usual debate that pitches government parties, in this case Labour, against the opposition, in this case especially the Conservatives, the emergency of the attacks in the USA calls for a national consensus in which the opposition joins forces with the government to condemn the attacks, to show solidarity with the victims and an historically allied country, and to announce various measures of security. Apart from some more critical voices that emphasize the deeper causes of the attacks, the opinions expressed in this debate are remarkably similar.

This extraordinary session of the House of Commons is opened by a short speech by Prime Minister Tony Blair, followed by the leaders of the other parties, and a speech by Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, followed by other speakers of different parties. Most interventions follow the usual patterns of public political declarations in times of emergency when the nation is threatened. Indeed, Tony Blair also begins by declaring that the attacks were not merely directed against the United States but against “the basic democratic values in which we all believe so passionately and on the civilised world”. The people of America as friends and allies are promised British solidarity and cooperation. As is the case for other discourses on September 11 in many other countries, the attacks are compared with national tragedies, wars or terrorist attacks in which British lives were lost, such as Lockerbie, the Falklands, the

Gulf War or the terrorist attack in Omagh, Northern Ireland. And in the same way as in the public discourses in the USA or elsewhere, as was the case for President George W. Bush's discourse for the United Nations, Blair emphasizes that the attack should not be associated with "decent law-abiding Muslims throughout the world". Finally Blair describes the terrorist groups thought to be responsible for the attacks in the usual rhetorical terms of negative other-presentation and positive self-presentation:

- (1) We know a good deal about many of these terror groups. But as a world we have not been effective at dealing with them. Of course it is difficult. We are democratic. They are not. We have respect for human life. They do not. We hold essentially liberal values. They do not. As we look into these issues it is important that we never lose sight of our basic values. But we have to understand the nature of this enemy and act accordingly (...) We know that these groups are fanatics, capable of killing without discrimination. The limits on the numbers that they kill and their methods of killing are not governed by any sense of morality. The limits are only practical and technical. We know, that they would, if they could, go further and use chemical, biological, or even nuclear weapons of mass destruction. We know, also, that there are groups of people, occasionally states, who will trade the technology and capability of such weapons. (...) Terrorism has taken on a new and frightening aspect. The people perpetrating it wear the ultimate badge of the fanatic: they are prepared to commit suicide in pursuit of their beliefs. Our beliefs are the very opposite of theirs. We believe in reason, democracy and tolerance. These beliefs are the foundation of our civilised world. They are enduring, they have served us well, and as history has shown, we have been prepared to fight, when necessary, to defend them. The fanatics should know that we hold our beliefs every bit as strongly as they hold theirs, and now is the time to show it (Columns 606–607).

Apart from briefly promising heightened airport security and other measures, Blair's speech is hardly programmatic, and barely goes beyond asserting that the British will stand "shoulder to shoulder" with their U.S. friends. The other speeches generally follow the same pattern, some recounting personal experiences of recent visits to the USA or about friends who have been close witnesses of the attacks.

It cannot be the aim of this paper to study all the topics, style or strategies of these speeches. I shall limit myself to a study of some of the ways knowledge is being managed in this debate. A first observation to be made in this respect

is that, apart from personal experiences, very little new information is being given in these speeches. After several days of intense national and international coverage, most of the “facts” are known to all the participants of the debate. This means that where assertions are being made, they usually have the function of reminders or of information that is used as a presupposition of other statements, mostly of emotions and evaluations. Yet, at the same time such a heavy presuppositional structure also allows us to examine which presupposed information is thus indirectly being asserted, even if it is not actually being shared.

Obviously, there is not one way or method to analyze the manifold manifestations of knowledge in discourse, so we shall focus on different epistemic dimensions of the fragments in question.

### The explicit expression of knowledge

Although most knowledge necessary to produce or understand a discourse is presupposed and hence implicit, speakers do also explicitly refer to knowledge. This is obviously the case for reference to the knowledge of others than themselves or the recipient. They also may refer to their own knowledge, as a person or as shared with others, e.g., the recipients. And of course, speakers may state that they do *not* know something, a use quite prominent in this debate, since there is still a lot unknown about the events, such as the responsible actors of the attacks. Relevant also are all uses in which for the same reasons the speaker emphasizes that we *need* a specific kind of knowledge, e.g. before policies can be decided. Let us examine some of these examples and try to categorize them in various ways that are relevant for an analysis of parliamentary debates.

#### *Making shared knowledge explicit*

One of the ways “to know” used in discourse is to make shared knowledge explicit. Obviously this is a marked case, because shared knowledge usually remains implicit, and hardly needs to be stated again. The form in which such expressions appear is the presupposition-preserving expression “we (all) know that...”, where “we” in parliament usually refers to all MPs or more generally to all or most citizens. Here are some examples (bold type for “know” is mine, unless otherwise indicated):

- (2) As we speak, the total death toll is still unclear, but it amounts, we **know**, to several thousands.
- (3) Their objective we **know**.
- (4) But if, as appears likely, it is so-called Islamic fundamentalists, we **know** that they do not speak or act for the vast majority of decent law-abiding Muslims throughout the world.
- (5) We **know** a good deal about many of these terror groups.
- (6) We **know** that these groups are fanatics, capable of killing without discrimination.
- (7) We all **know** the consequences of what followed.

In these examples, we see that “we know” tends to be used as a marked expression of shared knowledge especially when it is compared or contrasted with lacking or doubtful knowledge. That is, in the debate on September 11 and international terrorism, it is often said that we may not know exactly who has done it, but we do know at least a couple of things about the perpetrators. Politically speaking this is important, because obviously no decisions or policy can be made on the basis of ignorance or doubts, so that what we *do* know needs to be emphasized and hence made explicit, as in these examples. Example (4) is interesting in this case because it is not so much an expression of shared knowledge — indeed, many people actually do equate terrorism, Islamism and Muslims. Rather, then, in this case the knowledge of the speaker is contrasted with the prejudices of many others, and rather as a normative statement about what we *ought* to know or believe.

### *Emphasizing plausible inference*

We have seen that many forms of knowledge are hardly knowledge in the strict sense, but rather firm belief or plausible inference. Common with the previous function of explicit “know” is that implicitly some form of doubt is also present here, in the sense that the speaker knows that no real knowledge is involved but merely firm belief. Of course, such statements are in principle open for challenge, because they may not be shared by the recipients at all. Here are a few examples:

- (8) We **know**, that they would, if they could, go further and use chemical, biological, or even nuclear weapons of mass destruction.

- (9) We **know**, also, that there are groups of people, occasionally states, who will trade the technology and capability of such weapons.
- (10) I think I **know** part of the answer.
- (11) It is also important to have an international response because we **know** that there is no point in indulging in behaviour or sanctioning action that reinforces the notion that might is right.
- (12) I **know** that our emergency services would have reacted with the same outstanding courage and self-sacrifice as was demonstrated by their American colleagues.

Again, the political function of this use of “know” in this debate is obvious. Although strictly speaking mere belief, it is belief that for the speaker is so firm that it should be taken as knowledge for all practical purposes, and hence to base policy on: If we know what terrorist will do, we know how to respond to that before they do so, as also the speaker in example (10) emphasizes. Note also in (10) that, interestingly, the speaker says that he *thinks* he knows. A classical definition of knowledge in terms of justified true beliefs would be inconsistent with such a way of speaking. It merely indicates that the speaker believes that according to his certification criteria, he knows something. Yet, obviously, the use of “think” in this case *does* mark an element of doubt.

### *Promises and menaces*

When predicated of the recipients or other people, often in a normative framework (“you *should* know”, or “they *must* know”), the use of “know” typically marks speech acts such as promises and menaces, that is, knowledge about good or bad future acts or states of affairs:

- (15) The fanatics should **know** that we hold our beliefs every bit as strongly as they hold theirs, and now is the time to show it.
- (16) They should **know** that they would be regarded by the other nations of the world as legitimate targets should they indeed harbour terrorists.
- (17) People must **know** that, whatever acts they commit, they will be caught and brought to the bar of international justice.

That is, the knowledge normatively attributed to the others, is rather a consequence of what is now being stated as a threat or promise, namely a necessary epistemic consequence of what we are now *telling* them. Politically speaking, such references to the “necessary knowledge” of others imply the performance

of speech acts of political promises or threats, that is, of adequate policies of response and measures of security and defense.

### *Facts*

Knowledge can be expressed explicitly in many ways, for instance by expressions such as “the fact is”, “I am sure that”, etc. Reference to the “facts” is especially made when referring to past events in complex statements, so that these events become presupposed in the current discourse:

- (18) We still do not have those, and the scenes on our television screens of events in the channel tunnel for many weeks past are evidence of that **fact**.

Of course, such uses may be manipulative in the sense that they suggest that the past event as told indeed happened, although such may not be the case at all:

- (19) There is also, I think, a recognition of the **fact** that the threat to the world today has changed since some of the sharp ideological divisions of the cold war declined.

Interestingly, therefore, as we have seen for the use of explicit “know” speakers often refer to the “facts” when they refer to events, acts or states of affairs that have been or might be doubted, or that they want to be the case:

- (20) I thought it particularly important in view of the **fact** that these attacks were not just attacks upon people and buildings; nor even merely upon the United States of America; these were attacks on the basic democratic values in which we all believe so passionately and on the civilised world.
- (21) That is quite wrong and it is important, in all we say and do, that we underline the **fact** that it is wrong.
- (22) There is also, I think, a recognition of the **fact** that the threat to the world today has changed since some of the sharp ideological divisions of the cold war declined.

Thus, in (20), the speaker gives his firm opinion, namely that the attacks were not merely an attack on the USA but on the whole civilized world, a well-known *topos* in the debates on September 11. In (21) even more strongly, a normative statement (that something is wrong) is presented as a fact. And in (22) also, it is the speaker’s personal interpretation of the situation of the world that is presented as a fact. We might say that these uses of “fact” are just sloppy, but

also that such expressions function as expressions of firm beliefs, and especially as certified presuppositions for inferences and decision-making, as is of course relevant for MPs.

### *Being sure*

One common-sense meaning of the everyday use of “I know” is that one is pretty sure of one’s claims. I therefore examined the use of “(being) sure” in this debate, and found that one of its uses is that of firm belief, as is the case for many uses of “know”, for instance as in:

- (23) It is fruitless to speculate on the scale of military action that the Americans may be planning to undertake, but **I am sure** that the whole House agrees that it must be proportionate, clearly and legitimately targeted and effective. I am confident that it will be.
- (24) Has anyone else noted that 24 hours before the attack in America, General Masoud, the leading freedom fighter in Afghanistan — first against the Soviets, then against the Taliban — was the victim of a suicide bomb attempt that was meticulously and skilfully planned? I do not believe that that was a coincidence. **I am sure** that there is a connection between that event and what followed a day later in New York.

The first example is an expression of plausibly shared beliefs or knowledge, typically expressed in the consensus rhetoric of parliament, especially in dramatic circumstances like these, when national unity is important. But in (24) we see a piece of reasoning and speculation that is concluded by the expression of a belief for which not even further evidence is presented. That is, “being sure”, at least in this kind of political discourse, may just as well be doxastic rather than epistemic.

Note at the end of (23) a more formal version of “I am sure” in parliament is “I am confident that” or “I trust that” (each occurring once in the debate), with similar presuppositions and implications.

The other main use of “sure” in this debate is part of the expression “making sure”, generally used in a normative sense, that is, when referring to our obligations to act conscientiously, not to make errors, etc.

### *No doubt*

Given our analysis above, we might predict that people tend to use another epistemic expression, “no doubt”, precisely when there could be doubt, or when

they proffer an opinion. Indeed, the facts that are beyond doubt are either simply presupposed or asserted, and do not need such an epistemic tag.

- (25) There is **no doubt** that the angel of death is very much with us today.
- (26) There must be an all-party reconsideration of the matter in which the excellent Chairman of the Select Committee on Defence, my close friend the right hon. Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George), will **no doubt** play a critical role.
- (27) A range of practical measures can and **no doubt** will be taken, and I trust that they will be taken quickly.

Our expectation is indeed confirmed, in that (25) features a “no doubt” that is about a religious experience or a metaphorical expression, depending on whether the speaker is taken literally or not. In (26) and (27) future actions are being referred to, and hence are hardly facts. In other words, again, expressions such as “no doubt” tend to apply to firm opinions, normative expressions (things that must be done), or expected or desired future actions or events.

### *Agreement*

Fundamental in the theoretical account of knowledge is the shared nature of beliefs in an epistemic community. Interactionally, this often means that in conversations and debates such shared knowledge is expressed in the form of *agreement*. In this debate this agreement both takes the form of the national consensus in times of an emergency (“we all agree that...”), as well as the extraordinary agreement between Government and Opposition on the evaluation of the events and on the measures to be taken. Since many of these measures in fact imply a strengthening of the usual law and order policies, they of course perfectly agree with the Conservative agenda. As is the case in the USA, and for instance in Spain against ETA, left and right tend to be united against terrorist attacks. This is how Tony Blair formulates such agreement, emphasizing the non-partisan consensus when it comes to condemning terrorism:

- (28) There will, of course, be different shades of opinion heard today. That again is as it should be, but let us unite in **agreeing** this: what happened in the United States on Tuesday was an act of wickedness for which there can be no justification. Whatever the cause, whatever the perversion of religious feeling, whatever the political belief, to inflict such terror on the



world; to take the lives of so many innocent and defenceless men, women, and children, can never ever be justified.

Note that agreement usually implies sharing opinions or evaluative beliefs, as is the case here. However, especially also in the formal style of parliamentary speeches, agreement also means agreement of knowledge, of assessment of the situation, that is, of interpretation in general. Of course, such agreement in this case is especially relevant between Government and Opposition. Iain Duncan Smith, opposition leader, therefore emphasized his agreement, as follows:

- (29) I **agree** with the Prime Minister that we need urgently to assess how we respond, individually and collectively, and I welcome his commitment to review the laws against terrorism, taking account also of the worrying links with organised crime.

And this is how David Trimble of the Unionist Parties (Ulster) in his turn shows his agreement with Duncan Smith:

- (30) May I also underline and **agree** with the Leader of the Opposition's comments, in which he pointed out that we have seen the worst act of terrorism inflicted on the British people since the last war?

However, even in a consensus debate there are at least slight differences of opinion and assessment, some of which may appear in rhetorical or real questions, in the usual style of provoking dispreferred answers, as in the following question:

- (31) Referring to what the Prime Minister said about future co-operation, does he **agree** that it is almost inconceivable that intelligence or security agencies somewhere in the world did not have wind of an event in which so many people were involved and which took so long to plan?

In fact, Blair does not accept the proposed agreement and withholds comments on what he calls the "speculation" of the first question. We here observe a nice example in which the interactional proposal to share firm beliefs, conceptualized as the inconceivability of the negation, is rejected by the recipient. On the scale between undisputable knowledge and mere beliefs, speculation is undoubtedly on the side of the more unreliable beliefs.

Given the consensual nature of the debate, however, it is not surprising that the concept of agreement is mentioned 34 times in this debate and disagreement only 4 times — once in a sentence in which the right of disagreement in a democratic society is being emphasized. One of the few moments of disagreement

is when the Prime Minister strongly disagrees with an MP (Dennis Skinner) who, unlike the others, expresses doubts about President Bush, whom he describes as “scurrying off to his bunker”, an assessment that is responded to by other MPs with the exclamation “Shame!”. This is one of the very few moments of discord in the debate.

Notice, finally, that there is a particularly formal variant of the concept of agreement in British parliamentary jargon: “to accept”, often in the form of questions to the Prime Minister:

- (32) Mr. Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr): Will the Prime Minister **accept** my unreserved condemnation of the atrocities carried out in the United States? Will he also accept that that terrible act of terrorism claimed the lives of many people of many faiths, including Muslims? In addition, will he assure the House that it would be quite wrong for British Muslims to be tarred with the same brush following that dreadful act of terrorism?
- (33) Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): Does the Prime Minister **accept** that, when the initial horror of the atrocities subsides, sophisticated attempts will be made to limit the action that can be taken by trying to link what some regard as just causes with the atrocities? Does he agree that such approaches will ignore both the fanaticism of those who have carried out these grotesque acts and their unlimited objectives?

We see that the relevant meanings here are not the same as the usual reading of “to accept” in, for instance, making apologies. Since the Prime Minister also responds in terms of agreement, we must read these expressions again in terms of consensus or agreement, that is, in terms of shared beliefs — at least rhetorically affirmed or questioned. Notice also that the second speaker continues her intervention with a similar question asked in terms of agreement.

### *Evidentials*

Closely related to our knowledge are the ways people obtain, certify or justify knowledge, for instance through the various epistemic criteria of their epistemic communities. Politicians, and especially also MPs, are such a community, and what they accept to be certified knowledge must go beyond those of everyday life. That is, in order to be able to debate all kinds of political events and policies, technical, economic, bureaucratic, and other specialized information may also be necessary. In discourse, such specialized knowledge sources need to

be frequently invoked in order to justify or legitimate political action or decision, or to sustain arguments in political discourse. Also politicians, in their own specific way, need to show the evidence of what they claim, and therefore also have recourse to a set of evidentials (Biber and Finegan 1989; Chafe 1986; Kamio 1997; Mushin 2001).

With regard to the events of September 11, these evidentials obviously are primarily referring to the mass media, from which virtually all shared knowledge about the events are obtained by the MPs of the British House of Commons. They indeed make frequent references to the dramatic images of the twin towers as they appear in the press and on television:

- (34) We are speaking a few days after the event, when the memory of it is fresh in our minds and its consequences are seen daily in our newspapers and on our television screens (613)
- (35) We watched the television and read the newspapers — I read the Washington Post and The New York Times — and looked at the long list of people who had lost their lives and the circumstances in which they had started their day (650)
- (36) One of the most moving and poignant images in today's press is of a fireman running up the stairs as others were running in the opposite direction, fleeing for their lives.

The reference to “fresh” memories in our minds is part of the evidential, and an argument why these are not merely faded memories but recent and hence exact memories, making knowledge more reliable.

There are many other sources the MPs use for their statements. First of all they frequently refer to each other, a form of deictic or other contextual reference that is quite common in parliamentary debates. In this case, these references are generally positive, instead of the more critical encounters in the more ordinary debates. But also other people are thus referred to as speakers and as sources, e.g. to provide evidence for the things stated or support for the opinions expressed:

- (37) The NATO Secretary General, Lord Robertson, rightly said that an attack on one is an attack on all.
- (38) Some have said that Tuesday changed the world for ever,
- (39) The Muslim Council of Britain said in its strong condemnation of the atrocities: “These are senseless and evil acts that appal all people of conscience”.

- (40) That international response has been heartening, because if terrorism is to be driven from the face of our planet, we need, as US Secretary of State Colin Powell has said, to form a worldwide coalition against it.
- (41) I believe that it was Mahatma Gandhi who said that the problem with an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth is that we would soon end up with a blind, toothless world.
- (42) President Bush described Tuesday's outrage as an act of war.

The functions of these various evidentials are well-known, and range from lending support of political, military or moral authorities to vague reference to "some" in (38). Of course, in a situation like this, one would especially expect military sources on the one hand, and moral sources (like Gandhi) on the other.

As is the case in news discourse, these forms of intertextuality may also serve to attribute opinions, especially controversial ones, to others, and hence to avoid possible face loss. Quite prominent in this debate, as well as for instance in Bush's UN speech is the frequent reference to credible Muslim sources, so as to convey the message that the very negative words concerning the terrorists are not understood as being against Muslims, and in order to express the support of Muslims for the campaign against terrorists. There are also repeated references to the words of personal friends who were victimized by the events. Whereas reliable sources usually are mentioned as support for the veracity of statements, such references to friends or victims are similarly presented as a warrant for the genuine emotions of the speakers.

Finally, reliable sources may be complemented with statistics in order to enhance credibility:

- (43) Statistics from my small part of the world show that...

### *Other expressions of knowledge and belief*

There are of course many other ways firm beliefs or knowledge can be lexicalized in discourse, either by word meanings, or by discursive implications and presuppositions. Thus, we encounter also the following fact-implying verbs or predicate phrases in the debate, among others:

- it is clear that
- it is obvious that
- it is right that
- to acknowledge that
- to admit that

- to be afraid that
- to be confident that
- to be conscious of
- to be reminded of
- to conclude that
- to have certainty about
- to realize that
- to recognize that
- to remember that
- to understand that

Whatever their stylistic and contextual differences, these various verbs presuppose knowledge or firm beliefs of various kinds, e.g., combined with the following implications or presuppositions:

- knowledge of events of the past (to remember, remind, etc.)
- discovery of (new) knowledge (to realize...)
- certain knowledge (to be confident that, it is obvious that, it is clear that, )
- reluctant knowledge (to be afraid that, fear that, to admit that, to acknowledge that)
- inferential knowledge (to conclude that, understand that).

These examples show again that knowledge is not a unified kind of belief, but a vast complex of different kinds of mental representations or “propositional attitudes”, ranging from mere beliefs to absolute certainty, depending on the believers, the context and the strategies of their discursive manifestation in debate. Such knowledge may be about past, present or future, about real, fictitious or abstract events, be old or new knowledge, and acquired by observation, experience, inference or more or less reliable sources. It may be our own, or shared with others, desired or reluctantly accepted knowledge, apply to just one event or to many events and situations. In sum, as we have suggested before, and as the data also show, knowledge is rather a field of mental experiences than just one kind of belief.

### **Implicit knowledge**

Most of the forms of knowledge examined above are explicitly expressed in lexical items or phrases. We have seen, however, that most knowledge, and

especially socially shared knowledge, remains implicit, namely as implications and presuppositions. Let us finally examine in some detail the various ways such implicit knowledge is associated with this parliamentary debate.

*Presupposed specific/event knowledge*

We have already seen that most of the specific knowledge presupposed by this debate is about the events of September 11 and as those events have been communicated by the mass media. Indeed, Tony Blair begins by reminding his audience of these events, which he calls “sickening familiar”:

- (44) The events themselves are sickeningly familiar to us. Starting at 08.45 US time, two hijacked planes were flown straight into the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York. Shortly afterwards at 09.43, another hijacked plane was flown into the Pentagon in Washington. At 10.05 the first tower collapsed; at 10.28 the second; later another building at the World Trade Centre. The heart of New York’s financial district was devastated; carnage, death and injury everywhere. Around 10.30 we heard reports that a fourth hijacked aircraft had crashed south of Pittsburgh. (Column 604).

That is, these and other facts of September 11 communicated by the mass media are henceforth presupposed to be known also by all participants in the debate, and need no longer be asserted. All expressions of emotion and evaluation expressed in this debate, both about the events themselves, as well as about the perpetrators and the consequences of the attack, are related to this body of public, and undoubtedly historical, knowledge.

Indeed, most *definite expressions* of the debate refer to various aspects of these well-known events:

- *the* tragic events in the United States this week
- *the* hideous and foul events in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania that took place on Tuesday 11 September.
- *the* twin towers of *the* World Trade Centre in New York.
- *the* selfless bravery of the New York and American emergency services
- To underline *the* scale of the loss...
- to *the* passengers aboard *the* hijacked planes
- *the* links between terror and crime
- We need to mourn *the* dead and then act to protect *the* living.
- *The* people perpetrating it wear the ultimate badge of the fanatic

- *The* sheer horror of what took place on Tuesday is virtually impossible to comprehend, as is *the* evil of people who would commit such acts against fellow human beings —
- as one in 10 of those who died may well have been British, making this *the* worst terrorist atrocity ever against our own country.

Besides presupposed knowledge about specific events, as is the case here for the events of September 11, there is of course a vast set of more generally shared sociocultural, political and historical knowledge, often also marked in the text by definite expressions:

- *the* United States
- *the* civilized world
- *the* basic democratic values in which we all believe
- *the* government and people of America
- *the* Gulf War
- *the* Secretary of State
- *the* airlines
- *the* UN Security Council
- *the* NATO Secretary General

As the expressions “the civilized world” and “the basic democratic values” show, this presupposed knowledge may be closely associated with underlying ideologies. It is not only shared knowledge, but also shared values, norms and other basic beliefs that may thus be referred to with definite expressions, especially in parliamentary debates, in which such shared social representations play an important role, as is particularly the case in this debate on the September 11 events.

Apart from reminding us about the various kinds of knowledge presupposed in political discourse, these definite expressions as such do not reveal any major surprises. Let us therefore examine other forms of implicit knowledge and their functions in parliamentary discourse.

Let us begin with a few fragments of Tony Blair’s speech:

- (45) There will, of course, be different shades of opinion heard today. That again is as it should be, but let us unite in agreeing this: what happened in the United States on Tuesday was an act of wickedness for which there can be no justification. Whatever the cause, whatever the perversion of religious feeling, whatever the political belief, to inflict such terror on the world; to take the lives of so many innocent and defenceless men, women, and children, can never ever be justified.

By using “of course” in the beginning of this fragment, Blair presupposes that he knows, and that his recipients know, that in this kind of debate, and in parliamentary debates in general, there are differences of opinion. By making this presupposition explicit, and even adding that this is “as it should be” he professes his democratic credentials. But, we see that this positive introduction is followed by “but”, thus turning it into a disclaimer, because despite such freedom of opinion he also excludes opinions that are not a strong condemnation of the attacks in the USA; under no circumstance may these acts be justified. In other words, he tacitly assumes that whatever the democratic freedom of opinion, there are limits to such freedom. Indeed, he elaborates on this theme with another disclaimer, namely an apparent concession, agreeing that violent actions are sometimes justified by a cause or religious feeling, but again, this is followed by a clear statement of unacceptability. That is, we see that in this passage Blair is making explicit the underlying ideology of anti-terrorism, with the further implicit knowledge that there are people who *do* commit such crimes and *do* justify them in terms of political and religious causes. That is, we can only really understand this passage by Blair if we know about this kind of politics, and about the democratic, anti-terrorist values Blair adheres to. Similarly, the last sentence also presupposes that it is especially unacceptable if the people murdered are “defenceless” citizens, instead of, for instance, military personnel. This at the same time implies that the perpetrators of such crimes are especially bad people.

Consider also the next passage:

- (46) There are three things that we must now take forward urgently. First, we must bring to justice those responsible. Rightly, President Bush and the US Government have proceeded with care. They did not lash out. They did not strike first and think afterwards. Their very deliberation is a measure of the seriousness of their intent. They, together with allies, will want to identify, with care, those responsible.

Interesting here are the negations — what the US government did *not* do. Negations and denials often presuppose that something else is expected, normative, or claimed by others. That is, in this case, one would expect of any government, and maybe especially of the U.S. government that they would immediately react. Blair emphasizes that they did react carefully, despite the circumstances, and thus enhances the positive image of the US government.

And finally, examine the following statement:



- (47) Let us make this reflection too. A week ago, anyone suggesting that terrorists would kill thousands of innocent people in downtown New York would have been dismissed as alarmist, yet it happened. We know that these groups are fanatics, capable of killing without discrimination. The limits on the numbers that they kill and their methods of killing are not governed by any sense of morality. The limits are only practical and technical. We know, that they would, if they could, go further and use chemical, biological, or even nuclear weapons of mass destruction. We know, also, that there are groups of people, occasionally states, who will trade the technology and capability of such weapons.

What exactly does this passage presuppose and imply? First of all, it does seem to weakly imply that alarmists may be right after all. And this presupposes that any policy that is consistently focused on security matters is the right policy. It also seems to imply that to be lax on questions of terrorism has terrible consequences. These and other implications of a complex social representation of terrorist and terrorist violence are partly made explicit in the explicit *know*-statement that follows: We may not know who did this, but we do know that these terrorist groups are fanatics.

That is, here and elsewhere in this debate, instead of merely presupposing what kind of people terrorists are, the Prime Minister and the other speakers after him, are making beliefs explicit, beliefs which they define as knowledge about terrorists, and which others might describe as opinions. The description of the terrorists, as is usually the case for those outside of the consensus, is in terms of those who violate the most basic principles. They not only kill, but do so without consideration, without restraint, and more generally without any moral consciousness. This negative description of course presupposes that in that respect the Others, the terrorists, are fundamentally different from Us, who *do* have morals, would *not* kill, and certainly only with restraint, and with discrimination, as in military action. Note that these presuppositions do not deny that killing may sometimes be legitimate.

Note also that Blair, as will later be the case for President Bush, makes explicit his “knowledge” about the terrorists using weapons of mass destruction. Of course, he has no such knowledge, but we have seen that strong beliefs or fears may often be described in terms of knowledge. Indeed, he does not mention any evidence in support of this statement. He even repeats his “knowledge” with regard to other states, thus confirming the “rogue state” policy of the USA.

It needs no further argument that to presuppose the use of such weapons by the terrorists is an effective rhetorical means to describe them in the most negative way. What the terrorists have done is already terrible, but it is useful to make sure with this kind of hyperbole or threatening prediction that the politicians and citizens form the most negative images of them. Note also that such presuppositions and implications can only be derived from this text by recipients who know what these weapons of mass destruction are, and that, for instance, they are able to kill many more people than in the recent attacks in the USA. Another implication of this statement for government policy is that any state that harbours, protects or does business with these terrorists will itself be treated as a terrorist state. This implication, however, can only be derived, if we make explicit our general knowledge about contemporary politics and policies in the USA and the UK against the so-called “rogue states”.

In this same way, each word, each phrase, each sentence and paragraph of this debate is being produced and understood against the background of a vast amount of “world” knowledge. We have seen that such knowledge needs to be analyzed much more explicitly than we are used to in epistemology and psychology. We also have seen that what is described as “knowledge” by members of one group, as does Blair, may well be a form of opinion or belief by members of other groups. It is important, though, to insist that anything they say should be systematically related to the kinds of knowledge they share with other members of their group and culture. Whereas some of this knowledge, for instance about terrorists, Muslims, Arabs, and especially about what they call the “civilized world” is typically ideologically based, other knowledge is much more generally cultural. Knowledge about buildings, violent attacks, airplanes, victims, for example, is probably not disputed among groups with different ideological backgrounds. Part of the definition of the situation of what happened on September 11 is built on this kind of common-sense and Common Ground cultural knowledge. But another part of the definition of the situation, specifically those parts to do with the fanatic, wicked, etc. nature of the men who attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, are obviously based on ideologically controlled social representations.

### Contextual knowledge

We have seen that participants in communicative events have many types of knowledge relating to what they speak *about*, such as recent events, historical

events, future policies, specific people, and terrorists in general, among many other things. It is important to realize however that they also have knowledge about the very communicative situation and events *in* which they are *now* participating. Indeed, since talk is always situated, such social situations are usually taken to be conditions of discourse variations and the source of their contextualization.

My own approach to contextualization is however different. Cognitively speaking, there is no way social situations can influence discourse directly, nor can discourse influence social situations directly, as is usually assumed in current approaches to context (for references and critical analysis, see Van Dijk, 2003). For many theoretical reasons that will not be further detailed here, we therefore must assume that the text-context interface is necessarily cognitive, and that social situations need to be accounted for in terms of mental models. These so-called “context models” explain many things, such as the subjective nature of contextual influence, personal variations in interpretation, and the important fact that it is not the whole social situation that impinges on discourse, but only its relevant properties (Van Dijk 1999b). That is, context models are mental constructions of situational relevance. Being personal interpretations of the current situation, they are able to act as the mental interface with the (also mental) processes of discourse production and comprehension. They account for the well-known phenomenon that in one and the same communicative situation, different speakers may have different interpretations of the situation, that is, different context models, which may be a source of conflict.

Among many other functions, context models finally explain a most relevant aspect of this paper, namely how knowledge is managed in communicative events. That is, language users have a huge amount of knowledge, but obviously only a fragment of such knowledge needs to be activated and used for each discourse. It is the context model, or rather the Knowledge-device of such a context model, that regulates which knowledge is now relevant and must be activated, or now becomes irrelevant and may become de-activated.

Context models are thought to consist of more or less stable schematic structures that allow fast application in the huge amount of communicative situations in our lives. That is, we may expect such canonical categories as Setting (Location, Time), Participants (and their different categories and relations) as well as ongoing Events or Actions in which they are now engaged. As we have seen, their relevant cognitions, such as intentions, knowledge or opinions are also part of these context models.

Context models have a crucial, coordinating function in communication and interaction. They not only represent participants' awareness of who they are, what they are now doing and why, but also regulate and co-ordinate the production and comprehension of discourse within such a framework. There is virtually no level or dimension of discourse that is not (also) controlled by context models. This is especially the case for any aspect of style or rhetoric, that is, *how* we should speak or write in order to make our discourse appropriate in the current situation. But even the discursive formulation of the content of discourse, derived from the social representations and mental models of events, as we have seen above, is controlled by context models: We cannot say what we want to anybody in any situation. For reasons of politeness, relevance, political correctness, interestingness, and many other reasons represented in context models, we also need to control the formulation of meaning or content.

Much of this discourse control by context models is automatized and speakers are barely aware of such control until there are complications, such as speakers breaching contextual rules or strategies, or when there are conflicting demands on the speakers. On the other hand, more or less explicitly, they may also refer to many of the properties or constraints of the current situation, e.g., to show that they are aware of contextual constraints, or in order to justify deviations. Much work on politeness, face keeping and impression management explains just that. And the study of deictic expressions in pragmatic semantics show that social situations and their elements (participants, place, time, etc) can be referred to just as any other situation.

To show how also the speakers in parliament are aware of the social situation and communicative event in which they are actively engaged, let us finally examine some examples that show that and how MPs refer to, mark or otherwise signal the context as they represent it. This is the case, of course, in all passages in which the business at hand in parliament is regulated, such as interventions of the Speaker of the House, turn taking (and termination), and references to previous or next speakers. Thus, in our example, the debate begins like this:

- (48) **Mr. Speaker:** Before I call the Prime Minister I should like to inform the House that at 11 am I shall invite colleagues to rise and observe three minutes silence in memory of those who lost their lives in the tragic events in the United States this week.

**The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair):** I am grateful, Mr. Speaker, that you agreed to the recall of Parliament to debate the hideous and foul

events in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania that took place on Tuesday 11 September.

Apart from the usual self-references (as “I”) for Current Speaker as a fixed category of Context Models, the speaker is here identified in the Hansard transcript as “Mr. Speaker”, that is in term of his current function, an element of knowledge that is obviously not only shared by the stenographers but also by all those who are present. That is, even when listening, this person will be addressed as “Mr. Speaker”, that is, as the official chair person of the session, the one who decides who will speak, and who must stop speaking. In this case, part of his business is also to announce three minutes of silence, at a specific moment, thereby referring to a special act, on a special occasion, but also referring forward to a specific part of the parliamentary debate or session itself. He also refers to his other future act as a Speaker, namely to “call” the first (and next) speakers. Note that his small intervention also features the other standard elements of the context model, namely Location (“the House”), Time (“before”, present tense), Participants and their roles (“colleagues”), a speech act (“invite”) and an occasion for the speech act and silence (“in memory of”). Obviously, knowledge of the participants is such that they routinely interpret “the House” as the British House of Commons, and not, say, as a House of Worship.

Then, without further spoken (but maybe with non-verbal) signals, Tony Blair takes the floor. Before talking about the current events of September 11, he also needs to attend to some interactional and contextual business, namely addressing the Speaker explicitly (as is the rule implicitly), and thanking him for the special, emergency session of parliament, thereby acknowledging the power and position of the Speaker, apart from being merely polite.

Throughout the speeches of the MPs who take the floor in that debate we are able to detect more or less explicitly or implicitly their awareness of the current communicative situation and event, namely as a session of parliament, with MPs and members of government as participants, also in their role as representatives of their constituencies, as responsible for policies and legislation, and so on. Much of the time, such awareness is merely implicit, for instance in the choice of topics, in the lexical style, in the forms of address, in the control of time, and so on.

Let us merely give a few more interesting examples where such awareness of the social situation and the ways MPs interpret it in terms of their personal context models becomes explicit and interesting for observation:

- (49) There will, of course, be different shades of opinion heard today.

Reference to the day of the session, with the deictic expression “today” and to the act of listening (“will be heard”), implies that Tony Blair, is referring not only to this parliamentary session itself but also to the normal situation of different opinions. We have already seen above that this statement is rather used as a disclaimer, and that Blair today does *not* want any deviant opinions, as also the mitigating expression “shades of” suggests.

- (50) Let us unite too, with the vast majority of decent people throughout the world in sending our condolences to the Government and people of America. They are our friends and allies, and we the British are a people who stand by their friends in times of need, tragedy and trial, and we do so without hesitation now.

We have seen that this emergency session is essentially an expression of consensus and joint action, rather than of debate between two opposed political parties. Hence also the deictic reference to the act of “uniting”, the use of pronoun “us” referring to all MPs present, and the joint accomplishment of the speech act of expressing condolences, as part of the ongoing actions of the current parliamentary situation. The well-known political pronoun *we*, in “we the British”, is used to mark national group membership of both the speaker (Blair) and the recipients (the MPs), so as to establish the balance between We British and Them the Americans in this act of sending condolences (Wilson 1990). It needs no further argument that many of the references to speech acts in this debate are not merely speech acts, but also *political* acts, precisely because of their contextual embedding (who says what when). Thus, nearly all speakers express and repeat these condolences, also on behalf of their parties or constituents, and in similar ways also perform other speech acts, such as praising the New York firefighters, mourning the victims, denouncing and accusing the perpetrators, promising appropriate actions and legislation, and so on. Thus, among the few concrete things Tony Blair says, he simply states the following as what “we”, that is the Government, have done:

- (51) Here in Britain, we have instituted certain precautionary measures of security. We have tightened security measures at all British airports, and ensured that no planes can take off unless their security is assured. We have temporarily redirected air traffic so that planes do not fly over central London. City airport is reopening this morning.

By rule or convention, Tony Blair’s speech is followed by that of the (new) leader of the Conservative opposition. Since he is speaking in this role for the

first time, again, some parliamentary business needs to be taken care of first, such as thanking the Speaker of the House, thanking and congratulating the previous speaker, the Prime Minister, and making clear in what role he is speaking. Note also the use of political “we” when referring to himself in this formal role, that is, as speaking-for the Conservative Party:

- (52) **Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green):** I thank you, Mr. Speaker, for giving us the opportunity to speak on this matter. On behalf of the official Opposition, I thank the Prime Minister for his statement. He is to be congratulated on responding to this crisis quickly and resolutely, and on giving a lead to other nations that value freedom and democracy.

Duncan Smith also emphasizes what the Prime Minister and other MPs stress in this special session, namely that today is not a day of political confrontation and party politics. This means that unity and consensus must be respected, and that the overarching values of Us, as democrats, against our enemies, must be emphasized, as also Blair and many other speakers have done both in the British Parliament and worldwide. That is, Us no longer is “we” the British Conservative, but “we” the British, and more generally “we democrats” and “we civilized people”. The general polarization between Us and Them, and its political implications could not be more clear, and this is obviously part of the context as it is defined by the participants. In other words, this and other speakers urge that all those present essentially have more or less the same context models, that is, similar interpretations of the current situation:

- (53) We are party politicians in a stable democracy, and we are used to the cut and thrust of political debate, here and outside, yet we are also, as the Prime Minister said, the guardians of a set of values that are underpinned by that democracy and the rule of law. (...) That is why we are united in the House in our determination not only to extend our genuine and heartfelt sympathy to the United States but to defend civilised values against those who seek to bring them down by violence.

Indeed, in the next passages the leader of the opposition affirms that his party will give full support to any action the government may take against the terrorists, and he joins the Prime Minister in sending his condolences to the American People. Tony Blair then responds, again by first doing some parliamentary business, namely congratulating the leader of the Opposition with his new role, and regretting that this has to be on such a sad occasion. The reference to

the Dispatch Box is obviously understandable only for those who have a mental model of the communicative situation, the location and the relevant objects present in British Parliament:

- (54) **The Prime Minister:** I congratulate the Leader of the Opposition on the position that he has attained in his party, and welcome him to the Dispatch Box. I think that, like me, he would have preferred that this had not been the first occasion on which we faced each other here, but I sincerely congratulate him. I thank him unequivocally for the support that he has given us today. It is both important and immensely welcome.

Then the leaders of other parties take the floor in much the same way, that is, by first attending to contextual constraints, such as thanking the Speaker of the House, complimenting the previous speaker, referring to earlier parts of the debate (which now have become part of the context), and joining previous speakers in the relevant speech acts of condolences, congratulation, and warning that any negative remarks on terrorists should *not* be interpreted as directed against Muslims. Note that in such cases political speech acts in parliament may also encourage the Government, other MPs or people outside of parliament (not) to take specific actions:

- (55) I strongly underscore the comments of the Prime Minister and the leader of the Conservative party about the importance of all of us sending the correct and legitimate signal to the Muslim community in Britain. There is no argument to be had here, and woe betide anyone in a position to influence public opinion who tries to suggest that there is. Over the past couple of days, I have become concerned about the emergence of a strand of comment and sentiment that mixes those horrific acts with legitimate differences between the parties and so on about asylum seekers, immigration and the position of various ethnic communities within our countries. It is not about that. The House of Commons must send that signal defiantly.

In this example we see how mental models of the wider social situation, such as that of race relations in the UK are closely intertwined with the specific local situation of ongoing parliamentary action. That is, by avoiding specific accusations in parliament, MPs also want to show that they do not engage in discrimination or stereotyping against the Muslim communities. Apart from more general social concerns, it hardly needs to be stressed that such concerns are not seldom also motivated in terms of their being representatives of multicultural communities and because of their concern for their Muslim constituents.



Indeed, it should be stressed that parliamentary business is not merely limited to the explicit references to parties, MPs, and other explicit business at hand, but also involves the many political implications of the topics and statements about the subject matter being treated. In fact, when the MPs speak of events in the USA, about victims, about terrorists or about Muslims, *all* this has potential political presuppositions, implications and relevance, e.g. for the formulation of policies, for the establishment of a national consensus, as a way to positively present one's party, and so on. In other words, the "content" parts of the speeches are never politically innocent.

Only occasionally there is a bit of real debate. We have already seen that once the Prime Minister strongly disagrees, and the other MPs shout "Shame", when one MP expresses doubts about President Bush "scurrying to his bunker". A milder, but perhaps more fundamental difference of perspective becomes clear, when the respected "Father of the House", sworn in that same day, makes the following interruption, immediately responded to by Tony Blair:

- (56) **Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow):** Does the House have the assurance that in no way will we ourselves inflict terror on innocent people? If we do so, we simply recruit more terrorists.
- (57) **The Prime Minister:** Of course, we as a country will always act in accordance with the beliefs that we hold dear. [611]

With his seemingly innocent and nearly rhetorical question, Tam Dalyell immediately focuses on the heart of the matter, namely the likely consequences of any international military action against terrorists. Such an intervention may also be interpreted as a warning to the Prime Minister to be careful with his support of any military action by the U.S. Also his later intervention in more detail calls for more attention for the deeper causes of the attack and the possible consequences of retaliation. We have seen that such causes cannot really be talked about here because the general slogan is that *no* cause can possibly justify such horrible mass killing. Consequences of international measures are not further taken into account in this debate. There is more looking back to the events and the immediate situation than to thinking about the future and the possible consequences. Indeed, this debate is significant perhaps more because of all the things that are *not* said.

We see that Tony Blair reacts to this interruption with a bland ideological and nationalist phrase, thus dismissing any critique or warning. Indeed, he does not speak of "we" as government but of "we" as country, thereby again stressing that he is not engaging in party politics but that he is speaking as the leader of

the country. Note that all this is not said, or meant, but presupposed and implied by the very interaction taking place, and interpreted as such by all competent members of this epistemic community, namely the MPs.

That is, what is actually “going on” in such debates is not usually being said, but usually remains implicit. Any discourse or conversation analysis that ignores such implicit meanings, beliefs, knowledges, etc. in the analysis of this kind of debate, is unable to account completely for what is going on, for instance explaining *why* Mr. Tam Dalyell and the Prime Minister say what they are saying and how they say it. Hence the fundamental importance of an explicit knowledge component in a theory of discourse in general, and in a theory of parliamentary debates in particular.

## Conclusion

In this paper we have shown that discourse in general, and parliamentary debates in particular, presuppose vast amounts of participant knowledge. Despite much earlier research in epistemology, psychology and the social sciences, however, the notion of knowledge remains quite vague and elusive. So the first aim of this paper was to discuss some notions of a new, multi-disciplinary theory of knowledge, rejecting traditional epistemological definitions. One of the tasks of such a theory is to provide a typology of knowledge, in terms of such criteria as generality, scope, and level, and thus distinguishing between personal, group, societal and cultural knowledge of concrete events or general characteristics of events, among many other types of knowledge.

Having outlined such a new, relativist epistemology, the next task was to elaborate the relations between knowledge and discourse, continuing current work in the cognitive psychology of text processing. Although this psychological approach emphasizes the fundamental role of shared knowledge in the comprehension and production of text and talk, it reflects very little on the nature and different kinds of knowledge involved, and especially neglects the social dimensions of knowledge that need to be accounted for. It is here proposed that knowledge in this cognitive framework should be accounted for in terms of a K-device in so-called context models, that is, episodic mental representations of the relevant features of the communicative situation. It is this device that controls how speakers and writers express, leave implicit or presuppose their personal or shared knowledge, and how recipients are able to understand epistemically “incomplete” discourse.

These ideas on the knowledge-discourse interface are finally applied in the field of political discourse, and in particular in an account of parliamentary debates. It is shown what kinds of knowledge MPs need to have in order to be able to be competent members and to engage in parliamentary debates. This knowledge may range from general cultural knowledge shared with all other competent members of the same culture, to national knowledge about what goes on in the country, to group knowledge shared with other MPs, to knowledge about other MPs, parties, etc., to specific knowledge about current political events and the current context of communication, that is, the ongoing parliamentary debates.

These observations on the role of knowledge in parliamentary debates are finally applied in a study of a speech by Tony Blair to the British House of Commons following the September 11 attacks in the USA. This analysis first of all shows that, although shared knowledge in principle is presupposed and hence need not be expressed, it often happens that MPs often explicitly say they “know” something, when in fact they are only believing that something is the case, but want to emphasize that such beliefs are shared by others. We thus analyzed many ways in which knowledge is signaled in political discourse, also by many other expressions, such as “being sure that”, “agree that”, “fear that”, and so on, which also show that knowledge is not some unified notion, but a very complex cognitive system with many different aspects, that also may be brought to bear, interactively, in parliamentary debates. But perhaps the most interesting dimension of an epistemology of political discourse is to show how implicit knowledge and beliefs actually control much of political discourse. An adequate theory of knowledge and parliamentary debates thus must show by which discursive, mental and interactional strategies MPs are able to manage this complex task of expressing and presupposing knowledge in such debates.

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