Turning Public Discourse into an Authentic Artefact: Shorthand Transcription in the French National Assembly

GARDEY, Delphine

The history that I want to evoke here deals with the French parliamentary regime and in particular the National Assembly, the principal locus of parliamentary life. Questions such as the “French model of parliamentary democracy,” “representation,” “delegation” or “certification” and the definition of a democratic public space are at the core of my investigation.1

These issues will, however, be approached from a perspective that may at first appear excessively microscopic or tenuous. Indeed, the actors in this history are largely overlooked, forgotten or simply neglected. They are the stenographers, the inventors, practitioners and champions of shorthand-writing technologies, the only people capable of “writing as fast as one can speak”.2 They are the people who have transmitted their taste for stenography across generations as others have done for the piano. By dedicating endless hours to their training, practicing ever more difficult “scales” or “dictations,” they succeeded, over the course of the nineteenth century, in producing dynasties of virtuosi entirely devoted to the art of oratory and its transcription.

Reputedly as old as writing itself – thus, for example, it is said to have been already known in antiquity under the title of “Tyronian notes”3 – the technique of concise writing indisputably enjoyed a renaissance at the end of the eighteenth century in the form of treatises and inventions, as well as patent applications made to different learned academies. At the end of the eighteenth century, inventors promoted their methods in terms of the “principles of language, grammar, and geometry”.4 These activities were protected from any form of assessment, except for tests based on the confrontation of the internal formal merits of the systems under consideration.5

The history of shorthand linked up with the history of parliamentary democracy during the French Revolution.6 Inventors and practitioners in the field of abbreviation claimed to be the only citizens capable of providing the public with the

1 I am currently doing a historical and sociological investigation of shorthand writing at the French National Assembly. Primary sources and archives (archives administratives du Palais-Bourbon) are compared with observations and data collected during my fieldwork conducted between February and June 2003. This paper was first presented for the EASST/4S meeting, Palais du Luxembourg, Paris, France, August 26, 2004. I would like to thank Jean Pinchot, director of the service, for his wonderful welcome and for allowing me to take photographs, and Vincent Leguy, who helped me technically. I also would like to thank Michel Cal-lon for his remarks when I presented: “Une technologie (invisible) de la démocratie. La sténographie des débats parlementaires (France 1789-1914),” during the workshop I organized with Christian Licoppe on “Technologies de la communication et de l’information en société, micropratiques matérielles et macro transformation,” Cité des Sciences et de l’industrie, Paris, March 2005.
words of their elected representatives. This they claimed to be able to do in a way that was both “faithful” to what had been said and “exhaustive”. Half a century later, Léon de Maleville formulated this claim in the following terms:

“If openness be the soul of representative government, and the most certain guarantee of all the rights grounded in the constitution, then it is necessary that this element of our political life should receive all the developments from which it might benefit, and, in a sense, construct – by means of a form of communication that is as complete as it is rapid – that great image of a whole People gathered around the forum where its most precious interests are at stake.”

7 Léon de Maleville, Député du Tarn et Garonne, Rapport n°354, Chambre des Députés, session de 1847, fait au nom de la commission chargée de rechercher les meilleurs moyens d’assurer un prompt service du Moniteur (“Si la publicité est l’âme des gouvernements représentatifs et la plus sûre garantie de tous les droits fondés sur la Constitution, il importe que cet élément de notre vie politique reçoive tous les développements dont il est susceptible, et réalise, en quelque sorte, par une communication aussi complète que rapide, cette grande image d’un Peuple se groupant tout entier autour de la tribune où s’agitent ses plus chers intérêts.”)
The French Republics of 1848 and of the early 1870s, in contrast to Britain, considered that the parliament needed to make public what was said within its walls and to guarantee its authenticity. It thus chose to create a service, still existing today, dedicated to producing official verbatim minutes to be published in the *Moniteur* and later in the *Journal Officiel de la République Française.*

There are two questions that I will be focusing on in what follows: What has to be recorded? And what does the act of writing the official proceedings imply?

### 1. Recording in Session: Grasping Words, Sounds, Images, Situations and Events

#### 1.1. The Naked Word and the Ideal of Truth

As we said, the stenographers present themselves as the only people able of “capturing what is said on the wing”. In 1794, Jean-Baptiste Breton de La Martinière wrote on the need for “purity” and “integrity”. Insisting on the necessity of providing an “exact copy,” he praised transparency and neutrality as characteristic of the stenographer’s art and method.

This ideal was of course quickly undermined by the practical experience of stenographers, at least for one reason: The scene they had to account for largely exceeded the simple enunciation of words. They quickly learned that the speeches and debates could not be reduced to simple, naked, one-dimensional words. Words are not simply pronounced, they are played out, gesticulated, inflected with moods or passions – or contested. Coulon de Thévenot reflected in 1798 that “while I can transcribe an orator’s speech word by word, I cannot indicate whether he puts more or less vehemence into his presentation; such expressions of sentiment, the passion, the enthusiasm or the gestures that communicate to the audience the impressions that one wants them to experience; all these accessories give life to the ideas that one cannot recover in reading”.

If the life of the political ideas resides in the “passion” of the scene, the issue becomes one of the technical possibility of the stenographer’s capturing the scene in question.

#### 1.2. In the Eye of the Storm

“Mr. Macquart’s processes are unknown to us, but whatever they are, they are unable to give a complete picture of all the sessions, no more that it is in the power of painting to represent all the events of a storm.”

I would like, therefore, to invite you for a while onto the scene or – perhaps more accurately – into the storm. What follows is a summary report of one piece of my field work conducted between February and June 2003 at the National Assembly.

Wednesday, May 21, I arrive in the service a little before 3 p.m. I hurry toward the benches of the Assembly. As on every Wednesday, the Assembly’s rooms are full of activity, because Wednesday afternoon is the day in French political life, the day when deputies can ask the government questions about pressing topical issues. For this one hour, during which the questions are broadcast on television, the chamber is packed full. From the box...
where I am permitted to sit, I can observe the transcribers of the debates at work. Attached to the president’s monumental chair (known as the “perch”) we find, standing on the left, the rouleur (a woman, on this occasion), who has the job of noting the first four minutes of the session. She holds herself straight and has a piece of paper placed on a wooden writing surface that leans against the back of the president’s chair. On the side of the left-hand entry a few meters away, but hidden from the representatives’ view, her releveur is already in place, ready to succeed her. His eyes are fixed on a large clock, whose hands sweep out a complete turn in exactly four minutes. In front of the tribune, at the extreme right of a table, the réviseur is sitting at his post, where he will stay for the next twenty minutes.

The president’s chair is surrounded by ushers, who succeed in appearing to be serious, useful and important. There is a general hubbub that has become particularly intense. Suddenly the president opens the session, which starts noisily. At this point it is impossible to determine either who is speaking or what is being said. The female rouleur immediately springs into action. All the rest follows very quickly, with her searching to identify who is going to ask the first question and yet continuing to write the whole time. After a while, she is replaced by her releveur. She leaves the room to
transcribe her first take, with the text being pro-
vided to the réviseur at the end of his 20 minutes. Jumping up from my chair, I ask her whether I can see her notes. She shows me a page with a few shorthand symbols separated from each other by long strokes and under this a brief text in shorthand, altogether covering less than a single page. “Did you get everything?” I ask, and she replies, “I got everything,” and then excuses herself, saying that she has to hurry.

Back in the session, there is a great commotion. Maxime Gremetz, a Communist deputy is in full swing. The transcribers dread this particular deputy because of his continual interruptions and exclamations. The Social Services Minister is responding to a question on the new scheme for retirement funding. Exclamations ring out from the benches on the left. “Lies!” “Are you joking?” “Gravedigger!” The minister’s response is completely inaudible. In order to hear the interruptions coming from the left, the rouleur twists and turns in every direction, continually sweeping the chamber with his gaze while never interrupting his note-taking. The hubbub reaches its peak then suddenly subsides, returning the chamber to silence. A deputy from the right is asking a question about the “fate of missing children” and the number of police that need to be mobilized in order to find them. There is a general lull. The rouleur makes his notes, while deputies on the left think, read their papers or study the day’s agenda. The chamber becomes agitated again following a question by a Gaullist deputy about the complaints voiced by emergency-room doctors. The rouleur on duty is alert, with his attention turned towards the benches on the left – from which no reaction, this time, is forthcoming. The rouleur relaxes.

The next one to be placed in the limelight is Luc Ferry, the minister of education, an unpopular figure among the political elite. The cries of “Reactionary!” ring out from the left. Although the question was addressed to the minister of education, it is his secretary of state who replies. Is this a sign of weakness? The secretary of state is applauded on the right and booed on the left, but with everyone crying out at once. The rouleur tries to hear what is being said, frowns, and seems no more able than I am to understand what the deputies from the left are saying while brandishing their copies of the Le Monde. The tension mounts, and with the cries of invective reaching a climax, the socialists begin chanting...

Such a storm is not a regular feature of every Wednesday parliamentary session, although it is the norm rather than the exception. Nobody will thus be surprised to learn that stenographers have organized themselves to cope with storm. Three decisive points that count in making a good record could be given:
1. The essential role of the sporting performance: making the individual a perfect machine. First and foremost, there has always been the question of the stenographer’s personal capabilities, the fact that he or she is a virtuoso. Writing everything down, getting it all, requires years of training. For the last century, the recruitment examination has fixed the minimum speed at 180 words a minute, a demand that is rarely met. The risk of falling behind remains a constant threat.

2. A recording system that is highly hierarchical and controlled: making the organization an all-encompassing machine. A way to describe the stenographers’ art would be to say that they form a kind of stereo recording system. Since the organization was perfected in 1848, three pairs of ears and eyes are entirely dedicated to listening and watching the session. On the left of the president’s chair the roulleur listens to the “interruptions” from the political and physical left, while on the right, the réviseur picks up all the remarks and injunctions from the right. This geographic distribution of the recording system is also a hierarchical distribution of the listening process. The role of the roulleurs is to reconstitute the raw words of what is said. The more qualified réviseurs listen and reconstitute the global meaning, while at a third level, the director of the service or his representative, present for the whole length of the session, certifies what happened. It is he who is ultimately responsible for the minutes to be published in the Journal Officiel de la République Française.

3. The session as an event: anticipating the significant incident that might develop. While today there is a mechanical ear that records what is said, the shorthand-transcribers have not dispensed with their exhaustive note-taking. They are not only faithful witnesses of what happens in a session but also the only witnesses of all that happens offstage. The procedural dimension of the session requires them to be constantly vigilant. Although most interventions have no direct consequences, some might have and might trigger an incident – or worse. Incidents could be of quite different proportions: just an oratorical jousting match or the making of noise, but also insults, physical threats, public disruptions – or a revolution. Although quite rare, such historic events remind us of the unpredictable nature of parliamentary life.

In short, stenographers record more than words. They also record images, situations and a variety of events – a task no tape recorder could perform. Successive techniques of recording thus have never seriously challenged the century-and-a-half-old stenographers’ system – our religion, our Marxist-Leninism, as one of today’s directors once described it to me.


2.1. Making an Eloquent Speech a Well-Written Document – or How to Pass from Orality to Literacy

Stenographers in the National Assembly have other competences in addition to being good at recording everything. Their success also depends on their ability to render the complexity of what they record into a script. Initially, their objective and raison d’être were to produce a text that had to be available the next morning in newspapers, offering citizens the text of all speeches and debates. A “modest witness” of the parliamentary scene, the stenographer was also the one whose function it was to make it public through a written document. For that reason, he had to face a first well-known practical problem, the making of a transition from orality to literacy – a difficulty he shares with ethnographers and linguists.

As no one speaks as he writes, any intervention in a session requires a significant work of “transcription,” of rewriting, of “revision,” as stenographers say. As the director of the service under the Third Republic remarked: Transmitting the qualities of a great speaker requires patient and invisible work. Tightening up, clarifying, trimming, revising, done with “taste and tact” – and of course hiding

13 Interview with the director of the service, October 31, 2002.
the traces of this intervention not only from the reader but also from the speaker himself— all these define, according to him, the “literary” nature of the stenographers work. More precisely, there was a historical choice in favor of an exquisitely well-written text because of the importance of éloquence as a cardinal virtue in nineteenth-century France.

2.2. Materially Producing a Faithful and Authentic Text

The making of the written text follows a complex organizational path, starting with the initial take made by the rouleur and his coming back to the service. The rouleur establishes his transcription based on his own notes (and, now, also on the tape-recording of the session). This first four-minute transcription, known as the brut or raw text, is fast and perfunctory. The réviseur who is in the session for twenty minutes gets hold of the five bruts from his take. Physically, these bruts are composed of typewritten sheets with large spaces between the lines to facilitate commentaries and corrections.

Revision consists in the improvement of the brut using pencil. The revised brut document then becomes the blanc, the white text. This is a bundle of papers consisting of the five revised notes, each covering four minutes, which is sent by pneumatic tube to the printer of the Journal Officiel to be type-set. The document takes about eight minutes to cover the quite long distance that separates the National Assembly from the journal’s printer on the Quai Voltaire. Here, the production requirements have evolved over time. Under the Third and Fourth republics, the return of the type-set white text known as the “placard” was expected to take a few hours. When I observed the process, the “tubist” and the director complained that congestion at the Journal Officiel slowed the process down. After receiving the placard, the réviseur adds new corrections and improves the layout. The new placard is returned by tube to the printer, where it is recomposed and returned to be read a second time by the réviseur before being seen by the director, who gives the final authorization for publishing.

Constantly changing hands and changing form, the text repeatedly dies and is reborn in a series of versions that mark its physical journeys. While it is both provisional and disposable, all the traces of

the journey are retained and could be retrieved – for example, for unhappy deputies. This codified series of acts and this circulation and rewriting of texts allow the circulation of trust. One long chain links all the actors, binding those involved into a series of relationships with the text, with the institution and, ultimately, with the citizens.

2.3. Producing a Text and Instituting the Republic

As the transcribers of the country’s sovereign speech, stenographers mediate between the deputies and the people. They restore to the people what the people have delegated to their representatives. What is granted as an abstract act of delegation needs to be returned, and the stenographers are the artisans of this restoration.

Historically, the question of the individual stenographer’s art, of his personal relationship with the spoken and written word (something that characterizes the 1830s and 1840s and the private publication of the compte-rendus in newspapers) cedes its place to the question of the organization of a collective machinery able to produce an official text. There is, no doubt, a functionality in the organization of the service, in a procedure that has been strictly followed for more than a century and a half. But this change is also tied to a political project. The scenographic aspect and theatricality of the stenographic process, as well as the complex ritual of production of the text, are there to help make the final text the true expression of national sovereignty. Already in the context of the Second Republic, but more clearly under the Third, the key goal of this official transcription was to help make the Republic, to help stabilize a democratic regime still under threat, to render it visible, inescapable. Making everything public every morning, giving daily a faithful and complete account – in short, producing an authentic artifact – was what was at stake for the stenographic service and what was decisive for the new power.

The stenographers who organized themselves so precisely and so visibly were thus doing something more than taking notes and writing: They were helping make the parliament the core of French political life.