Meanings of Democracy in Estonia: An Analysis of Focus Group Discussions

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Abstract

The word 'democracy' is well disseminated among people all over the world, yet there is little detailed knowledge apart from ungrounded assumptions about how this concept is understood outside academia, how it is meaningful to the general public. This paper aims to uncover some of this meaning on the basis of focus group discussions on democracy conducted in Estonia at the end of 2006. First of the two objectives of this paper is to introduce aspects of Cognitive Linguistics to aid in this analysis of meaning. Relying mostly on the notions of categorization and conceptual frames, the second and main objective of the paper is to outline and introduce four frames of democracy as the four main ways this word can be meaningful: the freedom frame, the responsibility frame, the interaction frame and the rules frame. It is the contention here that together these four frames cover most of the variation in the meaning of the word 'democracy' in Estonia.

Keywords: democracy, discourse analysis, Cognitive Linguistics, framing.

1. Introduction

If a person is asked anywhere around the world what the word 'democracy' means, the answer most likely given is that democracy first and foremost means freedom or certain rights. At least this is what survey research tells us is the case (see e.g. Dalton et al. 2007). This primary association with freedom or rights seems to be relatively universal, although with certain regional peculiarities, and thus seems to suggest that a specific version of (or label for) the concept of democracy has become diffuse all over the world. But what does this tell us about the meaning of democracy? We know that democracy means freedom and rights, but what does freedom or rights mean? How do people understand these notions and their components and how do they construct the meaning(s) of the term 'democracy'? Such knowledge is at present essentially lacking and research into this question is scarce. Among some of the more significant examples are John Dryzek and Leslie Holmes who conducted research on the discourses of democracy in 13 countries at various levels of democratization using Q-methodology (Dryzek and Holmes 2002). This study, however, lacks an explicit or elaborated account of the notion of meaning or discourse and provides narratives constructed by the researchers themselves as discourses of democracy in the investigated

countries. Thus, although theories of democracy have over centuries produced a myriad of different meanings for this term with versions of liberal representative democracy being undisputedly hegemonic at present, there is next to no knowledge about how the people – the central actors of any true democracy – understand this word and construct its meaning.

The aim of the current paper is to modestly amend this deficiency. It uses focus group discussions on the concept of democracy in Estonia conducted at the end of 2006 to provide information on how people understand the meaning of the word 'democracy'. Focus group discussions, as opposed to survey questionnaires or Q-methodology, are able to generate data on the notion of democracy, which is far more detailed and uninfluenced by the researcher. The main problem, however, at least at the outset, is how to analyze this data. The most prominent approaches to the analysis of talk or texts – versions of critical discourse analysis (CDA) – do not provide the tools for a detailed and substantive analysis of the meaning of words and concepts. Therefore, the current paper will rely on Cognitive Linguistics (CL) as a more suitable theory and method for the purposes of such an analysis. By analysing focus group discussions on the notion of democracy through the application of elements from Cognitive Linguistics, four different conceptual constellations or frames of democracy, which appear across the focus groups and thus seem to be well disseminated in the Estonian society, are outlined. By bringing out the conceptual makeup or structure of these constellations, this analysis provides a more detailed and substantive picture of what, and more importantly how, the notion of democracy means to people.

2. Cognitive Linguistics and the Analysis of Meaning

To come to grips with the problem of meaning, CDA has in recent years adopted some elements from Cognitive Linguistics, more specifically cognitive semantics. The fact that CDA has not paid any attention to the human mind has been seen by some as one of the most important aspects missing from the discipline (Chilton 2005). It seems essential for CDA as a research enterprise that the workings of the human mind become one of its central concerns, if for no other reason than for the fact that it is the mind that provides the link between discourse as language (use) and social actions and practices (Chilton 2005: 23). Attention to cognitive processes might also help to better conceptualize and analyze aspects of meaning and understanding as they are represented in discourse.

Hereafter some of the elements from Cognitive Linguistics necessary for the purposes of this analysis are outlined. They will centre on how Cognitive Linguistics understands meaning, how this relates to words and texts, and what should be investigated in the analysis of meaning in such abstract domains as democracy.

2.1 Encyclopaedic Knowledge

The view of knowledge as encyclopaedic is founded on the premises that knowledge forms a structure, that the meaning of objects emerges in the context of structure, and that words are access points to encyclopaedic knowledge structures (Evans et al. 2006: 11). Above all, this means that word

meanings cannot straightforwardly be defined, which would constitute a dictionary view of meaning, since words are not transparent containers of meaning, but rather serve as access points to potentially fluid knowledge structures that are related to a concept or a conceptual domain (Evans and Green 2006: 160). Thus, from this perspective Cognitive Linguistics, or more specifically cognitive semantics, is 'concerned with investigating conceptual structure and processes of conceptualization' (Evans and Green 2006: 170) in order to uncover the meanings of words. In this light, the goal of the current paper is to investigate the conceptual structures which people invoke when using the word 'democracy'.

2.2 Categories and Categorization

Before turning to conceptual structure, some elaboration on the basic elements of such structures – conceptual categories – is needed. Categorization or the formation of concepts is a central element of our thought process (Lakoff 1987: 5-6) and lexical items or words essentially correspond to conceptual categories (Evans et al. 2006: 15). In general, it can be said that a category is a bundle of entities, activities and/or processes that are somehow grouped together, subsumed under a single 'label' if language use is taken into consideration. Categorization is at the heart of the encyclopaedic view of knowledge in so far as it accounts for 'the organization of concepts within the network of encyclopaedic knowledge' (Evans and Green 2006: 248).

Two approaches to categorization can be identified – the classical view and what is called the cognitive view. The classical view of categories proposes that categories have definitional structure, necessary and sufficient conditions that determine category membership (Evans and Green 2006: 251). This classical view of categories, however, suffers from a number of shortcomings (Evans and Green 2006: 252-254), which suggest that it is inadequate for explaining the actual process of categorization. This has led the issue of categorization away from the classical view towards investigating what are so-called 'cognitive models', which structure categories and categorization. Therefore, in order to investigate the meaning of words, one should put the emphasis on different cognitive models or configurations of conceptual structures, which are formed in the process of categorisation. It should be noted here that every category is itself composed of sub-categories and relations between them. Therefore, speaking about conceptual categories and speaking about relationships or structures between conceptual categories is inseparable and emphasis on either side depends on the analytical focus.

2.3 Conceptual Frames

In investigating conceptual structures, a general consensus around the notion of frame (which has among other things been called script, schema and model) has emerged (Lukeš 2007: 189). A frame is a category that is composed of several other subcategories and which together form a structured whole (Dirven et al. 2003: 6). More specifically, however, a frame can be defined as 'any system of concepts related in such a way that to understand any one of them, you have to understand the whole structure in which it fits' and 'when one of the things in such a structure is introduced into a text, or into a conversation, all of the others are automatically made available'

(Fillmore 2006 [1982]: 374). Thus, a frame is defined as a way in which knowledge is structured, with the specific emphasis on the way this structure as a whole establishes (or helps to establish) the meaning of a conceptual constellation and its components. Although there are no determining ways to organize a specific conceptual frame, certain configurations can be culturally rather wide-spread, durable and static. Within the context of this analysis, therefore, the main emphasis will be put on how various different categories, which are associated with the notion of democracy, and their component categories, are interrelated in noticeably durable ways across the focus group discussions.

2.4 Conceptual Domains

Encyclopaedic knowledge is arranged into conceptual domains. To get a better grasp of the notion of domains, a basic feature of understanding concepts (categories), namely their division into 'profile' and 'base' (or 'figure' and 'ground' in other terminology) (Croft 2006: 271) should be considered. In general it might be said that a base is the set of presuppositions that are needed to understand a concept (the profile). This reflects the central idea of encyclopaedic knowledge – that the meaning of a word (the conceptual category or frame that it corresponds to) is determined against a larger background of concepts and inter-conceptual relations. Like categories and frames, what is to be considered a domain is determined by the level of focus. Indeed, a more relational definition of a domain is that it is a 'semantic structure that functions as the base for at least one concept profile' (Croft 2006: 272). A domain is essentially any background against which any concept is understood. In this paper domains will be considered on the greatest level of abstraction as abstract dimensions against which elements of a frame (or the frame as a whole) are profiled (Dirven et al. 2003). Thus, domains are, in relation to categories and frames, and especially the latter, considered as the most abstract and broadest areas of knowledge in the encyclopaedic structure of knowledge.

On the basis of these insights from Cognitive Linguistics, then, this analysis will proceed as follows. Since the central elements of encyclopaedic structures of knowledge are conceptual categories, one should first pay attention to what categories people invoke in their talk and how – which are the categories that are used most often, when speaking about democracy? It should also be discerned how the whole domain in which the notion of democracy is situated is, in broad terms, categorized and what is the conceptual background against which democracy is understood. In this case it would mean how people understand the state or society as a whole. Finally, and perhaps most important, one should look at which frames or conceptual structures (if any) people use when they speak about democracy. Since a frame is a recurrent conceptual structure, attention must be paid to any regularity in speaking about democracy across discourse, in this case the focus group discussions.

3. Overview of the Data

The current analysis is based on 8 focus group discussions, which were conducted at the end of 2006 at locations all over Estonia from the capital

Tallinn to smaller rural settlements. Each group included from four to eight discussants and lasted around two hours. The discussions were recorded and the recordings transcribed.

Across the focus groups 44.7% of the participants were male and 55.3% were female. According to age groups (<18, 18-25, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55, 56-65, 65+), all age groups roughly accounted for slightly more than 10% of the participants, expect age group 26-35 (23.4%) and age group 36-45 (19.1%). It should be noted that FG8[1] consisted entirely of adolescents (high school students below the age of 18) and thus other focus groups contained next to no participants from that age group. In general 34.7% of the participants reported that they had some kind of a higher education, 36.2% had secondary education (including secondary vocational education), one participant reported to have primary education and 14.9% were still obtaining their secondary education (again, mostly from focus group eight – FG8). Additionally, 14.9% of the participants reported that they were members of a political party. Thus, perhaps with the exception of FG8, but certainly across all the other focus groups, the participants made up a diverse cross section of people, across different age groups and educational backgrounds. With regard to the occupations of the discussants, the picture in general is also quite varied. Again, FG8 stands out, which consisted of high school students and perhaps also FG5, which comprised people mostly of 'high status' managerial occupations. In other groups the occupational characteristics of the discussants were diverse and nothing specific can be said to stand out. All the participants in the focus groups were ethnic Estonians.[2]

Each of the interviews lasted roughly two hours, during which time the participants were able to discuss what they considered relevant with regard to the notion of democracy. The discussions were moderated by two moderators, whose influence on the course of the discussions was kept to a minimum and was limited mostly to presenting the central topics for discussion and asking now and again certain specifying questions (probing). With regard to the substantive dynamics of the discussions, they followed the subsequent 'route', which was inserted into the discussions by the moderators. The first general topic that was introduced in all of the discussions was the general meaning of the term 'democracy' with the focus on what the discussants would consider to be the most relevant and important features of that notion and the significance they attributed to the whole term. The second general topic focused on how people would perceive democracy in Estonia and its development during the past 15 years. After that, people were asked to describe the aspects of democracy that they were either satisfied or unsatisfied with. The interviews ended with the introduction of a topic that would turn the attention of the discussants to the future and how they would see the development of democracy in Estonia in the coming years. Although this was the general and broad predefined framework of the interviews, the specific dynamics of each discussion often broke down that structure with elements, which had emerged in earlier parts of the discussions, later brought into the discussion under different topics and with some aspects of the framework thus inevitably receiving more and some less attention.

With regard to the roles that were set up in the specific context of the discussions, the moderators established, usually right in the beginning of the

interview, that they were merely there to listen to what the discussants had to say and that the latter were in that context essentially the 'experts'. Additionally, all attempts on part of the discussants to reflect the topics or questions back to the moderators and ask their own opinion were blocked by the moderators and in most cases they were careful not to influence the course of the discussion beyond the bounds of the general topics that they introduced and the elements that the discussants themselves brought into the discussions. Such a set-up of roles on part of the moderators created an environment for discussion, in which the discussants could as freely as possible and in their own words express what they understood to be relevant in the context of democracy in Estonia.

Although 47 people formally took part in the discussions, the actual case was that some of the discussants tended to dominate the discussion in the sense of doing most of the talking and the contribution of some of the participants was in some cases even limited to just a few sentences, thus when compared to the length of the interviews, almost nonexistent. Thus, while 47 discussants were present in the physical location of the discussions, the effective number of speakers can be considered to be somewhat lower. This silence on part of some of the discussants might reflect the fact, among of course many other things, also established through survey research on the same topic – namely that not all people are able to provide a conceptualization of democracy (Dalton et al. 2007).

4. The Four Frames of Democracy

This section will outline and analyze how people across the discussion groups understood the notion of democracy. To understand the conceptual structure, which gives this word meaning, the section will start with the categories of state and power on the one hand and people and politicians on the other, as the former constitute the domain and the latter the main component elements of the frames of democracy. The analysis will be interspersed with salient examples from the discussions to give a better grasp of the generalizations that are made and the knowledge structures that are outlined.

4.1 The General Domain: State-power

In its most dominant sense the state is understood as an institutional or a legal framework that structures social and political life with the corresponding subject positions (frames, which correspond to actors) for the actors that operate in and direct this setting (i.e. the politicians). Such a conceptualization is evident in phrases like 'to rule a state' or to 'lead/command a state', which are usually used to refer to the conceptualization of politicians as those who manage a state. Expanding and exemplifying this sense of the word 'state' is the personification of the state, which in this case is an example of a subtle metonymy, where an element of the broader domain of the state – the politicians – is used to refer to the whole domain, or rather the reversed version of this: when speaking of the whole domain, the activities of the politicians are implicitly referred to. The word 'state' in relation to the notion of politicians is used pervasively throughout the

discussions, suggesting that the category of politicians is central to this domain.

The conceptualization of the state is also closely related to the conceptualization of power, because the state is seen as a location of power. This was already evident, when politicians were spoken of as those who manage or rule the state (both being activities that imply the exercise of power) and when speaking metonymically of politicians as the state. The same is evident when people in general are referred to in relation to the state as 'subjects of the state'. In such instances and contexts the notions of power and state mutually implicate each other. The notions of state, power and politicians seem to be closely interrelated, whereas the notion of people (the society in general), to which we will turn to below, is conceptualized separately from the state, the politicians and power.

4.2 Central Actor Categories: People

Whenever the category of people as social actors in general (not referring to a specific subcategory of people defined by some characteristics) is brought up in the discussions, it is usually done with a negative undertone. Referring to people as social actors with some positive capabilities or agency is almost nonexistent. The few positive categorizations usually concern a specific subsection of the whole of people or some specific examples. A peculiar element becomes evident when the notion of nationality is used as the basis for categorizing people, namely a reoccurring idea that Estonians are in a sense victims, which is also seen to effect the conceptualization of them as social actors. This appears to be the case when Estonian history is brought into the respective categorization and is evident in statements like (1) – (3)[3]:

(1)
Estonians are so, so to say, with much patience, that they do no protest. They are subjugated and they suffer. I guess they are used to being like that. (FG1)

(2)
That nothing depends on us, the Estonians have too much of a feeling of helplessness. This does not allow for that democratic society also to function that well as the rules right now would allow, I think. (FG2)

(3)
I think that Estonians have suffered so much from this whole, from the Soviet and German, so terribly have suffered. (FG6)

At times, but not always, such a categorization seems to attach a sense of passivity to the category of people as Estonians (they are seen as being used to the role of subjects), which is seen as determined by the historical experience of the nation.

An explicitly and strongly negative view of people as actors in general, without the co-articulation with nationality, appeared most strongly in two instances – in FG3 and FG5, but echoes of such a categorization also surfaced in other discussion groups. This view has two subtypes. On the one hand, the negative view can be based on perceived ignorance and stupidity on part of people, as expressed in statements like:

(4)
Or a person with full intellect does not go to vote because of a colourful picture. These are those people, who have made for themselves the decision to be stupid, meaning not to know anything about things and then we have nothing to complain about that democracy does not work the way it should in fact work. (FG3)

or more mild ones like

(5)
Then so to say the knowledge about what a council [local government council] is and what is a government is pretty vague. People do not very much understand it. (FG2)

This perspective can be seen as contingent ignorance – something that is the case, but does not have to be. People are seen as ignorant, stupid or just mildly in the dark. People, however, are not seen as destined to be like that and the situation can at least in principle be altered for the better.

On the other hand, a much more fatalistic strand of a negative perspective is also expressed, most dominantly in FG5. This perspective categorizes people through reference to human nature, an essence of people, which results in seeing members of that category in general (the majority) being by nature intellectually impaired or lacking rationality. This is evident in expressions like (6):

(6)
People cannot take a broader perspective. When a person could get a bit out of one's capsule, look at what is going one elsewhere, but cannot. That is exactly the problem that human nature is made that way. (FG5)

Such a categorization can be called fatalistic ignorance, since it is based on an understanding of what people are by nature and in this sense is much stronger than the contingent perspective.

In addition to having assumptions about the intellectual level or capacity of people and their agency, a prominent element in the general category of people seems to be their attitude towards politics and the willingness to engage in broader social and political matters. This might be called the resignation view and is evident in statements like (7) – (9):

(7)
And generally, most of the people don't, they are fed up with this politics, and so they don't go to vote. (FG1)

(8)
So, I mean that we have a prevailing indifference, [...]. That all is indifferent to us. Ah, I don't care, I deal with my own business. (FG3)

(9)
I think that people have tried and they have run against the concrete wall so many times that they have lost hope. That this does not change anything anymore, I will not waste my energy. (FG4)

Such a categorization sees people as politically passive and tired of politics, being separated from politics and the activities of politicians, who do not take much interest in what people have to say, and does not see them as having any agency in political processes. It positions members of that category explicitly outside the domain of politics.

If the concept of democracy is seen as involving both people and politicians, then such a categorization is detrimental to understanding democracy as functional or people in general as active participants in democracy. What is significant is the fact that whenever the category of people became the subject of discussion, the perspective that was usually taken was with a negative or at least non-positive undertone and there were almost no instances when people as agents in the context of democracy were generally depicted in an explicitly positive or proactive way.

4.3 Central Actor Categories: Politicians

Politicians often tend to be seen as a closed and interconnected category. They are seen to form a clique which is intersected by personal connections (e.g. FG6) and which does not seem to tolerate too much turnover. It is noteworthy that a perception of politicians as actors acting in the public interest with the common good in mind is almost totally absent from the discussions. Instead quite often and in almost all the discussions, politicians are depicted as being primarily self-interested actors, who above all are concerned with their own personal benefits (or of people close to them) and re-election, but also not taking into account the opinions and interests of the public. This is evident in statements and expressions like:

(10)
But our rulers unfortunately do not take public opinion much into account. (FG3)

(11)
About general interests, the general interests of the people, they are discussed generally only before elections. During rest of the time lobby groups and their interests are dealt with. (FG1)

(12)
And, well, when we talk about politicians then first of all they have those personal ambitions, which in fact, well, let's say that it is most important that they would be in the same place in four years [the parliamentary term in Estonia], right. (FG6)

Such a position is also expressed through normative statements like (13):

(13)
I think that politicians, when they have been elected to the front end of the state, then they have been elected with this objective that they should execute my will instead of me there. (FG3)

This perspective seems to suggest that a certain distance exists between people or the public and politicians. Politicians are seen as just doing their

own thing, keeping their own interests primary and not giving much thought to what would be best for the society in general.

Another view of the politicians that appeared at times was of politicians as incompetent at what they do or should be doing. This perspective is presented in statements and expressions that refer to politicians in the following ways:

(14)
Some guys, who are at one point emotionally liked by somebody, they do not have competence or knowledge about this system that they have to run in practice. (FG4)

(15)
... bunch of idiots. (FG5)

This incompetence could also be expressed with reservations, implying that some politicians are and some are not capable of doing their job as in (16):

(16)
Among those people from whom to elect there are decent people as well... one has to elect all the time and there is nothing more to it. (FG6)

One of the more significant elements in talking about people or politicians is the use of passive voice, which hides the specific actor behind the action and only indicates that something has happened or taken place (see e.g. van Dijk 1998; Fairclough 2003). Such choices of wording seem to hide the agency of politicians, depicting their actions as something that are done impersonally without reference to a specific actor. This seems to represent some distance between the discussants and that which happens in politics, for political processes and activities are seen as taking place in a way that is somewhat obscured and the actors behind there processes are presented as hidden.

4.4 Conceptualizations of Democracy: Central Frames

Looking at the discussions that were analyzed here, four different ways in which democracy is understood can now be discerned. In some cases, the distinction between those four frames is in part analytical, since in the discussions they can appear together, superimposed, or one frame could presuppose and thus subsume the other. But all of them have a distinct internal structure, which can be invoked separately and in many instances is. Such frames act as organizing structures for component conceptual categories. Different ways for articulating their component elements constitute different meanings that the concept of democracy has, as it was expressed in the discussions. It is likely that these four frames account for most of the meaning that the concept of democracy can have in the popular discourse in Estonia, since no other such distinct and recurrent frames were noticeable across (or for that matter within) the discussions.

4.4.1 Frames of Democracy: Freedom Frame

The primary way in which democracy was understood was through what can here be called the freedom frame. This is usually the first association that people bring forth with regard to the word ‘democracy’ and it is explicitly

expressed most often in almost all the discussion groups. This association also reflects some of the survey results on the understanding of democracy that were mentioned in the beginning of this paper. The freedom frame is primary also in another sense: some of the other frames that are outlined below rely in part on the freedom frame.

Although people when they speak of freedom bring out various and at least at first glance different activities like speaking, acting, deciding, managing, thinking, expressing, moving, choosing, etc, all of them can be understood as different forms of individual behaviour. They are all actions that an individual actor can perform. Although it does not explicitly exclude collective action, the way this frame seems to be expressed is from the perspective of an individual in society. Though it concerns an individual as an actor, no action or activity is actually included in the frame, only the potential and possibility for action. This potentiality is especially evident when the word rights (e.g. the right to vote or to participate) is used in the context of this frame. The action is present only insofar as it is something that can be performed by the actor. An actor in this frame is free as long as he or she has the possibility to act on his or her own (or perhaps more specifically if there are no explicit impediments to acting thus).

Although this frame explicitly focuses on an individual actor in society, the frame implicitly presupposes another actor who is in a sense opposed to the free individual insofar as it has a potential to set limits on the possible actions that the free individual can take. It is evident that most often it is the state that could perform that limiting role, especially since at times the freedom frame is invoked in a comparison with the Soviet period, when the state had set certain fairly restrictive limits on what people could say or do in the society. Although this frame seems to implicitly contain the state as an actor, which has the potential to limit freedom, it can be said that this frame is non-political. It concerns a broad social arrangement, which touches upon various aspects of people's day to day lives and some specific freedoms like the freedom or right to vote or to run for political office can be seen as special instances of the freedom frame and certainly not some of its primary manifestations. In this sense, democracy understood through the freedom frame is present in all walks of life and more often than not does not include politics as such. The freedom frame is invoked when democracy is referred to for example in the following ways:

(17)
Which aspects are the most important – of course this freedom of speech and freedom of action. (FG1)

(18)
It is the freedom to decide for oneself. Manage for oneself. (FG6)

(19)
But first and foremost also for me is that I can think freely and second that I can move freely, well for Estonians that is extremely important, right, and well, let's say then that I can also express my thoughts freely. (FG6)

(20)
We have a right to express our opinion for example. Freedom of speech. Freedom of choice. We have the right to run in elections… (FG8)

(21)
You can meet people where you yourself want and talk about that, which you want. You can choose what you do. (FG4)

(22)
Me as well, that democracy at first glance associates immediately with this kind of a right for persons to freely express their positions, opinions. (FG4)

These are only some of the more prominent instances where such a frame was expressed and many others are abound across the discussions.

4.4.2 Frames of Democracy: Responsibility Frame

Democracy understood through the notion of responsibility or obligations can be considered as a supplement to the freedom frame, because it is often invoked as an addition to the freedom frame, as something that goes together with freedom. However, both of those frames are also apparent separately. The notion of responsibility in the context of democracy is understood in a variety of situations and in the case of different actors. On the one hand, people speak of democratic responsibility with regard to politicians as rulers, but on the other hand responsibility is associated with the category of people in their role as citizens. In some cases what is actually meant by that notion remains clouded and it is just brought out that responsibility is something that comes as a result of freedom. This, in a sense, like the freedom frame, is also an individual-centred frame, since it does not explicitly include a specific relationship between different categories of actors, but rather a relationship between an actor and the broader social environment. In contrast to the freedom frame, which included or concerned primarily only members of the category of people as members of a society, this frame explicitly includes also members of the category of politicians. What seems to be essential to this frame and which is similar across the included subject positions is the fact that persons as actors are not seen as acting in a vacuum, but in a social environment that implicitly includes other actors. When the frame of freedom was negative in the sense that it focused on limitation, the responsibility frame is positive, since it emphasizes the importance of acting in certain ways (usually unspecified in talk) if a country or society is to be considered democratic. With regard to the specific elements that make up this frame, one can thus discern individual actors, the society as a whole, in which they are situated and a relationship between them, which sets an obligation on the actor to behave in certain ways.

The responsibility frame is expressed in the discussions in the following ways:

(23)
That those who have come to power through democratic mechanisms, that they then also in this sense would fulfil the responsibility side of democracy. That there is greater responsibility. (FG2)

(24)
Well, with democracy there comes certainly some kind of a sense of responsibility, which I talked about earlier. (FG3)

(25)
But when there are also rights there are also responsibilities, right. That we give people a right to vote, but with the fact of being a citizen, this comes with responsibilities as well. (FG3)

(26)
It was said correctly that democracy also means responsibilities. That people often forget the responsibilities next to the rights. And the more rights, the greater the responsibility or the more there are obligations. (FG4)

(27)
That this is the thing, let's say well that in this sense freedom brings along responsibilities. (FG6)

(28)
But is the same thing that the fruits of democracy are tasted but the responsibility of democracy is not taken. Well, let's say here that maybe it would be more precise to say the responsibility of ruling. (FG2)

4.4.3 Frames of Democracy: Democratic Interaction Frame

The democratic interaction frame conceptualizes democracy as a relationship of interaction between power-holders and subjects/people. This interaction is most often seen in the form of people being able to influence political decision making processes. While the freedom and responsibility frames centred on a single explicit actor, this frame explicitly incorporates two such actors, one who has the power or capability to decide (e.g. politicians) and another who is somewhat subject to those decisions or has a stake in them (e.g. people). Crucial to the frame is the relationship between those two subject positions, through which people have an influence on the activities of politicians. It is this relationship of influence, which makes this constellation democratic. What is peculiar, however, is that in most instances the relationship of influence is limited to people merely 'having a say' or 'speaking along' if the phrase is to be translated directly into English. This phrase is used to express the relationship across the discussions and it seems to have a very specific implication, which also reflects an already mentioned distance between people and politicians. It seems to imply that politicians do what they do, as a force with its own inertia, and people must only have the opportunity to speak along to that, which the politicians do. Of course this often comes with either an implicit or explicit presupposition that politicians should take into account what the people have to say. In some instances this 'having a say' is also conceptualized merely though the act of voting, which is seen as the primary way people can be involved in politics. Thus, the procedure of elections is one part of this frame and is throughout the discussions the only specific procedural (in the sense of procedural definitions of democracy) element that is associated with the notion of democracy. This frame can be seen expressed in the following statements:

(29)
On a personal level it is the freedom to speak along in those things that hurt me or where I feel constrained. (FG1)

(30)
It [democracy] associates with this that there is like the possibility somewhere to speak along in deciding or to express one's opinion. (FG2)

(31)
And likewise for the state that there is a right to speak along in those matters that the state well, let's say to make one's life better in short, that there is a right, well the right to vote mostly. (FG6)

(32)
I wanted to say that it is the right of a competent citizen to choose the political leadership of one's country, but freedom of speech might be there as well. This is a bit more disputable. (FG7)

4.4.4 Frames of Democracy: Rules Frame

The last frame through which democracy is meaningful is the rules frame. In this frame democracy is understood as certain rules, established processes, and mechanisms (usually not specified in discussions), or agreements that have been established in the society (or in a smaller group of people) and that should be followed. Compared to the other three, especially the freedom frame and the interaction frame, this is the least prominent across the discussions, but still distinguishable and significant for it accounts for some of the meaning that the word 'democracy' can have.

In this frame the meaning of democracy is not embedded directly in the actions and interactions of different social actors as in the previous frames, but in rules or agreements that have been established and that have to be followed by actors. Indeed, categories of actors are implicit in the frame, their presence and activities are required for otherwise the notions of rules and agreements would be meaningless, but they are not explicit elements in the frame. This frame is expressed in statements like (30) – (36):

(33)
That, well, I believe that those leaders from the Soviet times, they have two possibilities, they are either taken down, because the people are still not satisfied or they learn to live in the new circumstances and at least try to follow some kinds of democratic processes or to play along. (FG1)

(34)
… that those, who have come to power through democratic mechanisms… (FG2)

(35)
It is a functioning mechanism that has been agreed upon in a society. Right. Democracy means that there are some rules of the game that have been agreed upon and this should be followed by all. (FG3)

(36)
… democracy is certain agreements. Those things are agreed upon which are to be followed. Therefore, I think that this can be an internal matter of a group. Those that agree, following the agreements between themselves is democracy. If this agreement, if this does not take place, then there is no democracy. (FG5)

5. Conclusions

The word democracy, at least in the collective domain of knowledge in Estonia, seems to have four meanings, which are all interrelated, but yet clearly distinct. Whenever people seem to talk about democracy, at least across the discussions analysed here, they seem to understand democracy in one of these four ways – either as freedom, responsibility, interaction or rules. These frames are understood in a domain, where the state, politicians and power are closely articulated together and the people are understood somewhat separately and passively. The approach to knowledge and meaning developed in Cognitive Linguistics seems to have proved useful in outlining regularities in conceptual structure, which is reflected in people's talk about democracy. The notion of meaning as a quality of conceptual category structures with various levels of abstraction and with culturally solidified configurations (frames) is something, which can usefully be applied to the analysis of meaning. Thus, this certainly is a perspective, which is valuable for critical discourse analysis or any textual analysis for that matter.

Focus group discussions and the application of elements from Cognitive Linguistics provide a lot more than has been brought out in this paper. Thus, for example conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff and Johnson 2003 [1980]) could be applied in this case to bring out how people understand such notions as power or progress/development in the context of democracy in Estonia. The theory of conceptual integration (Fauconnier and Turner 2002) could be applied to show how people take a certain frame of democracy, which is invoked in the domain state-power, and 'export' it to such domains as family life or the workplace and through it understand the social environment or interaction in these domains through the notion of democracy. All this seems to indicate that Cognitive Linguistics has potentially a lot to offer for the analysis of meaning in social analysis.

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1 Hereafter such designations will be used to differentiate between focus group discussions.

2 This can be considered a significant shortcoming of the study as Estonia has a very large Russian-speaking minority, who are thus excluded from the results of this analysis, since there is no reason to assume that the meanings of democracy among them are the same as among ethnic Estonians.

3 Here and hereafter the translations try to stay as close to the original Estonian colloquial form as possible. As a result, some of the translations may seem grammatically incorrect or somewhat obscure, but this just reflects the original data.

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