

REFERENTIAL COHESION, AMBIGUITY, VAGUENESS AND GENERALITY IN PARLIAMENTARY DEBATE*

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Abstract. Political discourse has been characterised as being ‘vague’ and ‘ambiguous’. It is argued that politicians tend to use generic and unspecific words in order to avoid explicit commitment (McGee 2018). Although this situation may describe discourse genres such as political interviews and election debates, it is unclear that it can be applied to parliamentary debate. This study analyses a corpus consisting of two parliamentary debates in English and Catalan with respect to ambiguity, vagueness and generality in connection to referential cohesion. Three variables are qualitatively and quantitatively analysed: a) the abstractness of the topics, b) the non-specific or specific nature of these entities, and c) the grammatical or lexical nature of the units that maintain referential cohesion. The results show that ambiguity and vagueness are rather infrequent in parliamentary debate. However, the high frequencies of non-concrete referential entities, and of non-specific referents characterise parliamentary debate as a general discourse. As a counterpart, lexical cohesion devices as repetition and encapsulation highlight the topics under discussion, what leads to avoid ambiguity and vagueness.

1. Introduction

Political discourse has been widely characterised as being ‘vague’ and ‘ambiguous’, since the addressor is usually reluctant to show her or his stance on the topic (Page 1976:742). Moreover, it is argued that politicians tend to use generic and unspecific words in order to avoid explicit commitment (McGee 2018). However, although *ambiguity*, *vagueness*, and *generality* may be seen as synonyms in everyday language, they are not a unique and the same phenomenon. They are narrowly intertwined with regard to meaning (un)explicitness, but, from a strict semantic point of view, these labels refer to different semantic features.

Vague qualifies for a linguistic expression open to various but related interpretations and thus is connected to *polysemy*, whereas *ambiguous* does for units having two or more unrelated meanings, a property linked to homonymy. Otherwise, *generality* is related to unspecificity, i.e., to the lack or scarcity of details to delimit the meanings clearly. Finally, one more concept must be added in order to complete the whole landscape of semantic unexplicitness: *fuzziness*, a property suitable to define those categories whose boundaries are blurred or not clear-cut (Zhang 1998).

Considering the differences amongst these concepts, this chapter hypothesises that parliamentary debate (henceforth PD) does not

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qualifies as either ambiguous, vague, or fuzzy discourse, at least with regard to the topics discussed, highlighted by means of referential cohesion.¹ Ambiguity may easier characterise other genres of political discourse such as political interviews, election debates and electoral programs, but not PD, which may be more clearly defined as a general discourse with respect to referential cohesion. Moreover, although referential generality may transmit to the addressees some intuition of vagueness in PD, both phenomena should be distinguished, the former being related to generic and non-specific reference and the latter to words and expressions opened to several (or imprecise) interpretations.

In order to prove or reject this general hypothesis, a corpus consisting of two PDs in Catalan and English is analysed with respect to referential cohesion. The establishment of the topics under discussion and their maintenance by means of the various referential devices have been determined and analysed qualitatively and quantitatively (Ribera 2008). Moreover, the semantic-pragmatic nature of the entities that qualify as topics in the debates and their specific or non-specific type of reference have been also discussed (Lyons 1977; Dik 1997).

The results show that abstract relations are the most frequent entities to establish the topics. Besides, many entities point to non-specific or generic referents. This fact marks PD with a high degree of generality and unspecificity. As for the referential devices in the cohesive chains, lexical cohesion is overwhelmingly more frequent than grammatical devices such as pronouns and zero anaphora. In fact, there are two lexical cohesion devices which play an important role to point out the topics under discussion in PD: repetition, usually embedded in enumerative series, and encapsulators or shell nouns, consisting in abstract unspecific nouns able to refer phorically to complex predicative chunks of discourse (Schmid 2000; Ribera & Marin 2018).

Repetition tends to highlight recursively the main topics and contributes to profile them pervasively throughout the debates, what prevents ambiguous and vague interpretations. In turn, a vast amount of encapsulators is easily matched up with their discourse contents and therefore potential vagueness and unspecificity is solved through discourse.

2. Aims, corpus description, theoretical framework, methodology and general data

This study aims to shed light on the following questions:

- a. Is ambiguity and vagueness a feature of PD as a genre or may it be better characterised as general?

¹ This study does not deal with the concept of *fuzziness*, which, otherwise, is more easily delimited than the other three (Zhang 1998:14–16).

- b. In what measure may the semantic-pragmatic types of entities establishing the referential chains be related to ambiguity, vagueness or generality in PD?
- c. May the different types of lexical and grammatical devices in referential chains contribute to prevent ambiguity and vagueness?

In order to answer these questions, a corpus consisting of two debates, one in Catalan and another one in English, has been analysed:

- a. Catalan (*Investiture*): the Plenary Session of Investiture of the President of the Government of Catalonia, the *Generalitat de Catalunya*, which took place on December, 20th and 21th, 2012 in the Parliament of Catalonia.
- b. English (*Sct P*): the Statement by Alex Salmond on Scotland's Independence Referendum and the Debate on the motion of the SMP John Swinney on Scotland's financial strength. They took place on March, 21st, 2013 in The Scottish Parliament.

The two debates share the general subject of discussion: the independence of Catalonia and Scotland, respectively, both related with various economic issues. The selection of the debates with respect to similar general subjects intends to control to some extent discourse variables that could be attributed to the subjects discussed.

In the case of the debate in Catalan, a plenary session is selected and only the first intervention of the spokesperson of each political group is analysed, so we have not considered the replication turns. As for the debate in English, the procedure more similar to the plenary sessions of the Catalan Parliament is the so-called ministerial statements and motions (see Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body 2013:9; Standing Order of the Scottish Parliament 2015, chapter 13, rule 13.1).

However, a substantial difference between the two debates must be highlighted. PDs in the Catalan Parliament (and in other parliaments in the Hispanic world) are structured on the basis of a series of speeches of the representatives of the various parliamentary groups, speaking in turn in accordance to the number of seats won at the polls. And there is no possibility of interrupting or questioning the member of parliament (MP) *in medias res*; in fact, these interventions work in discourse as a series of successive monologues.

In contrast with this Hispanic parliamentary dynamics, in the British tradition, the discussion that follows a ministerial statement or a deputy motion is quite much dialogical: despite the planning underlying the MPs interventions, she or he can be interrupted, by asking him or her to *give way*. And the addressor has the option of giving the word or not. These differences have consequences as for the functioning of both repetition and encapsulation in each debate, as it will be underlined later.

This study proceeds on the basis provided, on one hand, by semantic and pragmatic insights into ambiguity and, in general, into unspecificity

in discourse (Geeraerts 1993; Zhang 1998; Dunbar 2001; Sennet 2021). On the other hand, some approaches to discourse reference related to text linguistics (Halliday & Hasan 1976), functionalism (Halliday 1994) and cognitive linguistics (Schmid 2000) are central. In this regard, the starting point are the concepts of reference, cohesion and lexical cohesion (Halliday & Hasan 1976). Moreover, the concept of encapsulation, a restrictive interpretation of these authors' class of general nouns, derived basically from Schmid (2000), is adopted. The concepts of types of referential entities (Lyons 1977; Dik 1997), topic continuity and referential chains (Givón 1983, 2017) and referents' accessibility (Ariel 1990) are obviously essential for this work.

As for the analytical method, firstly, the initial occurrences of the referential entities not referred either to the participants in the debates or to the physical context in which they take place have been manually determined. Thus, deictic reference—such as references to the political parties and their representatives, to the Catalan and the Scottish parliaments and to the time of utterance—have been left out. Metalinguistic references to the type of document discussed in the sessions, such as *statement* or *motion* have not been considered either. Those restrictions intend mainly to discriminate between phoric pronouns and zero anaphora, on the one hand, and deictic pronouns, on the other hand, which are different in nature. Thus, those cohesion devices somehow interpreted as deictic have not been taken into account either. It is exemplified in (1).

- (1) a. Does THE FIRST MINISTER agree that despite all the negativity and fears that have been generated by THE ANTI-INDEPENDENCE PARTIES over votes for 16 and 17-year-olds, the referendum question and— yes—even the date itself THE SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT has been positive, straight and fair with the Scottish people with regard to the referendum process? (*Sct P*, Bruce Crawford (Stirling), SNP, p. 18123)
- b. we have not had a suggestion from THE UNIONIST PARTIES that this is anything other than a fair and democratic test of the will of the people of Scotland. Even if THEIR pessimism about Scotland's future is still in place, and even if THEY retain the negativity with which THEY express their arguments (*Sct P*, The First Minister (Alex Salmond), p. 18123)

Example (1a) includes the reference to *the first minister*, *the anti-independence parties* and *the Scottish government*, which are obviously participants in the debate. Similarly, (1b) shows lexical reference to *the unionist parties*, subsequently maintained by the possessive determiner *their* and the pronoun *they*. Although entities like these contribute to cohesion, they have not been considered, since they imply deictic reference.

Regarding lexical cohesion, the devices have been labelled as repetition, reiteration and encapsulation (Ribera 2008). Repetition includes instances of both total and partial lexical repetition of the topics. As many topics have non-specific or generic reference, there are many instances of repetition which are not co-referential and involve encyclopaedic associative referential relations. Reiteration includes synonyms, hypernyms and hyponyms co-referential with a previous or following noun phrase. In turn, encapsulation identifies those lexical cohesion instances where abstract and semantic unspecific nouns refer phorically to predicative chunks of textual information (encapsulated content).

As for grammatical devices, only those pronouns and zero anaphoras effectively contributing to discourse cohesion have been considered. Thus, *it*-fronting subjects in English and zero subjects in Catalan related to a subsequent clause in the sentence (as in *It is important to acknowledge that...* / *Ø És important reconèixer que*) are excluded. Structural syntactical gaps in copular patterns involving a demonstrative determiner in subject position and a lexical cohesion device in the subject complement position (as in *that Ø_i is the positive argument_i*, e. g.) are also excluded.

Secondly, the semantic types of the entities implied have been widely delimited considering Lyons' (1977) and Dik's (1997) orders of the referential entities. Basically, this follows to discriminate amongst first-order concrete entities (as people, institutions and physical objects), second-order entities (events) and third-order entities (abstract relations). Thirdly, those instances of non-specific and generic reference, as opposed to specific reference, have been also identified and quantified. Both referential properties offer an approximate measure of the degree of generality implied in PD.

After tagging both debates, they have been introduced in the tool Sketch Engine in order to obtain the quantitative data of each variable analysed. For the purpose of statistical analysis, the software platform IBM SPSS Statistics v. 29 has been used. The general data obtained from the corpus are shown in Table 1.

3. Ambiguity, vagueness and generality in parliamentary debate

Ambiguity, vagueness and generality are semantic phenomena closely related, but distinct in nature. It is not easy to distinguish amongst them. Ambiguity and vagueness are usually linked to homonymy (e.g., *bank* 'financial organisation' vs. *bank* 'side of a river') and polysemy (e.g.,

Table 1. General data from the corpus

	English	Catalan	Total
N Words	29,507	41,625	71,132
N Units establishing referents	690	1,153	1,843
N Devices in referential chains	2,944	3,517	6,461

mouth of a river, of a person, of a tunnel. . .), respectively (Geeraerts 1993; Zhang 1998; Dunbar 2001). Otherwise, generality has nothing to do with these two phenomena: the word *person* is general because it is underspecified with respect to sex, age, nationality, and so on; in fact, it only specifies the *seme* ‘human’. (Zhang 1998:25–26).²

3.1. Ambiguity

In his entry “Ambiguity” for *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, Sennet (2021) offers an explanatory schema that reflects the difficulties in dealing with ambiguity and the other semantic related phenomena. After an introduction that defines ambiguity in general terms (“Ambiguity is generally taken to be a property enjoyed by signs that bear multiple (legitimate) interpretations or, more generally, some system of signs”, Sennet 2021:§ 1), he discusses “What (Linguistic) Ambiguity Isn’t”. This includes vagueness (“lack of precision in the meaning or reference of a term or phrase”), context sensitivity (e.g. deictic pronouns), underspecification and generality (as in “I’m going to visit *one of my sisters*”, but I do not specify which one) and sense and reference transfer (as in the metonymic reference observed in “I’m parked on G St”) (Sennet 2021:§ 2).

In fact, several researchers on ambiguity in discourse have underlined that the concept “is not used uniformly across different disciplines and that its definitions are often imprecise” (Bauer, Knape, Koch & Winkler 2010:7). This imprecision is even noted within one discipline and ambiguity is often related to underspecification, uncertainty, and vagueness (Olson 2001:21; Kennedy 2011:508; Wagner 2020:26).

Various types of ambiguity can be distinguished (Walton 1996:260–263; Payrató 2021:6–7; Sennet 2021:§ 3).

- a. Lexical ambiguity: related to homonymy in the lexicon.
- b. Structural ambiguity: related to syntax and word-order of sentential constituents.

² Zhang (1998:25–26) offers a rather clear and useful description of homonymy and polysemy in taxonomic terms: *words* (superordinate level) include *lexical items* (basic level), which, in turn, include *semes* (subordinate level). Homonymy occurs at the level of words, whereas polysemy does at the level of lexical items.

- c. Discourse-pragmatic ambiguity: related to pragmatic meanings in each specific discourse.

For the purpose of this study, it is especially relevant to focus on the discourse pragmatic dimension of ambiguity. According to Wagner (2020:27), “ambiguity in discourse is a pragmatic category”. This means that any discourse may include potential ambiguous units, but they become functional when having two or more distinct denotations in the specific discourse (Wagner 2020:27).

Although political discourse is frequently qualified as ambiguous, PD seems not to be so. In fact, ambiguity *stricto sensu* can be identified only sporadically in the corpus. Lexical ambiguity is rather infrequent: it is difficult to find an example of it, if any. Perhaps, the most straightforwardly examples are those where the spokesperson appeals to the country, the people, the citizens, the society, as a whole, whereas, in fact, she or he is winking at her or his potential voters (2).

- (2) Given the unpopularity of independence in *the country*, is not it the case that, rather than announcing the referendum date, the First Minister has actually announced his retirement date? (*Sct P*, James Kelly (Rutherglen), Lab., p. 18127)

However, it is obvious that this sort of ambiguity does not depend on lexis uniquely and pragmatic implicatures play an essential role. Syntactic or structural ambiguity is also unusual (3).

- (3) I think that *the Opposition parties* think that *those oil companies and their investors* are completely stupid, but it is no surprise that *they* expect the fields to be more, not less, productive over the coming years and that revenue is expected to be between £41 billion and £57 billion (*Sct P*, Mike MacKenzie (Highlands and Islands), SNP, p. 18172)

The pronoun *they* in (3) has two possible antecedents: *the Opposition parties* and *those oil companies and their investors*. Probably, the second candidate is more consistent and compatible with the subsequent content: the oil companies and their investors expect their business to be more successful in the future. But it can also correspond to the Opposition parties' expectations.³

³ The literature on reference usually deals with examples like (3) as cases of *referential ambiguity*. Actually, they are in the interface between syntax and discourse (Givón 1983, 2017; Ariel 1990; Ribera 2008).

Pragmatic ambiguity includes presuppositional ambiguity, ambiguous speech acts (4a) and Donellan's (1966:233–236) ambiguous use of definite descriptions as either referring or attributing expressions (4b), among others (Sennet 2021:§ 3.3).

- (4) a. the truth is that Alex Salmond knows that if he held the referendum now he would not just lose it—he would be routed. (*Sct P*, Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok), Lab, p. 18120)
- b. If we are to have *the transparent debate* that the First Minister says he wants, why does he not publish his full independence plans now? If he wants *a proper debate*, he must disclose that white paper today. (*Sct P*, Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) Lab, p. 18121)

The statement in (4a) shows the exhortative illocutionary force of a warning. Otherwise, the NP *the transparent debate* in (4b) may be interpreted as essentially attributive—assuming that a *debate* is to or will take place and it would be desirable that it were *transparent*—or as a referential description, i.e., as “merely one tool for [...] calling attention to a certain person or thing” (Donellan 1966:33), to an event, in this case.

In connection with (4b), it is worth noting a specific case in the interface between lexis and pragmatics. Considering the discourse genre, i.e., PD, and the topic of discussion, i.e., a debate on independence, the ambiguity of the word “debate” is widespread: in (4b), it may refer as much metalinguistically to the illocutionary act being carried out as to the specific locutionary act of discussing a topic.⁴

3.2. Vagueness and generality

According to Zhang (1998:20), “a vague expression has one meaning but more than one interpretation, and the interpretations are semantically related”. Regarding lexis, this definition shows the connection of vagueness with polysemy, as explained above.

Vagueness is negatively perceived in areas such as academic and scientific writing, where precision is necessary. However, this is not the case of political discourse. Following on Gricean theory and pragmatics, McGee (2018) highlights the importance of vague language as a politeness strategy. As this author puts it, “the idea here is that precise

⁴ The extension and the aims of this chapter do not allow us to discuss here the traditional tests to detect ambiguity and vagueness (Zwicky & Sadock 1975; Nunberg 1979; Zhang 1998; Dunbar 2001), other interesting cases of ambiguity and other issues related to its connections with homonymy and/or polysemy (Vicente & Falkum 2017 and Sennet (2021).

language gives too much information or information that is not welcome or wanted by the addressee (McGee 2018:44). In sum, by being vague and imprecise, politicians avoid controversy and confrontation.

With respect to PD, however, it is not usually so (see example (4a) above). In fact, in our corpus, vagueness is much restricted to indefinite quantifiers such as *a number of*, *some*, and attenuating expressions like *sort of* (5).

- (5) Stewart Stevenson has virtually proven the point that I am making, which is that the SNP views Scotland as *some sort of* colonial dependency. We are no such thing (*Sct P*, Ken Macintosh (Eastwood), Lab, p. 18138)

With respect to lexis, it seems suitable the idea that both vagueness and ambiguity are matters concerning denotational meanings, leaving aside referential acts (Nunberg 1979; Dunbar 2001). Although there may be instances where the denotational meaning of an NP affects the referential act, this premise prevents us of mixing vagueness and ambiguity with generality, the latter related to the lack of specificity and details in the word meaning. It is widely implied in PD through generic and non-specific reference.⁵ In other words, the superabundance of generic and non-specific referents observed in PD, mainly by means of abstract nouns, seems to provoke an effect of vagueness and ambiguity. This is in fact generality, an ostensive feature of PD's referential cohesion, as it will be developed in the rest of the chapter.

4. Referential cohesion establishment, abstractness and generality in PD

Halliday & Hasan (1976:31) define referential cohesion as a semantic property of texts that “refers to relations of meaning that exist within the text and that define it as a text”. Referential cohesion consists of two basic and interdependent operations: the establishment of referential entities, i.e., their initial occurrences, and their maintenance in the subsequent discourse by means of various grammatical and lexical phoric devices, such as zero anaphora, pronouns, demonstratives and definite NPs (Halliday & Hasan 1976; Givón 1983, 2017; Ariel 1990; Ribera 2008).⁶

As it will be amply proved, most referential entities implied in the operations of establishing reference chains in PD are non-discrete abstract entities. But what do we understand as abstractness? In order to

⁵ However, Zhang (1998:21) also leaves out generality from referential processes. The thing is that this work focuses on lexis strictly speaking.

⁶ For an approach to reference and referential devices from various linguistic paradigms, see Ribera, Marín & Alturo (2018).

approach this concept, it is important to distinguish between extensional abstractness and intentional abstractness (Schmid 2000:63–73; Ribera 2008:280–287).

Schmid (2000:63–65) compares the extensional notion of abstraction, according to which “abstract nouns are those nouns whose denotata are not part of the concrete physical world and cannot be seen or touched” (Schmid 2000:63), with Lyons’ (1977:442–445) proposal of the referent types intervening in referential processes, which can be summarised as follows:

- a. First-order entities: entities such as objects, places, animals and human beings. They are spatially delimited and stably profiled.
- b. Second-order entities: events, including activities, processes and states.
- c. Third-order entities: states of affairs, facts and ideas, including propositions and objects of thought (Figure 1).

According to Schmid (2000), the extensional notion is excessively vague, since it is based on the assumption that the boundaries between concrete and abstract nouns are clear-cut. Conversely, Lyons’ (1977) proposal involves intensional abstractness and makes it possible to understand abstraction in terms of prototypes and fuzzy boundaries between the two extensional semantic classes of names. In other words, although the concrete nature of nouns denoting objects or individuals is clear, compared to prototypical abstract nouns, which denote “intangible notions and ideas” (Schmid 2000:64), the extensional notion of abstraction is questionable when applies to names that designate activities or, in general, events, that is, second-order entities in Lyons’ (1977) proposal.

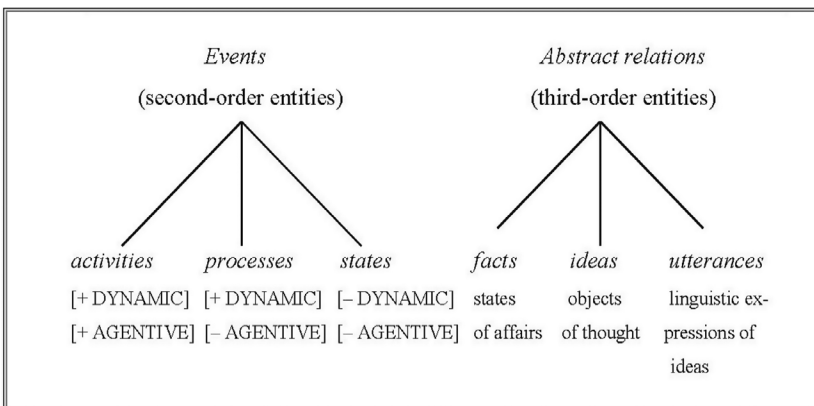


Figure 1. Lyons’ (1977) proposal of second-order and third-order entities, see Schmid (2000:66)

The corpus quantitative results with respect to the types of referential entities are shown in Table 2. The first outstanding result is that third-order entities are the most frequent type of referential entities both in English (70%) and Catalan (56.3%).

(6) I am delighted to lead a Government that today introduces *a bill* that offers the people the opportunity to vote for *an independent Scotland* [...] *Devolution* has already shown how this Parliament has used its current powers to improve lives [...] and we have begun to tackle *Scotland's long-standing public health problems* (*Sct P*, The First Minister, Alex Salmond, p. 18117)

Example (6) includes several instances of abstract relations: a) *a bill*, i.e., a linguistic expression of ideas; b) *an independent Scotland*, an idea or object of thought; c) *Scotland's long-standing public health problems* or *Scotland's public health*, two facts or states of affairs, obviously including an indeterminate number of subsidiary entities, such as institutions and individuals (first-order entities) and events (second-order entities). As for *Devolution*, considered diachronically as the process of giving power from the British Parliament to the Scottish Parliament, which took place from the early 1970s until 1999, is of course an event or a series of events. However, at the moment of the Independence Debate in 2013, it was

Table 2. Order of referential entities

			1st order (concrete and discrete entities)	2nd order (events)	3rd order (abstract relations)	Total
Language	English	Count	51	156	483	690
		% within Language	7,4%	22,6%	70,0%	100,0%
		Adjusted Residual	−2,2	−4,9	5,9	
	Catalan	Count	120	384	649	1153
		% within Language	10,4%	33,3%	56,3%	100,0%
		Adjusted Residual	2,2	4,9	−5,9	
Total	Count	171	540	1132	1843	
	% within Language	9,3%	29,3%	61,4%	100,0%	

already a fact or a state of political affairs governing the relations between Scotland and the rest of the UK. Let us see now some examples from the Catalan debate:

- (7) a. una Catalunya que pateix, com tots els països d'Europa, les conseqüències

duríssimes d'*una crisi econòmica* que s'allarga en el temps, (*Investiture 1*,

presidential candidate to the Generalitat de Catalunya, Artur Mas, p. 4)

'A Catalonia that suffers, like all European countries, the very hard

consequences of an economic crisis that is lasting too much'

- b. I en el meu discurs d'aleshores els plantejava un gran repte de país: obrir *la*

transició nacional basada en *el dret a decidir*, amb *el pacte fiscal* com a primer

objectiu. (*Investiture 1*, presidential candidate to the Generalitat de Catalunya,

Artur Mas, p. 3)

'And in my speech at that time, I posed you a great challenge for the country: to

open up the national transition based on the right to decide, with the fiscal pact

as the first aim'

- c. *La resposta* al plantejament molt majoritari del Parlament és prou coneguda.

(*Investiture 1*, presidential candidate to the Generalitat de Catalunya, Artur

Mas, p. 4)

'The answer to the Parliament's majority proposal is well known'

In (7a) the NP *una crisi econòmica* 'an economic crisis' refers to a state of affairs, whereas *la transició nacional*, 'the national transition', *el dret a decidir* 'the right to decide' and *el pacte fiscal* 'the fiscal pact' in (7b) designate ideas or objects of thought. In turn, *la resposta* 'the answer' in (7c) refers to the linguistic expression of an idea, specifically the illocutionary act of giving an answer to a petition.⁷

As for second-order entities, they show an intermediate percentage, lower in English (22,6%) than in Catalan (33,3%), just the opposite situation found with third-order entities. They consist of activities, i.e.,

⁷ Dik (1997) revises and modifies Lyons' (1977) proposal, and classifies referential entities designating illocutionary acts as fourth-order entities (Ribera 2008:275).

agentive and dynamic events, in both debates, as in (8) from the debate in English.

- (8) Scotland's oil and gas sector is going from strength to strength with record levels of investment in the North Sea. (*Sct P*, The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth, John Swinney, p. 18137)

Regarding first-order entities, their quantitative occurrences are the lowest both in English (7,4%) and in Catalan (10,4%). First-order entities imply mainly individuals, places and institutions or private entities (9).

- (9) What controls would *the Bank of England*—which will by then be a foreign bank—have over the policies of the Government of a separate Scotland? (*Sct P*, Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok), Lab, p. 18120)

The statistical results shown above in Table 2 demonstrate that the differences observed between the English and the Catalan PDs with respect to the types of referential entities are significant (χ^2 [1843, 2] = 34.301 > 13.8150, $p < 0.001$) but with small effect size (Cramer's $V = 0.136$). This means that the languages of the debates (independent variable) may explain the following facts:

- a. Abstract relations are higher in English than in Catalan.
- b. Events are lower in English than in Catalan.

However, given the small effect size of Cramer's V , these differences may be due to the corpus large size. Besides, other factors must be taken into account, e.g., the specific topics of each debate, idiosyncratic features of the MPs, and the dialogical performance of the Scottish debate *vs.* the monological nature of the addressors' first interventions in the Catalan debate.

Moreover, the small size effect resulting from Cramer's V test may be related to two coincidences in both languages:

- a. The preference of both debates for third-order and second-order entities.
- b. Conversely, the smaller number of first-order entities.⁸

In fact, these coincidences give support to my claim that PD as a genre tends to deal with abstract non-discrete concepts.

⁸ The adjusted standardised residuals in Table 2 show that the differences are weaker with respect to first-order entities and stronger in the case of the other two types of referential entities.

5. Non-specific reference and generality

As for generality, it is much relevant to consider the type of reference, either specific or non-specific, indicated by the units that establish the referential processes. Specific reference points to particular instances of entities (*tokens*) clearly identifiable in the physical or mental world, whereas non-specific reference designates general sorts of entities the referent of which may not exist in the real world, or even a whole class of entities, i.e., a *type* (generic reference).⁹

In order to simplify the analysis of this aspect, the predicative shell contents implied in encapsulating processes have not been considered: the fact of being events or abstract relations expressed by predicative units (clauses, sentences or larger chunks of text) makes it often difficult to decide on their referential nature. However, the results obtained from the analysis of the rest of units establishing the referential chains (the traditionally so-called initial antecedents) are quite telling (see Table 3).

The debate in English includes more specific entities which take part in the operations of establishing the referential chains (53.2%), whereas in the Catalan debate there are more non-specific ones (57.3%). However, what is conclusive for this study is the high percentage of non-specific entities in both languages: more than 45% in English and more than 55% in Catalan, rounding the numbers.

Let us discuss some examples.

Table 3. Type of reference by language

			ReferenceType		
			non-specific	specific	Total
Language	English	Count	102	116	218
		Expected Count	119,3	98,7	218,0
		% within Language	46,8%	53,2%	100,0%
		Adjusted Residual	-2,7	2,7	
	Catalan	Count	394	294	688
		Expected Count	376,7	311,3	688,0
		% within Language	57,3%	42,7%	100,0%
		Adjusted Residual	2,7	-2,7	
Total	Count		496	410	906
	Expected Count		496,0	410,0	906,0
	% within Language		54,7%	45,3%	100,0%

⁹ The distinction between *tokens* and *types* is a central topic in Cognitive Grammar (Langacker 1991), derived from the classical concepts of *reference* and *sense* in Frege's (1892) theory or of *extension* and *intension* in Carnap's (1947) work.

- (10)a. The next item of business is a debate on motion S4M-06016, in the name of John Swinney, on *Scotland's financial strength*. (*Sct P*, The Deputy Presiding Officer, Elaine Smith, p. 18133)
- b. *The Edinburgh agreement*, which the Prime Minister and I signed last October, has been followed by legislation in this Parliament and *Westminster* [...] In drafting the bill that enables the referendum, the Scottish Government has been aided by the 26,000 responses that we received to *our consultation* (*Sct P*, The First Minister, Alex Salmond, p. 18117)

Example (10a) provides a case of a non-specific state of affairs: *Scotland's financial strength*, which is in fact the issue to be discussed in the second part of the Scottish debate. Conversely, in (10b), three specific referents are observed: *the Edinburgh agreement* (third-order), *Westminster*, referring to the British Parliament (first-order) and *our consultation* (second-order). Let us see now some examples in Catalan.

- (11)a. una justícia social que descansi més en les decisions autònomes de les institucions catalanes i en els valors compartits *del poble català*, (*Investiture 1*, presidential candidate to the Generalitat de Catalunya, Artur Mas, p. 4)
- ‘a social justice rather resting on the Catalan institutions’ autonomous decisions and on the Catalan people’s shared values’
- b. I certament hi ha un punt de protocol en aquesta cambra, en la qual *es dona la benvinguda als diputats*, (*Investiture 2*, Oriol Pujol, CiU, p. 45)
- ‘And certainly, there is a protocolary point in this chamber, where the MPs are welcome’
- c. hem entrat a *la crisi* amb uns nivells d’endeutament molt elevats i que, per tant, *els marges de maniobra financera* són, en el cas d’*Europa*, escassos, i en el cas de *Catalunya*, inexistents. (*Investiture 2*, Oriol Junqueras, ERC, p. 12)
- ‘we have got into the crisis with very high debt levels and that, therefore, the financial room for manoeuvre are, in the case of Europe, scarce, and in the case of Catalonia non-existent’

Example (11a) offers the non-specific generic reference to *el poble català* ‘the Catalan people’ (first-order entity), meaning the whole Catalan society with no more specifications. In (11b) the clause *es dona la benvinguda als diputats* ‘the MPs are welcome’ refers to a general frequent activity (second-order) in the opening of parliamentary legislatures: the addressor highlights that it is “un punt de protocol” ‘a protocolary point’, what makes it clear that he is not performing then the specific event of welcoming the new MPs. In (11c) a non-specific state of affairs (third-order) is shown: *els marges de maniobra fiscal* ‘the financial room for manoeuvre’. Besides, (11c) contains three specific referents: *la crisi* ‘the crisis’ (third-order) and *Catalunya* ‘Catalonia’ and *Europa* ‘Europe’ (first-order).

The chi-square test shows significant association between the languages and the type of reference ($\chi^2 [906, 1] = 7.337, p = 0.007$) but with very small effect size (Cramer’s $V = 0.09$). This means that the languages implied may explain the differences observed, but they can also be due to the corpus large size. Besides, there must be other constraints that tend to weak these differences, first and foremost PD as discourse genre. In other words, the high percentages of both non-specific and specific referents in

both languages obtained from the corpus may be characterising PD as a genre. By intuition, the non-specific or generic entities seem to be higher than expected in other discourse typologies and genres, such as journalistic editorials and news or narratives of fiction. Ascertaining this intuition is an issue for further research.

If the order of referential entities is adopted as the explicative variable for the type of reference (Table 4), the results show that non-specific referents are the most frequent amongst the second-order entities (61.6%) and the third-order entities (54%), whereas the specific ones show higher counts amongst the first-order entities (55.6%). It is relevant to highlight that the proportions of non-specific and specific referents remain quite similar to those observed when considering the language as the explicative variable.

Table 4. Type of reference by order of the referential entities

			ReferenceType		
			non-specific	specific	Total
OrderRefEntities	1st order (concret and discrete entities)	Count	76	95	171
		Expected Count	93,6	77,4	171,0
		% within	44,4%	55,6%	100,0%
		OrderRefEntities			
	2nd order (events)	Adjusted Residual	−3,0	3,0	
		Count	189	118	307
		Expected Count	168,1	138,9	307,0
		% within	61,6%	38,4%	100,0%
	3rd order (abstract relations)	OrderRefEntities			
		Adjusted Residual	3,0	−3,0	
		Count	231	197	428
		Expected Count	234,3	193,7	428,0
Total	% within	54,0%	46,0%	100,0%	
	OrderRefEntities				
	Adjusted Residual	-,4	,4		
	Count	496	410	906	
	Expected Count	496,0	410,0	906,0	
	% within	54,7%	45,3%	100,0%	
	OrderRefEntities				

The chi-square test shows significant association as well (χ^2 [906, 2] = 13.188, $p = 0.001$), with also small effect size, but a little bit higher (Cramer's $V = 0.121$). This means that the order of referential entities is significantly associated with the observed counts of non-specific and specific referents.

The adjusted standardised residuals show that this association takes place in the case of first-order and second-order entities, but not with third-order entities (residual: $|0,4| < 1,96$, for a $p = 0,05$). This result may be explained by the fact that the distinction between non-specific and specific reference in the case of abstract relations is fuzzier than in the case of concrete entities and events. Furthermore, as in the previous statistical results, the small value of Cramer's V indicates that the differences may be attributed to the corpus large size. In fact, as for the claims of this study, the coincidences in the high counts of non-specific (and generic) referents appear to be more relevant than the differences.

6. Referential chains by means of lexical cohesion: repetition and encapsulation as devices to avoid ambiguity and vagueness

Until now, aspects related to the semantic-pragmatic features of the entities that establish the reference in PD have been discussed. This final part of the study will be devoted to the referential devices that guarantee the maintenance of the reference to those entities by means of phoric chains, paying special attention to lexical cohesion (Halliday & Hasan 1976 1994; Ribera 2008; Gómez González 2018).

Halliday & Hasan (1976:274) define lexical cohesion as “the cohesive effect achieved by the selection of vocabulary”. From this seminal work until now several studies have been devoted to lexical cohesion and various proposals of classification have been provided. Widely speaking, these authors distinguish three types of lexical cohesion: a) repetition; b) reiteration (synonymy, hypernymy and hyponymy, and encapsulation), and c) association (encyclopaedic or contrastive). For the purpose of this final part of my study, the first two types will be exemplified and discussed.

However, before going into the matter, it is worth noting some aspects of Gómez González's (2018) work. It not only offers an extensive review of the most relevant previous proposals of classification, but also includes important considerations pointing to a discourse-specific analysis of lexical cohesion. As Gómez González (2018:111–113) puts it:

My point of departure is that, in order to obtain a functionally adequate usage-based account of lexical cohesion, a *discourse-specific* view, rather than a system-oriented perspective, should be adopted assuming that lexical meaning is (con)text-specific [...] What this means is that the meaning potential of cohesion cannot be determined in isolation. Instead,

the communicative potential of lexical ties must be determined against the context of occurrence, taking into account such factors as processing relevance and cognitive coherence in relation to the context-specific communicative needs of discourse participants, thereby emphasising the collaborative dimension of (lexical) cohesion [...] lexical cohesion has a discourse dimension that motivates its use and therefore must be taken on board in any effort to describe it.

These words shed important light on the narrow relations between lexical cohesion and PD as a genre, particularly with respect to repetition and encapsulation. In fact, they constitute a suitable point of reference for my main claim in this section. Discrete delimitation of the topics chains in discourse avoids ambiguity. In the case of an informatively dense discourse genre such as PD (Ribera & Marín 2018), lexical cohesion proves to be very effective, as shown in Table 5.

6.1. *Repetition and encapsulation*

As it can be observed, repetition is by far the most frequent referential device both in English (60.5%) and Catalan (48.7%). By repeating the topics under discussion, the addressors highlight them and focus on them the addressee's attention, as shown in (12).

- (12) I am delighted to lead a Government that today introduces a bill that offers the people the opportunity to vote for an independent Scotland // *The Scottish Independence Referendum Bill* is the most important legislation [...] since our Scottish Parliament was reconvened [...] it enables *Scotland* to achieve with the powers of an independent country // The parties in this chamber disagree fundamentally about the merits of *independence*. However, it is important to acknowledge that *the bill* is a product of consensus and co-operation // The Edinburgh agreement [...] has been followed by *legislation* [...] to organise *the referendum*. In drafting *the bill* that enables *the referendum*, the Scottish Government has been aided by the 26,000 responses that we received to our consultation on *the bill*. As a result, we are today meeting the commitment that we gave under *the Edinburgh agreement*. (Sct P, The First Minister, Alex Salmond, p. 18117)

Table 5. Referential devices in the maintenance of topic chains

Referential Devices		Synonymy, hypernymy and hyponymy				
Language	English	Count	Repetition	Encapsulation	Pronouns	Zeros
	English	Expected Count	1782	472	375	37
		% within Language	1593,0	427,0	480,3	101,6
		Adjusted Residual	60,5%	16,0%	12,7%	1,3%
		Count	9,5	3,2	-7,1	-8,8
	Catalan	Expected Count	1714	465	679	186
		% within Language	1903,0	510,0	573,7	121,4
		Adjusted Residual	48,7%	13,2%	19,3%	5,3%
		Count	-9,5	-3,2	7,1	8,8
Total		Expected Count	3496	937	1054	223
		% within Language	3496,0	937,0	1054,0	223,0
		Adjusted Residual	54,1%	14,5%	16,3%	3,5%
		Count				

Six topics are constantly repeated in (12): *the bill, legislation, independence, Scotland, the referendum and the Edinburgh agreement*. This constant repetition contributes hugely to profile the affairs being discussed and orients the addressees to lead their attention to these topics. Thus, repetition can be considered an argumentative strategy in PD, which obviously avoids ambiguity.

It is frequent that repetition occurs in the context of an enumerative series (Cortés 2008), as shown in (13), where the antecedents are in bold and the repetitions underlined.

- (13) Davant d'aquest escenari, el que hem de dir és que això té una responsabilitat, que és **l'austeritat**. Ep!, l'austeritat que vostè ha aplaudit, l'austeritat que vostè ha legislat amb dues lleis d'estabilitat pressupostària, l'austeritat a què vostè ha donat cobertura ideològica [...] Aquesta austeritat n'és la responsable. I l'austeritat, senyor Mas, té **una raó de ser**. I la raó de ser és **una estafa**, una estafa, sí, orquestrada, una estafa que permet que els bancs agafin el diner al 0,75 [...] (*Investidura*, Joan Herrera, ICV-EUiA, 16)

'Before this scenario, what we have to tell is that the austerity is responsible for it. Listen! The austerity that you have applauded, the austerity that you have legislated with two laws of budget stability, the austerity to which you have given ideological support [...] That austerity is responsible for it. And the austerity, Mr. Mas, has a *raison d'être*. And its *raison d'être* is a racket, yes, an orchestrated racket, a racket that allows banks to borrow money at 0,75 [...]

As for encapsulators (or shell nouns, in Schmid's 2000 terminology), they constitute a lexical cohesion device defined by the ability to refer to complex predicative chunks of textual information. Specifically, encapsulators constitute a functional class of abstract and highly unspecific nouns which, due to their semantic nature, may refer to fragments of the previous or subsequent text, encompassing them within the *shell* of a noun. They are a functional class in the sense that they do not constitute a paradigmatic subset of nouns but are defined by their syntagmatic functioning in the development of discourse.

Encapsulators play an important role in PD, contributing hugely to structure the discourse. Moreover, by means of their phoric cohesive textual function, they enhance the semantic characterisation of the

encapsulated information, while contributing to the conceptual formation of discourse entities recategorised as nominals, that is, entities profiled as things in the mental representation of discourse as shown in (14).

- (14) They were partly about investing for the long term in an oil fund and partly about accelerated debt repayment. I do not think that, if we are to have an open and considered debate on these *subjects*, (*Sct P*, The Cabinet Secretary, John Swinney, p. 18146).

In (14) the noun *subjects*, together with the text deictic demonstrative *these*, retrieves anaphorically the set of previous activities which can match its semantic content: *investing for the long term in an oil fund* and *accelerated debt repayment*. This cohesive strategy implies important semantic, discourse-pragmatic and cognitive consequences (Schmid 2000:301–376; López Samaniego 2014:39–53, 70–78).

- a. As a noun, *subjects* has a stable lexical meaning which leads to the semantic characterisation of the encapsulated content as “the thing that is being discussed, considered, or studied” (*Cambridge English Dictionary*).
- b. The semantic non-specificity of the noun *subjects* makes it versatile enough to establish functional cohesive links with the activities previously introduced. In fact, as it can be observed in the dictionary definition, this non-specificity consists in a gap or lack of content in the semantic structure of the noun (*what* is being discussed, considered, or studied); thus, this gap has to be *saturated* by means of the encapsulated content. In other words, the meaning of *subject* puts into relation an activity of discussion and an object of discussion, which has to be specified through the previous discourse (Schmid 2000:73–80). Thus, encapsulators are potential carriers of unspecificity, but this is solved through discourse, although some sense of generality remains.
- c. The noun *subjects* recategorises syntactically and cognitively as a noun the activities referred, i.e., it reifies these predicates and conceptualises them as if they were *things* instead of relational entities (Langacker 1987:189). In this way, the reified predicates constitute potential topics and can be referred to anaphorically from that point onwards.

In sum, these three properties (semantic characterisation, cohesive linking and recategorisation or conceptualisation power) locate encapsulators in a point of balance between full-content nouns —with high semantic potential for characterisation, low cohesive ability and constant conceptualisation power— and anaphoric pronouns —unable to

conceptualise their antecedents or characterise them semantically, but prototypically cohesive units (Halliday & Hasan 1976:275, Schmid 2000:19).

As for the quantitative results, encapsulators are the second most frequent referential device in English (16%). In Catalan, they are a little bit less frequent (13.2%).

6.2. Other lexical cohesion devices, pronouns and zeros

Synonyms, hypernyms and hyponyms are rather less frequent than repetition and encapsulation in English (9.4%), but they show a similar number as encapsulation in Catalan (13.4%).

As for synonyms, it is worth noting that they tend to alternate with repetition to enhance the dynamics of PD in both languages: they do not only underline the topics under discussion, but they afford lexical variation, thus avoiding discourse monotony. This alternation is especially frequent in topic chains referring to the generic public audience, i.e., the citizens, as in (15).¹⁰

- (15)[...] *the people of Scotland* will get the Government for which *they* vote [...] Until we have the full powers of independence, we cannot prevent those policies from being imposed on *the people of Scotland*. The choice becomes clearer [...] to take the opportunity to use our vast resources and talent to build *a better country*, or to continue with the Westminster system, which simply is not working for *Scotland*. It is worth reflecting just for a moment on the privilege that *this nation and this generation* will have: nothing less than the privilege of choosing the future course of *our country*, in a democratic referendum that is made here in *Scotland*. [...] (*Scotland P*, The First Minister, Alex Salmond, p. 18119)

Hypernyms and hyponyms are much less frequent than synonyms and are used to highlight less general topics.¹¹

¹⁰ Repetition is marked in italics, while synonymy is both in italics and underlined.

¹¹ The hypernym *atributs* 'attributes' is in italics. The subsequent hyponyms are both in italics and doubly underlined.

- (16) Catalunya té tots *els atributs* per ser considerat un país normal entre els països normals del món. Té un territori definit, una població amb uns valors col·lectius compartits i amb un sentiment nacional àmpliament majoritari, (*Investiture 1*, presidential candidate to the Generalitat de Catalunya, Artur Mas, p. 5)

‘Catalonia has all the attributes to be considered a normal country amongst the world’s normal countries. It has a defined territory, a population with shared collective values and with a national feeling amply shared by the majority’

With respect to pronouns and zero anaphoras, they normally work within the scope of the same or the previous sentence, at most, and refer unambiguously to their antecedents. Let us see an example from the Catalan debate (17).

- (17) Els votants de Convergència han guanyat les eleccions, el senyor Mas *les* ha perdudes. Perquè ell va convocar unes eleccions..., *ho* diu vostè [...] «per aconseguir una majoria excepcional». Ø(=aquestes eleccions) No eren eleccions ordinàries, senyor Mas, Ø(=aquestes eleccions) no tocaven. (*Investiture 2*, Albert Rivera, Ciutadans, p. 28)

‘The voters of Convergència have won the elections, Mr. Mas has lost them. Because he called for elections..., you say it [...] «to get an exceptional majority». (They) were not ordinary elections, Mr. Mas, (they) were not necessary’

Example (17) shows two intrasentential clitic pronouns and two intersentential zeros. The first one (*les* ‘them.FEM’) refers to a primary topic (*les eleccions* ‘the elections’), repeated in the previous clause and again in the following sentence. The subsequent retrieval of the same topic by the two zero subjects underlines its importance as a topic. The second pronoun, the neuter *ho* ‘it’, advances cataphorically a quotation of words attributed to the presidential candidate, that the addressor uses as an argument against the opportunity of the elections.

As for the quantitative results, the pronouns in English represent 12,7%, while in Catalan the percentage is higher (19,3%). With respect to zero anaphora, the percentage in English is 1,3%, while in Catalan is significantly higher (5,3%). The differences in the numbers of zero anaphora in English and Catalan are clearly explained by the full-subject

nature of the former and the pro-drop nature of the latter. With respect to the remarkable quantitative differences of pronouns in each language, as English is a full-subject language, a higher number of pronouns would be expected. However, this is not a central issue in this study and will be postponed for further research.

The chi-square test shows significant association between the languages and the various devices occurring in the corpus' referential chains ($\chi^2[6461, 4] = 189.921 > 18.4662$, $p < 0.001$), with small effect size (Cramer's $V = 0.171$). This means that the differences in the counts of the various referential devices may be attributed to the different languages, but, given the small Cramer's V value, may also be due to the corpus large size. The adjusted standardised residuals show that the association is strong in the case of repetition, pronouns and zeros. As for repetition, this result is consistent with the dialogical nature of British PD, which is a feature in favour of a higher trend to repeat (Tannen 1987; Castellà 2004). Otherwise, if the hypothesis of no association is taken into account, considering the small effect size, it must be highlighted the overwhelming predominance of repetition in both languages, what points again to a specific feature of PD as a genre. As for encapsulation, although the residuals indicate a weaker association, the high counts both in English and Catalan relate this complex lexical cohesion device to informatively dense discourse genres as PD, as discussed in a variety of works on the topic (Borreguero 2006; Izquierdo Alegría & González Ruiz 2013; Ribera & Marín 2018).

7. Conclusions

This corpus analysis shows that ambiguity and vagueness *stricto sensu* are rather infrequent in PD. Conversely, several facts point to characterise PD as general with respect to referential cohesion.

Most entities establishing referential chains in both debates tend to be abstract, either events or states of affairs and ideas, as opposed to concrete referential entities. This result supports the hypothesis that PD tends to deal with non-discrete abstract referents. Otherwise, the high numbers of non-specific and generic referents intervening in the operations of establishing referential cohesion give support to the hypothesis that generality is a feature of PD as a genre.

As for the referential devices contributing to profile and maintain the topics under discussion, repetition proves to be the most remarkable device. Repetition guarantees the straightforward delimitation of the main topics and orients the addressees to pay high attention to them. Thus, repetition works as a powerful strategy used in PD to mark the path of the argumentative dynamics. As a device to maintain the main topics, the units involved tend to repeat the non-specific or generic reference of their antecedents. This contributes to reinforce the whole discourse effect of generality.

In turn, encapsulators contribute to structure the debates, as signposts that mark the debates development. Besides, they enhance the semantic characterisation of the encapsulated information, while contributing to the conceptual formation of discourse entities recategorised as nominals. Their semantic unspecificity consists in the fact that these nouns have one or several gaps in their semantic structure, which have to be filled in by information in the previous or the subsequent discourse. Thus, encapsulators match up easily and straightforwardly with the corresponding encapsulated contents, what also prevents ambiguity and vagueness.

As for the statistical analysis, it shows that there are significant differences between the languages (independent variable) and the various dependent variables taken into account, i.e., the type of referential units establishing the referential chains, the non-specific or specific referential nature of these units, and the various devices intervening in the maintenance of the topic continuity. However, given the small size effect of Cramer's tests, the hypothesis that the differences may be attributed to the corpus large size has to be considered. These statistical results do not refute the study's main claims. If the null hypothesis that there are no significant differences between both languages is assumed, it results in highlighting that abstractness and generality, linked to non-specific reference, and repetition as the preferred referential device to highlight the topics are discourse and pragmatic features that characterise PD as a genre.

Finally, the results of Cramer's tests point to several topics for further research in other corpora of PD and in other languages. Regarding the order of referential entities, it is advisable to study in depth whether the dominance of abstract relations and conversely the lower occurrence of concrete referents is in fact a feature of PD as a genre, as my results show. With respect to the type of reference, a detailed analysis of non-specific and generic reference would advance the characterisation of PD as a general discourse. As for the cohesion devices, the relation between repetition and encapsulation, and the more dialogical or monological nature of PD should be analysed. In general, the intricate relations amongst abstractness, generality, ambiguity and vagueness in PD and in other genres of political discourse should be explored in detail.

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