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Speaking on behalf of others
Why the digital humanities should care about parliamentary data

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Abstract

Parliaments keep minute records of all the words spoken by politicians during plenary sessions. Over the last decades, these (almost verbatim) proceedings have become increasingly available in digital format, spawning immense historical corpora, which contain millions of words, often spanning multiple centuries of political debate. These data give a unique insight into the language and worldview of members of parliaments, and the constituents they aimed to represent, thus providing a detailed account on almost every issue that moved public opinion at some point in time. Digital parliamentary proceedings constitute an invaluable, but still under-explored collection for digital historians. This talk gives an overview of emerging approaches to parliamentary data that combine computer science and history. It firstly covers how speeches of MPs allow scholars to study different aspects of language, form sentiment, or sophistication, to use of humour. Secondly, it discusses how the computational analysis of parliamentary debates contributes to answering critical historical questions, such as the role of women in national politics or the changing shape of political representation.

Bio

Kaspar Beelen is a digital historian, who explores the application of machine learning to humanities research. After obtaining his PhD in History (2014) at the University of Antwerp he worked as postdoctoral fellow at the University of Toronto. As researcher on the Digging into Linked Parliamentary Data (Dilipad) project, he published several papers situated at the interface of data science, political science and history, which explored a wide range of topics, including: the representation of women in Westminster, the evolution of public health discourse, and the use of affect in parliamentary language. In 2016, Kaspar moved to the University of Amsterdam where he first worked as a postdoc at the Informatics Institute, and later became assistant professor in Digital Humanities (Media Studies). Since February 2019, he works at the Alan Turing Institute as research associate for the Living with Machines project.