

O at the International OPPD Workshop on Technical options for capturing and reporting parliamentary proceedings



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on Technical options for capturing and reporting
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PROCESSING PARLIAMENTARY REPORT

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? INTRODUCTION

In the reporting process we find three main steps.

- Capturing
- Revision
- Publishing

There can be different and further passages, but all those who work on verbatim report in Parliament understand the meaning of these phases.

The parliamentary report (verbatim report) has some peculiar features compared with other reports. It is way different form a summary report, which refers on the main contents of a debate, regardless of words used by the speakers. It is quite different also from a legal report (court report) where the identity of written text to the spoken word is essential.

The Parliamentary Report aims primarily to make citizens aware of the activity of Members of Parliament as a consequence of the mandate that voters give MPs to make laws on their behalf.

This presentation illustrates the reporting proceeding that follows the capturing and leave aside the issue of used techniques or workflow organization, which vary from parliament to parliament.

I will shortly investigate the phases that we name Revision and the Publishing.

☒ I start from my experience in the reporting field as a stenographer of the Italian Senate and member and former President of the International Federation for Information Processing (INTERSTENO). In this two environments I have had the possibility to learn about the evolution of parliamentary reporting in many European and non European country.

It can be useful to mention that Intersteno has devoted an *ad hoc* Section to the parliamentary reporting (Intersteno Parliamentary Reporting Section IPRS) with the aim of collecting and spreading relevant information on the activity of Parliamentary Reporting Services.

Even if my background is limited to personal work experience, I will focus on some general issues that according to me are to be investigated more deeply, while planning the structure of a parliamentary reporting service.

Finally, this presentation is limited to non technological profiles, since Carlo Marchetti already went into the IT contents of the verbatim report in the Italian Senate. Besides it focuses on the plenary sitting report; that of Committees is published in longer term and follow more or less the same steps, but through a different workflow.

☒ **TREATING THE SPEECH IN PARLIAMENT**

- As an experience in Parliamentary Reporting, the MP's speech is not published exactly as it is spoken. The publication of the report implies that the words are put in order, that redundancies are solved, that repetitions are eliminated when they are useless, that material errors are corrected, that hidden or uncertain passages of the speech are made clear
- Often reporters can represent in the written shape also the tone, the emphasis, the intonation, which are highly relevant to describe the parliamentary communication and its political effect. One sentence can be stressed in various manners thank to a different position of words or simply to the smart use of punctuation marks.
- ☒ One could think that the MPS' speeches should be transcribed as they were said, but in order to give publicity to the parliamentary activity it is of great help to make speeches accessible to citizens, by enlarging the opportunities for accessing the legislative activity and pursuing a wider and easier

comprehension of political debates. Of course, the intervention of the reporter should not alter any of the essential part of the speech, including the mood, the tone and the emphasis.

- I will not go deep in this, but I would like to point out that a mere transcription of parliamentary speech sometime can give no clue about the political meaning nor about the will of the speaker.
- ☒ This is one of the main feature of the reporting profession and relies on critical competencies of the reporter. Those who want to become good reporters must have a wide and deep knowledge on political themes, must be acknowledged about the main issues of parliamentary debates, must have a sharp sensitivity and a wide comprehension of political communication, must be acquainted on the bills on the agenda
- ☒ One main issue in processing a verbatim report in Parliament is whether this kind of "speech treatment" has to be wide and deep or marginal and light.
- Such approach to the report implies that there are different ways of "treating the speech". Some would suggest to be more conservative, others prefer a more intrusive job; some aim to amplify or refine the communication impact, other are oriented to merely reproduce the MPs' words or communication.
- ☒ Should be taken into account the venue of further and new means of publicity of the parliamentary activity. We all know about satellite channel where one can watch ongoing parliamentary sittings; access is guaranteed also through the institutional Internet web pages of the Chambers; sometime the audio/video streaming or the TV signal are supported by subtitles (or closed captions) and in some more advanced systems a synchronisation of text to the audio/video feeding is provided. Thus, the parliamentary report gains newer and wider functions along with larger audience.
- Above all, the multimedia era implies that the "treatment" of parliamentary speeches has to match multimedia devices. For instance, the written text has to match (much more than in former time) with the audio/video feedings; the speech structure must not be altered in a relevant way, the reporter's correction has to be limited to the very few cases when the sentence is definitely wrong or when the readers could be tricked and misunderstand the political content.
- ☒ In the experience of the revision at the Italian Senate Reporting Service many corrections are due to an excessive or scarce "treatment" of the speech by the reporter. In some cases the reporter leaves the speech as it is, even if sentences can be misunderstood or are unclear to readers; in other cases the reporter's intervention is beyond what is necessary and risk to alter the properties of the speech, because typical elements of the written language are added or non common words out of the speaker's practice language.

☒ **The aim of the Parliamentary Report is to publish the parliamentary speeches. So it is essential:**

- To respect the ordinary way of speaking of that MP

- To keep to a domain of words typical of the spoken language and not of the written one
- To avoid uncommon or obsolete expressions if they are not (properly) used by the speaker
- To remember that the parliamentary report is a written representation of a speech (something like a theatre script).

☞ **FOCUS ON REVISION**

The phase that we call revision is crucial in the reporting production.

One main issue is whether and how revisers must correct errors made in the redaction of the report. The main reason for establishing a revision staff is that the production needs a general control on the report, mainly regarding the proceeding profiles and taking into account not only one speech but the whole debate.

Revision must:

- Collect and coordinates parts of the reports produced by the reporters
- Check errors that occur in the text
- Verify the coherence of the verbatim report with sitting proceeding and other reports

We also have to say that revision must not take care (but often does) of mistakes that can and should be avoided in the previous phase, such as

- misspelling words
- mismatching or (sound-alike) between what was said and what is transcribed
- wrong mentions of parliamentary acts or legislative references
- inapposite deletion of speakers words or addition of unpronounced terms

☞ **THE REVISION STAFF AT THE ITALIAN SENATE**

Let me give you a short overview on the revision staff at the Italian Senate.

The revision department includes 7/8 people

1 senior reporter

- receives and gathers the report pieces
- checks marks up and coherence with the sitting agenda
- publishes provisional report on the web site of the Italian Senate (about 50 minutes after the speech)

- prints the paper draft of each reporter's piece

4 senior reporters

- receive the printed version of reporters' pieces
- play back the audio files for checking that stenographers have correctly listened
- revise an 8 turns' lapse of report (40 minutes) and draw corrections on the printed sheets

2/3 typists

- insert corrections on the text file of the report
- consequently update the web pages

7 PUBLISHING

After the report has been revised, another step is needed. The publishing is the final step before the report is printed in a definitive version

The publishing activity aim to:

- final check the text, taking into account any details of the whole debate
- final verification of proceeding profiles (votes, correct number of articles and amendments, references to parliamentary or legislative acts, etc.)
- cross matching with contents of other reports (summary, annexes, etc.)
- clearance for the final print, when the time (one hour) for speakers to check the report is elapsed (only formal corrections are admitted)

1 official

- proofreads speeches

1 senior reporter

- verifies the proceeding together with that of other reports on the basis of a log that he/she has produced during the sitting
- guarantees the coherence with parliamentary rules
- provides for the very last corrections and refresh the web pages

The report is now ready for transmission to printery for being published in the official bulletin.

7 CRITICAL PROFILES OF REVISION

Let me draw your attention on some critical topics of the revision

There are activities which seems to burden the reporting process

- Above all, it seems not logical, although necessary, that revisers listen back to the audio record of the speech. Reporters have plenty of time for listening themselves to the audio file while transcribing their pieces. The necessity of playing back the audio file seems to depend mainly on the fact that text as it is after the first draft is not fully trustable. Apart from sentences that can be better understood on the basis of a larger sight of the debate form the revision staff, it occurs that revisers must correct errors that could have been previously avoided by reporters through an accurate listening.
- The same goes for some material errors, such as misspelling (i.e. foreign words or uncommon and technical terms). In the first stage (redaction of the report) some of these mistakes can be avoided.
- Another passage that has to be reconsidered is the double step for inserting corrections in the text file (previously on paper and after on text file) which is time consuming and source of further unexpected mistakes: if revisers themselves insert corrections, the use of typists become useless.

In order to improve the reporting process, in my opinion is necessary:

- To improve quality and accuracy of text in the first stage of the workflow
- Not to playback the audio file during the revision, as the matching with the spoken words compete to the first step
- To foresee that revisers themselves insert corrections on the text file, instead than on paper version

7 FOCUS ON IMPROVING THE TEXT REDACTION

Capturing parliamentary speeches and transcribing activity is beyond the ambit of this presentation. Nevertheless it is clear that organizational and technical efficiency affects the quality and quantity of text production.

- A more accurate listening to the audio file by the reporters will help a higher quality of draft report and relieves the burden for the revision staff
- Reporters must follow grammar rules and conventions agreed by the Reporting Service (capital letters, italics, bold, acronyms, legislative and parliamentary acts references)
- Besides, they must not use their style altering the meaning of the speech while producing the written perform of the speech (report) nor merely transcribe the audio file
- It is greatly appreciated the intervention of the reporter in order to ease the reading: short sentences, friendly construction of sentences, catch and represent the speaker's will and communication meaning

- It has to be reminded that the reporter must put in written words the speech of a person that has his/her own style, his/her own knowledge, his/her own way of expressing ideas and proposals, his/her own belonging to a political party rather than another, his/her own reasons for speaking in that particular way

☒ **RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING**

As a consequence of this analysis we have few guide lines for recruiting and training parliamentary reporters. One evidence is that the intellectual contents of verbatim parliamentary report is way more relevant than the techniques used for capturing and producing text. This is also the reason that a computerized machine will never be able to substitute the parliamentary reporting profession, which mainly relies upon very high human capabilities.

Therefore, regardless of the technique that is used for capturing speeches and transcribing, it is highly recommended that reporters:

- have a very good knowledge of political, juridical and social affairs
- are skilled on political domain and parliamentary themes
- are aware of parliamentary rules and of their implications in the parliamentary debate
- master the language, especially regarding the differences between spoken and written communication
- are able and disposable as a method of work to always double check their grade of global comprehension of parliamentary speeches

Thus, the recruitment and training proceeding should not be conditioned over a certain extent by the technical skills (shorthand, shorthand machine, other mechanical abilities) and must privilege the knowledge competencies.

☒ Thank you!