

Assessing symbolic convergence over time: similarities and differences in official accounts of agency reform in The Netherlands, Sweden and Australia

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from my doctoral dissertation *Translating agency reform. Rhetoric and culture in comparative perspective*. The paper examines and compares official agency talk over a period of 7-15 years and across three national political contexts: The Netherlands, Sweden and Australia. Against the background of debates about convergence in public management talk, two competing explanations for management reform talk are considered: the cultural political administrative context or international fashionable stories of reform. Using the New Rhetoric from Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, durable national styles of speaking about agency reform are identified in each of the countries under study. Indeed, it is shown that expert speakers, public values and quasi-logical argumentation are durable features of the management reform talk produced in the consensus political administrative contexts (The Netherlands, Sweden), while informal speakers, business values and arguments based upon reasonable belief are durable features of the adversarial political administrative context (Australia). While there was some evidence of convergence in the styles of speaking about agency reform at some point in all countries, this was always incorporated within a more durable national style of speaking. The paper also demonstrates that it is financial actors that have introduced similar (Anglo Saxon) management reforms to the consensus political contexts.

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1.0 Introduction

The adoption of agency reform in a range of different countries has been recognized as an international fashion in public management (Pollitt et al. 2001; Pollitt et al. 2004; OECD 2000). Their spread has provided further empirical material for analyzing issues of convergence in public management and assessing the associated theoretical debates about political and administrative institutions (Hall & Taylor 1996), policy transfer (Dolowitz & Marsh 1996) and translation (Sahlin-Andersson 2001, 2004). While applications of historical institutionalism have thus far been quite successful in demonstrating that agency practices have followed unique trajectories in different countries and sectors (Sundstrom 2003; Rowlands 2003; Gains 2000; Pollitt et al. 2004), there has as yet been little empirical analysis of the symbolism of agency reform. It has been argued that there is no evidence for the spread of international templates that are edited or translated in different contexts, as proposed by new institutionalism (Barzeley, 2006). This claim however rests upon a misinterpretation of the intentions of new institutionalist proponents, and more specifically the notion of translation (Sahlin- Andersson 2001, 2002). It assumes that translation seeks to explain the adoption of public management reforms as such, rather than the adoption of a particular way of speaking about reform initiatives. This article departs from an earlier observation by Pollitt (2001) that convergence in management talk, such as talk about agencies across different contexts, is far more likely than convergence in practice. Using rhetorical analysis it demonstrates that there is evidence of templates or rather similar stories about agencies that have traveled independently of context. Notwithstanding, it is shown that what has been said about agencies within national contexts over time is primarily a consequence of national styles of speaking, rather than the limited adoptions of such international templates. Furthermore, it is found that financial officials have been responsible for the introduction of the similar stories that have traveled to consensus political systems. This would indicate that these actors have played an important role in carrying (Anglo Saxon) international templates to consensus political contexts.

2.0 Why compare official agency *talk*? A return to the convergence debate

The notion of convergence has provided an extensive agenda for research in public management over the last two decades. In particular the identification of New Public Management as a (once) prevailing management doctrine elicited extensive research into the different degrees to which NPM practices had been adopted in different political administrative contexts, as well as the effects of reforms (Hood 1991, 1996). These research activities corresponded with revived academic interest in the way that political institutions shape government interventions and have increased our knowledge of quite varied trajectories of reform. In studies of agency reforms for example it has been shown that national institutions have been important in determining the contract like arrangements that are adopted between ministries and agencies (Pollitt et. al 2004) and in privileging certain actors to initiate the reforms (Sundström 2003; Rowlands 2003; James 2004). The corollary

of these academic studies on national institutions has generally been the rejection of the convergence thesis, or more specifically a rejection that there has been convergence in management reform practice. Instead it has been suggested that if there has been any convergence at all it is most likely to have occurred in talk, since talk is more mobile than practice (Pollitt 2001). This recognizes that NPM and management reforms more generally have not only been constituted by certain practices, but also certain stories about management (Hood 2001, Hood & Jackson 1991). It makes it possible to contemplate convergence in adopting similar management labels, such as *agency* or *autonomy*, across different contexts that are loosely coupled with particular national reform practices (Smullen 2004, 2003). To date however there has been little research into the extent to which convergence in symbols, or rather talk, across national contexts has actually taken place.

While both the NPM and convergence literature have generally been characterized by a consciousness of public management as an international activity, the notion of an international reform community is of particular significance for the study of the symbolic features of management reform. This is because, unlike functional explanations, symbolic convergence is motivated by a desire to conform to the *logic of appropriateness* within an organizational field or epistemic community. In contrast to historical institutionalism, the determinants of the character of (symbols of) reform are not isolated to experience shaped by national institutions and actors, but also by external pressures within an organizational field. Sahlin Andersson has argued that such organizational fields in public management are not only nationally based but also international, and transnational in character (Sahlin Andersson 2001). She, and others, have identified the importance of international organizations such as the OECD or professional networks, such as those of management consultants, in providing forums in which global templates for good reforms are created and distributed among national reformers (Sahlin Andersson 2001:45, Premfors 1998). It is argued such authoritative actors produce international stories that become the source of selection and editing within national contexts. This entails a process whereby national reformers reproduce the authorized story, but then attach these to existing or emerging reform solutions. In this way the international story is *translated* to the *reform practices* of a particular national context. Such an explanation excludes the role of national public management symbols and styles of speaking – not just practices- in moderating the adoption of international templates. Indeed, it is likely that if international templates do exist, they will be adopted to different degrees and appear within broader more durable national discourses about public management reform.

There is of course some skepticism about the focus upon mere symbols, the talk rather than the practice, of reform. While the notion of translation in terms of adapting certain stories to national arrangements tends to resonate with the observations of many international observers, the usefulness of such a perspective may be questioned. One justification for focusing upon talk lies in the recognition that argumentation in public management is a practice in itself that produces knowledge about what to do and what is good and right to do. Hood and Jackson for example argued some time ago that administrative knowledge was characterized by high degrees of uncertainty which left it vulnerable to doctrines and quasi-religious overtones (Hood & Jackson 1991, Hood 2005:14). Through studying public management talk it is possible to obtain insight into the extent to which certain types of knowledge become dominant, almost unquestionable in particular periods. A second related justification concerns the dynamics of fashions in public management and the analysis of

shifts in arguments. Again Hood (2000) has argued that knowledge in public management is characterized by pendulum swings. He argues that arguments in public management are rarely new and instead represent recurring themes that react against one another. An analysis of public management talk over time provides further empirical evidence as to whether such shifts in knowledge occur, how and in what way. In light of the seeming demise of NPM in recent years and its succession by governance and joined up government such investigations seem of particular pertinence at this time (see Smullen 2003). Agency reform is a useful object of analysis for these dynamics since they initially emerged as a widespread NPM instrument for management autonomy and improved organizational performance, and have since been widely subject to practices and discourses of joining up government and promoting the whole of government (MAC, 2004). Thirdly, analyzing the way similar kinds of management fashions have been talked about in different national contexts provides the opportunity to examine the extent to which international fashionable talk is modified in particular national contexts. The idea of international public management fashions spreading to national contexts, even if only in talk, represents a challenge to the notion of particular national trajectories of reform. Investigation into the way tensions between trans-national pressures through organizational fields and national trajectories of reform talk are reconciled is yet to be conducted in the field of public management. Related to this is the more specific concern that international public management fashions as propagated by the OECD have generally legitimized Anglo-Saxon ideologies about public management (Premfors 1998). To this extent the templates of reform produced in this forum have tended to advantage Anglo-Saxon countries, not only because these countries are generally identified as the leaders in reform initiatives, but also because international reform talk is conducted in English (Sahlin – Andersson 2004). Analyzing reform talk across different contexts, such as across Anglo-Saxon and consensus political administrative contexts, therefore becomes important because evidence of symbolic convergence would provide indications of the cultural hegemony of Anglo Saxon styles of speaking about public management in consensus democracies.

3.0 The New Rhetoric and *rules of speaking* about agencies

Rhetorical analysis provides a technique for identifying and assessing features of agency talk. It is an age old study developed by, among others, Aristotle in Ancient Greece, and is not unfamiliar to the study of public management (Hood and Jackson 1991, Hood 2000). The theoretical categories of rhetoric are particularly attractive to comparative research since they are applicable to a range of contexts. Variety in the adoption of similar labels for example can be examined according to the same distinct categories, which are at the same time sensitive to contextual differences. Indeed, there is a clear correspondence between the preoccupations of the rhetorician and institutionalists, where the former is not only interested in what has been said or how, but also the contextual issues of *who has the credibility to speak, where are they speaking from and to whom?* At the most rudimentary level the focus of rhetoric has required an assessment of the respective roles of the audience, the speaker and the argumentative message being relayed. Three interconnected Aristotelian concepts depicting this relationship between the speaker and audience - *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* – are central to evaluating argumentation and how it functions to persuade. I have interpreted these concepts as representing the *rules of speaking* in a given context.

Ethos refers to the character of the speaker or addresser and the way that she projects herself upon the audience. Central to this dimension of persuasion is how the speaker shows herself

to be trustworthy, knowledgeable and speaking for the interests of the audience. *Pathos* is the dimension of persuasion concerned with the way the speaker moves the audience. Hood (2000) has referred to it as the *mood music* that is adopted to encourage a state of mind receptive to the arguments. Both Plato and Aristotle drew attention to *pathos* out of the recognition that anyone who wishes to communicate effectively must do more than argue logically. They must also understand the emotions (Edmondson 1984:18, Aristotle 1991:139). Finally *logos* refer to the logic of the argument and the actual subject matter that is being discussed. It is the contents of the argument itself and the steps that have been taken to demonstrate the validity of the argument.

In their *New Rhetoric*, Perelman and Olbrecht's Tyteca have revived and adapted Aristotle's original manual of rhetoric, the *Art of persuasion*. They identify numerous concepts that accord with ethos, pathos and logos although they refer respectively to the construction of the audience (ethos), the premises of argumentation (pathos) and the techniques of argumentation (logos). Rather than a normative theory to evaluate the quality of argumentation, the criterion for persuasive argumentation in the New Rhetoric is the judgment of the community of minds to which the argumentation is directed (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 2000:14). This makes it suitable for analyzing and understanding empirical findings about what it has been possible for officials to say about the management reforms they initiate. In the realm of public management policy a positive judgment from the relevant community of minds is arguably reflected in official documents that initiate management reforms. These documents represent the official rationale that has legitimated, for example, the introduction of agencies. In the following paragraphs I will briefly describe the conceptual framework of Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca. It should be noted that this description is, for the purposes of this article, somewhat rudimentary. The theoretical framework of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca is extensive as is reflected in the 45 types of arguments that are identified among their argumentative techniques alone. For a more detailed account of their framework the reader is referred to Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 2000, Smullen 2007).

Ethos or the construction of the audience occurs, according to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, through the creation of both a universal audience, as well as particular audiences. They claim that in the presentation of arguments the speaker creates an image of the audience and the associated opinions and evidence that will be deemed acceptable to that audience. In this way the speaker creates rapport with the audience and demonstrates trustworthiness. The universal audience is an original contribution of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca to the tradition of rhetoric. It is a hypothetical representation of what is valid and true to all reasonable people in a given cultural context and transcends the preferences of particular audiences. They propose that the speaker will seek to unify particular differences across the audience by identifying broader ideals or commitments that are agreeable to almost everybody in a given context, such ideals in the western world may include commitments to basic human rights or to democracy. They write:

Everyone constitutes the universal audience from what he knows of his fellow men, in such a way as to transcend the few oppositions he is aware of...each culture, has thus its own conception of the universal audience (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 2000:33).

It follows that within the study of public administration we can also expect to find different universal audiences being addressed in different political administrative contexts and policy communities. One need only compare the way that legality has remained a central theme in French approaches to management reform, while notions of improved performance were central to USA reform initiatives in the early 1990s. By contrast, the particular audience may be any real or hypothetical audience limited by some particular features such as a profession or taxpayers. It has been defined as “any limited group of addressees, either a concrete, temporarily or spatially defined group of listeners, or an abstract target audience specified according to some principle”(Summa, 1993:225). In public management it is not unusual that such target audiences are constructed through expert or professional knowledge such as that of economists, lawyers, doctors and scientists. With respect to the theoretical concept of translation and how it functions to influence agency talk, it can be hypothesized that the standards of the international public management community would be incorporated in the construction of a *particular audience* of public management experts, without necessarily disturbing the *universal audience*.

The *premises of argumentation* or pathos are characterized by those features of the argumentation which prepare the audience for the logical content of the argumentation. Such preparation occurs by exalting certain values or facts that sensitize the audience to the necessity of addressing particular problems or to adopt particular solutions. In recent times the complexity of policy issues such as climate change or immigration has been a widely cited fact used to legitimize greater attention to joining up different administrative units and policy sectors (ref). There are also more general ways to move audiences that have been widely recognized within the rhetorical tradition. In particular, there are the loci or common places that can be adopted indiscriminately in any kind of argumentation although Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca recognize that the intensity with which different societies adhere to certain loci tends to vary (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 2003:85). There are two main types of loci, those that emphasize qualitative features of the particular, such as being unique or new, difficult or of a precarious nature. Alternatively, there are quantitative loci which emphasizes the goodness of something because it brings about more of good things, such as more efficiency or more accountability. Another quantitative locus emphasizes the durability of a certain activity because it is part of a tradition, e.g it is good because we have always done it that way.

Thirdly, there are also the logical contents of argumentation (logos), referred to as the argumentative techniques by Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca. They distinguish between three main types of argumentative techniques. Firstly, there is *quasi-logical* argumentation which seeks the adherence of the audience through replicating mathematical deductions. Typical quasi-logical techniques include the use of *definition*, *comparison* or the division of problems or solutions into different parts (*the division of the whole into its parts*) in order to demonstrate that certain appeals to action are true and sound. Secondly, there is argumentation based upon *the structure of reality*. This is argumentation which relies upon appeals to reasonable belief through demonstrating coexistent or sequential relationships. It includes using the technique of a *causal link* to attribute certain effects or results to particular actions, or the technique of *unlimited development* which emphasizes the goodness of the direction one is taking. Unlimited development insists upon the possibility of always going further with a particular action or reform and the idea that such persistence will continue to bring about increasing value. Other techniques relying upon reasonable belief include *arguments by authority* and the *person*

and his act. These both seek the adherence of the audience through lending the status of prestigious or reliable individuals or professions to that of a particular object or activity. Finally, the third type of argumentative technique is that which creates the structure of reality. Such techniques include *metaphors* or examples. Metaphors are condensed analogies and seek to impart a similar structure on one object, such as the idea of an agency, by drawing an analogy with another, such as a physical object. In public management such metaphors referring to physical objects include being flexible (like plastic) and being transparent (like glass). These metaphors function to make an idea like agency reform and the various advantages attributed to it appear more tangible. In the following sections the theoretical concepts of the New Rhetoric are applied to official agency talk over time in the Netherlands, Sweden and Australia. This enables distinctions to be made to the kinds of rules of speaking that are durable (national styles of speaking) and those rules of speaking that have been more temporary.

4.0 Case selection: the substantive and symbolic criteria for official agency talk

It is the intention to use the New Rhetoric to identify the *rules of speaking* that have governed the production of agency reform talk in the Netherlands, Sweden and Australia. This makes it possible to identify the extent to which national styles of speaking about agency reform can be discerned over time in each of the countries, as well as the extent to which there are similar templates for describing agencies across different countries. Indeed, the selection of agency talk in the cultural political administrative contexts of The Netherlands, Sweden and Australia has been guided by a comparative research design based upon similarities and differences in the cultural political context. *Similarities* in the rules of speaking about agency reform across *different* political and administrative contexts (both consensus and adversarial political administrative contexts) would indicate that the argumentation being produced is not context specific. It would provide evidence that there are templates, such as those defined by an international epistemic community, traveling independently of context. By contrast, the identification of patterns in styles of speaking across *similar* national contexts such as consensual political administrative contexts (The Netherlands and Sweden), that are also *different* to the styles of speaking in adversarial political administrative contexts (Australia) would indicate that it is the cultural political administrative context that has shaped official agency talk. The case selection therefore makes it possible to evaluate two competing explanations for official agency talk: national styles of speaking or an internationally fashionable story (the international template).

A second kind of criteria used to select the cases of official agency talk in this comparative study included both the substantive and symbolic features of the national agency reforms in each of the countries (Smullen 2007:60-62). Broadly speaking agency reform has been characterized by three *substantive* features: structural disaggregation from central departments, management autonomy and performance contracting (Pollitt et al. 2004). It refers to the increasing use and modernization of organizations at arms length from government departments which still remain part of the central core of government. In the existing literature it has become evident that the substantive contents of different agency initiatives often vary in both the trajectories of reform, and the degrees to which the three different characteristics of agency reform are adopted (Pollitt et al. 2004, Allix and Smullen 2003, Smullen 2007). Besides the more well-known cases of the UK Next Steps program for example (O'Toole & Jordan 1995), countries like Sweden have modernized their long

existing arrangements of independent agencies at arms length from departments. Their agency initiatives consisted of formalizing the relationship between departments and agencies through performance agreements and reporting, and by granting financial management autonomy. In Australia, by contrast, different kinds of agency status were created from the late 1990s in a context where initiatives for more management autonomy had already been pursued through financial reforms *within* government departments. Both the new service delivery agency Centrelink and the status of executive agency, which was created in the 1999 Public Service Act, were created through legislation which distinguished/disaggregated these organizations from departmental units. Nevertheless, they were still subject to many, sometimes more, of the performance reporting requirements of the departmental organizations. In The Netherlands the substantive trajectory of agency reform was similar to that of the UK, where a new organizational form separate from departments was created. Dutch *agentschappen* were defined in accrual accounting legislation that granted them the financial freedom to use an accrual accounting, but with the requirement of yearly performance reporting.

Aside from the substantive features of each of the cases of agency talk analyzed in this article, they also conformed to a *symbolic* criterion of agencies. This criterion requires the recognition of the reform initiative as part of the international fashion of agency reform within the international community itself. Such references occur for example when national reformers identify their own initiatives as following from or being like agency arrangements elsewhere. It does not necessitate the agency label itself. For example it has been widely cited that the UK Next Steps agencies followed from a workgroup visit to Sweden where the separation of small policy departments and operational agencies has a long tradition of independent *myndigheter*. Similarly, the Dutch program of *agentschappen* was introduced as being modeled on the UK Next Steps agency program (Ministerie van Financiën, 1991). Such symbolic identifications of agency initiatives were also identified in Australia, where Centrelink was associated by Australian reformers with Canadian Special Operation Agencies, New Zealand Crown Entities and UK Next Steps Agencies. Furthermore, the Australian executive agency status, while only briefly explained by officials, did follow from reports and discussions of the UK arrangements. Finally, Sweden has also pointed to the UK, New Zealand and Australia when describing the modernization of existing Swedish agency arrangements. Another way in which these symbolic identifications occur is in OECD reports where reform initiatives in a range of different countries are presented as part of a similar project (ref). Both Sweden and The Netherlands have been particularly prominent in these reports about agency reform. Aside from the substantive criteria, this symbolic criterion of agency reform requires that the cases analyzed have been pursued both within, and in recognition of, a particular international community of reformers. They are therefore good candidates for observing international templates of agency reform.

5.0 The *rules of speaking* about agency reform in three countries: empirical findings in The Netherlands, Sweden and Australia

The analysis of official agency talk in The Netherlands, Sweden and Australia required the identification of official documents describing agency reforms in each of the countries. Following from fieldwork in all countries, a questionnaire was sent to experts in each of countries to assist in the identification of government documents initiating, describing or evaluating national agency reforms over time. This led to a great deal of variation in the type,

number and size of documents identified. In Sweden for example most public sector reform initiatives require legislative change and are prepared in specially appointed commissions that produce a report of recommendation (Premfors 1983:623). These are often lengthy (in excess of 200 words) and detailed reports. Similarly, it is typical that reform initiatives in The Netherlands will follow from a committee report that is hosted by one of the ministries.

Table. 1.0. The selected documents across the countries

| The Netherlands | Sweden | Australia |
|--|--|--|
| 1991. Ministry of Finance. <i>Verder bouwen aan beheer</i> [Further building on management] | 1983. SOU Commission report. <i>Politisk styrning-administrativ självständighet</i> [Political steering – administrative independence] | 1996. <i>The Prime Minister's address at the official launch of Centrelink</i> presented by John Howard (then Prime Minister). |
| 1995. Ministry of Home Affairs. <i>Verantwoord verzelfstandigen</i> [Accountable autonomization] | 1985. SOU Commission report. <i>Regering, myndigheterna och myndigheternas ledning</i> [Government, agencies and agency managers] | 1998, <i>Three stages of an evolving model to a one stop shop – challenges at each stage</i> presented by Sue Vardon (then CEO) |
| 1997. Ministry of Finance. <i>Verder met resultaat</i> [Further with results] | 1997.SOU Commission Report. <i>I medborgarnas tjänst</i> [In the citizen's service] | 2004. Department of Prime Minister & Cabinet. <i>Connecting Government: Whole of government responses to Australia's priority challenges</i> |

By contrast, in Australia such changes can, and have been introduced without a policy document but rather through an executive government decision, or simply the presentation of new legislation to (a government majority) parliament. In the Australian case, official speeches by individuals (political or administrative actors) describing or introducing the reforms were used where no other policy documents existed or were available to the public. They were, in some instances, the only official story of agencies documented in Australia.

The documents that were selected for analysis were also spread over different periods of time depending upon the substantive creation of agency reforms in the different countries. The search was limited to documents from the early 1980s when the agency fashion was first taking international shape as reported in OECD reports. Documents that accompanied adjustments in the national agency reform initiatives over the period studied were given priority. Three documents were selected for analysis in each country. They spanned a period of 7 to 14 years. The documents selected, their official authors and date of publication are presented in table 1.0 above. In the following sections the *rules of speaking* exhibited in the documents over time are described for each country.

5.1 The Netherlands: Agencies as a unique and accountable alternative

When comparing the self presentation or *ethos* of the Dutch speakers, it was apparent that there were some differences in the kinds of *particular audiences* being constructed over time. In particular, the predominantly financial authors of both *Verder bouwen aan beheer* and *Verder met resultaat* established their credibility through demonstrating knowledge of developments in financial management and the Dutch financial system generally. This was reflected in detailed and technical analyses of the financial system such as describing the principles of the budget and financial facilities available to agency managers within this system. A vocabulary of capital accounts, macro budgetary principles, end of year limit and efficiency were typical of these documents. Despite these similarities there were also important distinctions in the

way such financial knowledge was presented. For example the speaker in *Verder bouwen aan beheer* constructed financial experts in their account. Explanations of technical terms were never supplied indicating that it was assumed the reader was familiar with this knowledge.

Alternatively in *Verder met resultaat* a more user friendly approach to the financial categories was pursued, this was reflected in the brief explanations of terms and even handy information boxes describing economic theories and the calculation of cost prices. Unlike *Verder bouwen aan beheer*, *Verder met resultaat* was an evaluation of agency reforms, but the speaker also used it to share experiences between and with prospective agencies. The adoption of sayings such as “becoming the boss of problems”, “learning by doing” and “reaching one’s farthest limits” indicated that the speaker adopted a consultancy tone to a *particular audience* of business like clients. In *Verantwoord verzelfstandigen* an entirely different knowledge base was used to discuss the benefits of agency reform. As part of a commitment to a more principled and transparent approach to *autonomization*, the speaker refrained from the narrow concerns of financial systems in the other documents and instead presented an overview of legal and organizational categories across the administration. The vocabulary shifted to matters of organizational design, including existing organizational types, their legal status and relationship to the minister. A *particular audience* of public organization experts was being constructed as reflected in the knowledge of organizational types, the concern with the relationship between politics and society, and the explicit commitment to the primacy of politics.

Despite the distinct features of the particular audiences across the documents, there were also some durable characteristics of the self presentation of the speaker which were interpreted as constructing the *Dutch universal audience*. They included articulating a commitment to ministerial accountability, which extended the financial (as described in *Verder bouwen aan beheer* and *Verder met resultaat*) and legal appeal (as described in *Verantwoord verzelfstandigen*) of agencies beyond the particular preferences of financial and public organization experts. For example agencies would not just provide a means for introducing an accrual accounting system, they would also promote ministerial accountability, and unlike ZBOs they remained within the departmental realm thus guaranteeing ministerial accountability. Other ways in which the Dutch speakers consistently sought to obtain credibility for their argumentation was by demonstrating their familiarity with scientific research criteria such as through identifying selection criteria for case studies or by identifying theoretical bases for their analyses. Furthermore, they always gave cursory attention to the desirability for consultation when pursuing agency reforms. All of these features: a commitment to ministerial accountability, scientific justification and references to consultation were consistently adopted over time to construct the Dutch universal audience in official accounts of agency reform.

The pathos or *premises of argumentation* used to sensitize the audience to agency reform exhibited somewhat less consistency over time than either Dutch *ethos* or *logos*. In the financial documents examined qualitative loci were found to be instrumental to promoting the appeal of agency reform. In *Verder bouwen aan beheer* for example agencies were repeatedly described as new or special, this is emblematic of the locus of the unique. It sensitizes the audience to conceive positively of an action or idea because it is distinctive. The locus of the unique was apparent in the descriptions of the financial capacities, more specifically accrual accounting, which were to be accorded to agencies. This was described as enabling them to

adopt a *special* management system or to give them a *special* character that was differentiated from *normal* departmental units. The qualitative locus of the unique was also present in the other financial document *Verder met resultaat*, although in this later document it was the *locus of the difficult* that was more prominent. In presenting the experiences of the evaluated agencies much emphasis was lent to demonstrating that working according to results orientated management principles did not happen automatically and required time and maintenance (Ministerie van Financiën 1998:21) Within the tradition of rhetorical analysis such descriptions prepare the audience to view the achievement (in this case agency status) sympathetically since if it is hard it must be worth struggling for. By contrast in *Verantwoord verzelfstandigen* quantitative loci was used to stimulate a positive disposition towards agency reform. This kind of locus operates by demonstrating that an action or idea will bring about more of good things, such as more accountability, more efficiency, more steering capacity or complete ministerial accountability, as compared to the limited accountability of ZBOs. While such quantitative loci were adopted in the other Dutch documents, and indeed in all the documents examined, in *Verantwoord verzelfstandigen* it was this locus alone that was used to sensitize the audience to agency reforms.

Dutch argumentative techniques or rather logos were primarily characterized by quasi-logical argumentation over time. At least, quasi-logical arguments were used in all of the documents examined and were most central to the argumentation in two of the three documents, *Verder bouwen aan beheer* and *Verantwoord verzelfstandigen*. These were the documents in which the speaker also sought to construct a particular audience of experts, e.g financial experts, public organization experts. Typical quasi-logical techniques adopted in these documents included definition, comparison and the division of the whole into its parts. For example the division of the whole into its parts was used in *Verder bouwen aan beheer* by presenting the financial features of agency reforms using the notions of macro budgetary principles and micro financial arrangements. The audience was led to conceive of agency reform in terms of a closed system of budgetary control where certain principles such as ministerial accountability, and desired levels of savings were to be the total sum of outcomes. Alternatively, the financial changes associated with agency reform were presented as mere adjustments at the micro level which would not disturb the broader whole. Other techniques included defining a vision of results orientated management and then presenting a comparison in which agency reform conformed to this vision. In *Verantwoord verzelfstandigen* definitions of internal and external autonomization were also used together with *comparison* to demonstrate that agency reform was a more desirable alternative to ZBOs (external autonomization) from the point of view of ministerial accountability. All of these quasi-logical techniques sought to obtain the agreement of the audience through replicating the formal logic of mathematics in which positive values were attributed to the choice of agency reform.

Alternatively in *Verder met resultaat*, the argumentation adopted was primarily based upon reasonable belief. This was the document in which the speaker presented as a business consultant and constructed a particular audience of business managers. The arguments of *unlimited development* and the *causal link* were more prominent than quasi-logical arguments in pursuing the acceptance of the audience for agency reform proposals. Unlimited development is an argument in which the speaker draws the audience to the notion of progress and always going further in a certain direction with increasing benefits. In *Verder met resultaat* this kind of argumentation was used in the discussion of agency performance

measures. While changing indicators prevented the assessment of whether efficiency had been attained, the speaker emphasized that it was also an indication that measures were being continually improved. It was noted that “original indicators were refined everywhere” and sub-titles such as “continue leren ook in de toekomst” [continue learning also in the future] were used to transfer this optimism about sequential improvements to the audience. The argument of unlimited development was also used in the first document *Verder bouwen aan beheer* to describe improvements in the financial system over time. In both documents this argumentation was supported by metaphors such as *further building* on past developments or, especially in *Verder met resultaat*, traveling metaphors such as *rigging one’s sails* towards better places or improving *stapsgewijs* [step by step]. Other metaphors that were prominent in the argumentation included describing agencies as flexible like plastic (in *Verder aan beheer*), as transparent like glass (*Verantwoord verzelfstanding*) as being more within grip [greep] than ZBOs, as enabling better steering, and as still being in children’s shoes (*Verder met resultaat*). An overview of the Dutch rules of speaking about agency reform over time is presented in table 2.0 below.

Table 2.0. Overview of the Dutch rules of speaking about agency reform 1991-1997

| | Verder bouwen aan beheer, 1991 | Verantwoord verzelfstandigen, 1995 | Verder met resultaat, 1997 |
|-------------------|---|---|--|
| Ethos | | | |
| Particular | Financial expert | Organizational expert | Financial expert |
| Universal | Scientific principles | Scientific Principles | Scientific Principles |
| | Consultation | Consultation | Consultation |
| | Ministerial accountability | Ministerial accountability | |
| Pathos | The unique (new/different) | More efficient More accountable | Unique (new/different) Difficult |
| Logos | | | |
| Quasi-logical | Definition Comparison Whole and its parts | Definition Comparison Whole and its parts | Definition Comparison |
| Reasonable belief | Unlimited development | | Unlimited development Causal link |
| Metaphors | Flexible Spacious Building | Grip Transparent | Rigging one’s sails Children’s shoes Step by step Business redressing Flexible |

5.2 Sweden: Agencies for democracy and as constitutionally prescribed

Swedish speakers invariably constructed expert *particular audiences* in their accounts of agency reform over time. The formality of presentation and the consistent adoption of technical concepts and categories indicated that the layman or indeed agency director generals were rarely being addressed in Swedish accounts. In *Politisk-styrning-administrativ självständighet* the speaker established credibility through demonstrating knowledge of political theories and constitutional law. The problem of growing agency independence and the political capacity to steer them was established by identifying technocratic theories of the state in “post industrial society”. Furthermore the audience was introduced to a range of political science concepts such as dualism, the description of various state powers and their separation,

different traditions of parliamentary democracy, and detailed references to the constitution and its historical development. There was also widespread use of statistical evidence to demonstrate that agency independence had grown. All of these aspects of the self presentation of the speaker would indicate that a *particular* academic audience of political scientists was being constructed. The more practical focus of *Regering, myndigheter en myndigheternas ledning* upon identifying methods of more direct and indirect political steering was evident in a somewhat less formal presentation of the speaker than in the earlier report. This was supported by some reference to the experience of managers. While concepts such as the technocratic state, state powers or representative democracy were still present in the document, the speaker devoted more space to demonstrating detailed knowledge of financial systems and employment conditions, and to goals such as savings and effectiveness. The state's economic and administrative system, the budgetary process, financial documents and the accounting arrangements for interest and appropriation distribution were primary figures in establishing credibility. This terminology indicated the construction of a *particular audience* of financial experts.

In the third document *I medborgarnas tjänst* the self presentation of the speaker once again revealed the construction of a *particular academic audience* of political scientists and legal experts. This was reflected in the various uses of citations from academics and academic studies, and the references to academic theories regarding the complexity of the state, closed networks and organizational learning. There were also detailed discussions of the legal obligations of the civil servants and the history of the Swedish state. In contrast to the earlier documents managers were present in the discussion of reform matters through the use of extensive interview citations. The speaker also repeatedly demonstrated a commitment to the primacy of the citizen, and the obligation of the administration to citizens. This indicated a more horizontal notion of democracy than was depicted in the previous documents. While a particular audience of academics was most prominent, such references made an audience of citizens and managers present in the description of issues surrounding agency reforms. Despite differences in some of the particular audiences being constructed in each of the documents, Swedish speakers always articulated a commitment to a democracy, and demonstrated historical knowledge of the institutional arrangements that support it in Sweden. This occurred through accounts of the history of dualism or the board system, through frequent citations of the Swedish constitution and the identification of important dates in Swedish political history. To speak credibly about agency reforms in Sweden it was also necessary to provide an appraisal of Swedish democracy, and thereby construct a *universal audience* committed to Swedish democracy.

Sensitization of the audience to agency reform proposals in Sweden was consistently pursued through the *qualitative locus of the precarious*. This moved the audience to conceive of reforms favorably by emphasizing the threats that are eminent if no action is taken, or if there is failure to monopolize upon a transitory state of affairs. For example in *Politisk styrning – administrativ självständighet* the presentation of the history of dualism in Sweden was used to demonstrate that opportunities to change the uneven relationship between ministries and agencies had not been taken in the past. "The time had not been ripe for this", however given contemporary constitutional debate it was suggested that clearer and more formal arrangements for steering agencies and curtailing their independence was possible (SOU 1983). In *Regeringen, myndigheterna och myndigheternas ledning* the locus of the precarious also appeared in statements about the political sphere being the only body that is capable of

“keeping the threat of bureaucracy at bay”. This provoked the audience to see recommendations for more precise budgetary steering as a clear and necessary response to the existing unruly arrangements. Finally, *I medborgarnas tjänst*, threats to democracy were once again depicted as eminent, but this time the threats were attributed to a different source: the introduction of market like arrangements within the public sector. These were presented as encouraging behavior that is at odds with a public service tradition. While the *qualitative locus* of the precarious was most durable in Swedish official accounts of agency reform, other *qualitative loci* were adopted albeit sporadically. For example the locus of the unique was also used in *I medborgarnas tjänst* when describing the Swedish state. It was described as a special political administrative tradition that was characterized by a number of unique features such as a tradition of administrative independence and the early adoption of progressive legislation regarding freedom of information. This unique characterization of the Swedish state prepared the audience to conceive of other threats such as marketization as particularly treacherous, and put them in a favorable state of mind for proposals about strengthening the public tradition. It should be noted that *quantitative loci* such as more is better were also observed in Swedish agency talk.

The argumentative techniques or logoi adopted to promote Swedish agency reforms were primarily *quasi logical* in character. Over time such techniques as the *division of the whole into its parts*, *definition* and *comparison* were used to establish agreement about the legitimacy of the political steering of agencies and the means of steering adopted. In Sweden it was typical for these kinds of argumentative techniques to be used when referring to the constitution. For example constitutional articles *defining* the limits of agency independence would be *compared* to findings about their actual independence. This was used in *Politisk styrning administrativ självständighet* to establish that the Swedish tradition of agency independence was not based upon law but custom. Similarly, in *Regering, myndigheter en myndigheternas ledning* constitutional articles were again used to *define* the limited cases for which agency independence was valid, as compared to the other kinds of activities in which the constitution defined agencies as subordinate to the government. They were also used to establish that the government could change budgetary procedures and use them to set performance goals for agencies. *The division of the whole into its parts* was an argumentative technique used in both *Politisk styrning administrativ självständighet* and *I medborgarnas tjänst*, it functioned by presenting agencies or agency reform as part of a broader system of democracy or values of democracy that were related to one another in a zero sum way. For example in *Politisk styrning administrativ självständighet* the legitimacy of active political steering, despite references to agency independence in the constitution, was established by presenting agencies as just one link in a chain of responsibilities in which the people were sovereign. Since the government was elected by the people’s representatives, its will was concurred with (read equal to) the will of the people. Therefore administrative independence could only be legitimate when it also concurred with the government. According to such a system lack of agency/administrative concurrence with the intentions of government *reduced* democracy, and thereby the will of the people.

Arguments *based upon reasonable belief* were also used to demonstrate the benefits of particular Swedish agency reforms, such as the introduction of management by results, or conversely in *I medborgarnas tjänst*, the perverse effects of this arrangement. In particular, the techniques of the *causal link* and the *argument of unlimited development* were used in *Regering, myndigheter en myndigheternas ledning* to show that new budgetary arrangements would promote more

effective management practices and cost savings. Politicians were presented as being able to make better *more precise* priorities in the budget through the receipt of more performance information from agencies over a longer period of time, e.g a three year budget. A sequential relationship between budgetary changes, more active political steering and better agency performance was being presented as a likely outcome. Such causal relationships were also supported by an overview of the developments in the budget and financial management, and the notion that these activities were being subject to continued refinement. It was argued that modernization of the budget and accounting arrangements had been an ongoing process since the 1970s and that this had “laid the basis for continual work to modernize the state budget operations”. As in The Netherlands the notion that the financial arrangements could be continually made more effective was accompanied by traveling metaphors such as being *on a path* or *taking essential steps* towards improvements. In *I medborgarnas tjänst* somewhat different sequential relationships were associated with management by results. In particular it was argued that the focus upon individual performance in the budget had contributed to fragmentation across the administration. Again it was the reasonableness of this claim, rather than its rational character, that was being used to attain the agreement of the audience. Arguments based upon reasonable belief only exceeded the quasi-logical argumentation in the second Swedish document *Regering, myndigheter en myndigheternas ledning*. They were also only ever presented in the context of a broader quasi-logical rationale.

The metaphors used to describe agency reforms in the Swedish documents consistently included *steering*, the *strong* state, and the *whole* over the period studied. It was typical for the Swedish speakers to refer to the capacity and necessity of the government to steer the administration, and even society. The references to steering were however significantly less in the last document *I medborgarnas tjänst*. There were also frequent references to concern for the *whole* of the administration or society, and the necessity to focus upon what was best for the *whole*. In *Politisk styrning-administrativ självständighet* the metaphors included *mapping* the relationship between the administration and politics, *sharpening* the roles and a finding *balance* in them. In *Regering, myndigheter en myndigheternas ledning* the proposals for agency reform such as new budgetary arrangements and changes to Director General appointments were presented as *sharpening* directives, *broadening* selection, promoting *long sightedness* and overcoming the *time pressing* problems of the existing budgetary arrangements. The budgetary changes in particular were described as taking further essential *steps* in financial *modernization*. Finally in *I medborgarnas tjänst* the most striking metaphors were those describing administrative activities or problems in terms of nature. For example the state was presented as a *tree*, while earlier business-like reforms were argued to threaten civil service culture, causing it to *water away* (dissolve). An overview of the Swedish rules of speaking about agency reform over time is presented in table 3.0 below.

Table 3.0. The Swedish rules of speaking about agency reform 1983-1996

| | Politisk styrning – administrativ självständighet 1983 | Regeringen, myndigheterna och myndigheternas ledning, 1985 | I medborgarnas tjänst, 1996 |
|-------------------|---|---|--|
| Ethos | | | |
| Particular | Political Scientist/ | Management experts | Political Scientists |
| Universal | Democracy & Constitution | Democracy & Constitution | Democracy & Citizen |
| Pathos | Quantitative | Quantitative | Quantitative – whole |
| | | | Unique |
| | Precarious | Precarious | Precarious |
| Logos | | | |
| Quasi-logical | Division of whole into parts Definition & Comparison | Division of whole into its parts Definition & Comparison | Division of whole into its parts Definition |
| Reasonable belief | | Unlimited development Causal link | Pragmatic argumentation |
| Metaphors | Mapping, steering, balance, sharpen | Steering, being on the path, deeper, stronger, modernizing, effectiveness, flexibility | Organic – tree, branches, dissolving, fragmentation |

5.3 Australia: Agencies enhancing customer service and promoting whole of government

The construction of *particular audiences* in the Australian accounts of agency reform varied somewhat over time and included the construction of tax paying voters, the staff and managers of agencies, and business consultants. Aside from the business consultant audience, it can be said that Australian particular audiences were always particular groups constructed as benefit from the reform, as opposed to groups characterized by particular kinds of knowledge. In the *Prime Minister's address at the official launch of Centrelink* for example the presentation of Centrelink as a one stop shop is accompanied by various references to the way the reform is to ensure that taxpayer's money is spent carefully. Centrelink is presented as playing an active role in the then Australian government's strong stance against social security fraud, and as being an efficient initiative. The effort taken by the speaker to show that Centrelink was not only a new kind of organizational form for delivering social security payments, but also a means to protecting taxpayers money, functioned to construct taxpayers as a particular audience. In addition, the employees of Centrelink were explicitly identified in the speech on numerous occasions. They were referred to as "highly valued" and described as being "given a new sense of career" through the creation of Centrelink. A particular audience of employees was also constructed in the *Three stages of an evolving model* speech presented by Sue Vardon. Employees were praised for their efforts at *best practice* and alerted to the career opportunities within the organization. Indeed, the Vardon speech adopted a strong motivational tone not only in references to staff, but also in the descriptions of Centrelink more generally. There was extensive use of business terminology including descriptions of Centrelink's *contestability*, *outlets*, *brands* and *key drivers*. This was interpreted as constructing a particular audience of business consultants. Such a business

consultant language and style was also identified in the *Connecting Government* document where the speaker presented best practice checklists and summary boxes to the audience.

There were two main ways in which the speakers consistently sought to broaden the appeal of Australian agency reforms to a *universal audience* over time. Firstly, in all of the documents analyzed the speaker always identified some commitment to customer service. This included references to the desirability of ease of access to government services (Howard 1997), as well as explicit commitments of the speaker to personalized or tailored customer services (Vardon 1998, MAC 2004). Tailored customer service by government was often presented as something that would benefit all Australians and indeed was posited as a broad and legitimate expectation of the Australian community (MAC 2004:2). In this way it transcended the desires being attributed to particular audiences and was part of establishing the credibility of the Centrelink and executive agency reforms to all Australians. A second, related means by which the speaker sought to demonstrate that agency reforms were universally beneficial was through descriptions of the reforms as Australian and for the Australian community. Centrelink for example was presented as an Australian solution to government problems, while specialist executive agencies were described as enabling the government to protect Australia's national interest in a globalized world. Both commitments were sometimes entwined through the presentation of the Australian community as a community of customers (Vardon 1998, Smullen 2007).

Sensitization of the Australian audience to the agency reforms were consistently pursued in all of the documents through the *qualitative locus of the difficult*. This occurred through frequent references to the creation of agencies as a momentous political feat or as generating improvements through persistence. For example in the first Centrelink speech John Howard congratulated departmental leadership for introducing a (difficult) reform that previous generations could only have dreamt of doing (Howard 1997). Similarly, the various *challenges* of the Centrelink reform were repeatedly described in the second document presented by Sue Vardon who emphasized that innovation had, and would, follow from the hard work of employees (Vardon 1998). Challenges were also prominent in the descriptions of executive agencies in *Connecting Government* and the more general context in which they were created. They had been created to respond to contentious issues and a complex environment and thereby appear to be good things. All of these references to the challenges of agency creation, and their continued existence, rely upon preparing the audience to accept the desirability of agencies because they have survived or arisen out of difficult circumstances. Other *loci* that were observed, albeit less consistently, included the *locus of the unique* in the two speeches about Centrelink (it is distinct, new separate from departments) and, conversely, the locus of the durable (Centrelink is a long standing tradition) in the *Connecting Government* document. Some use of the *quantitative locus* was also made in the documents.

The argumentative techniques adopted throughout the period studied were primarily based upon *reasonable belief* and the *structure of reality*. These included the use of the *causal link* to demonstrate that the agency reforms would promote efficiency and staff motivation (Howard 1997, Vardon 1998), or be better able to respond to complex issues than normal departmental units (MAC 2004). Central to Sue Vardon's speech were descriptions of a range of information technologies which would be used to promote customer service. Indeed, the length to which Vardon cited information technologies indicated that she was relying upon the authority of the technology itself to obtain the audience's agreement

(*argumentation by authority*). Prime Minister John Howard, by contrast, made political use of the technique of the *interaction between the person and the act* in his speech at the official opening of Centrelink. This occurred by identifying the Centrelink initiative as a sensible solution to problems (of access) he had long noted in his own political career. The sensibility of John Howard was used to demonstrate that the Centrelink reform itself was also sensible. Furthermore the *argument of unlimited development* was central to demonstrating that Centrelink would continue to improve customer service, innovation and business more generally (Vardon 1998). This technique was evident in the title of Vardon's speech *Three stages of an evolving model to a one stop shop*. The audience was ushered through three successive phases of Centrelink's development which would bring about continued improvement in customer service.

There was only limited application of *quasi logical* techniques in Australian arguments about agency reform. These occurred primarily in the third document *Connecting Government* and included *definition* to describe the key drivers of the whole of government priority for executive agencies (MAC 2004). This definition was also *compared* to existing agency practices, thereby demonstrating that it was being adequately dealt with by the new reforms. Finally, the metaphors adopted in the documents changed over time although there were numerous business metaphors in the early documents. These included describing Centrelink as *doing business* (Howard 1997, Vardon 1998) and having *outlets* and *brands*. In distinguishing Centrelink from traditional bureaucratic organizations John Howard referred to it as having a *human face*. In the later two documents this distinction from bureaucracy was achieved through references to *tailored, seamless* or *personalized* customer service and to the *flexibility* of agencies more generally. Accompanying the argument of unlimited development in the Vardon speech were also a number of traveling metaphors describing agency innovation including *being on the road* and *leading the way*. Finally, in the last document *Connecting Government* there were some different metaphors including *balancing* priorities, *sharper* responsibilities, *integrating* services and promoting the *whole* of government.

Table 4.0. Overview of Australian rules of speaking over time

| | Prime Minister's address at the official launch of Centrelink, 1997 | Three stages of an evolving model to a one stop shop, 1998 | Connecting government, 2004 |
|-------------------|--|--|--|
| Ethos | | | |
| Particular | Taxpayers Employees | Business consultants Employees | Business consultants |
| Universal | Customer service Australians | Customer service | Customer service Australians |
| Pathos | Difficult (challenge) | Difficult (challenge) | Difficult (challenge) |
| | Unique (new) | Unique (new) | Durable (tradition) |
| Logos | | | |
| Quasi-logical | | Definition & Comparison | Definition & Comparison |
| Reasonable belief | Causal link The person and his act | Causal link Unlimited development | Pragmatic argumentation Unlimited development |
| Metaphors | Human face Centrelink is a business, flexibility | Brands, outlets, tailored customer service, on the road, flexibility | Balancing, sharpening, whole, transparent |

6.0 Comparing agency talk over time: national styles of speaking or an international template?

The presentation of the rules of speaking in national official agency accounts would thus far indicate that some aspects of official agency talk have been durable over time. For example, ministerial accountability, democracy and customer service were recurring commitments that the speaker's respectively identified in Dutch, Swedish and Australian descriptions of agency reform. Similarly, the sensitization of the audience to benefits of agency reform were repeatedly pursued through the *locus of the precarious* (the threat to democracy) in Sweden, and the *locus of the difficult* (the challenge) in Australia. The loci in Dutch official agency accounts were less consistent over time with the Ministry of Finance documents relying primarily upon the locus of the unique to move the audience, while the Home Affairs document relied solely upon the quantitative locus of more is better. Furthermore, the argumentative techniques adopted over time in the different countries revealed some continuity. In particular *quasi-logical argumentation* was more prominent in the Swedish and Dutch documents, while arguments based upon *reasonable belief* were more typical of Australian characterizations of agency reform over time. These durable rhetorical features of official national agency talk were labeled the *national styles of speaking* in this study and they are presented together in the table 5.0 below:

Table 5.0. National styles of speaking about agency reform over time

| | The Netherlands | Sweden | Australia |
|-------------------------|---|----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| <i>Recurring ethos</i> | Ministerial accountability Scientific criteria Consultation | Democracy Scientific criteria | Customer service |
| <i>Recurring pathos</i> | | The precarious (threat) | The difficult (challenge) |
| <i>Recurring logos</i> | Quasi-logical | Quasi-logical | Reasonable belief |

Patterns in the national styles of speaking identified across the consensus political contexts (The Netherlands, Sweden), that were different to those of the adversarial political context (Australia), would indicate that context has played an important role in shaping official agency talk. In particular, the *ethos* and *logos* of Dutch and Swedish official accounts revealed important similarities in the symbolism of agency reform. The *universal audiences* (ethos) in both the consensus political contexts were constructed through the speaker's consistent commitment to public values (democracy, ministerial accountability) and the application of scientific knowledge. In addition, the *particular audiences* (ethos) were primarily constructed as experts such as legal, public organization, or financial experts. There were some exceptions over time such as the construction of managers in both cases, the construction of a particular audience of citizens in the Swedish case, and a particular audience of business consultants in the Dutch case. Furthermore, the argumentative techniques adopted in both consensus political contexts were primarily *quasi-logical* over time. It was typical in both The Netherlands and Sweden to obtain credibility for agency initiatives through replicating mathematical deductions. This was pursued through the use of definitions, comparisons and the division of the whole into its parts to describe agency initiatives. By contrast, in the adversarial political context, Australia, the *universal audience* was consistently characterized by a

commitment to private values (customer service), while *particular audiences* were primarily groups of beneficiaries to reforms (taxpayers, agency staff) or business consultants. In the Australian context it was more typical to obtain credibility for agency reforms through establishing reasonable belief that the reforms would bring about various benefits. This was pursued through such argumentative techniques as the *causal link*, *unlimited development* and *argumentation by authority*.

Some similarities in the rhetorical features of official agency accounts across all of the countries can also be identified. This would indicate that there was also convergence in the *rules of speaking* across different political administrative contexts. More specifically there was a shift towards similar argumentative techniques (logos) including the *argument of unlimited development* and *traveling metaphors*. These features of official accounts appeared primarily in the Dutch document *Verder met resultaat*, the Swedish document *Regering, myndigheter en myndigheternas ledning*, and in the Australian documents *Three stages of an evolving model to a one stop shop – challenges at each stage* and *Connecting Government*. Typical of their use in official agency accounts were descriptions of agency initiatives, or their features, constituting a refinement in the management regime that was, or would be, continually improved. In The Netherlands and Sweden for example these argumentative features appeared in the respective descriptions of the performance indicator regime and the budgetary regime of agencies. It was said that performance measures were being continually refined and that learning would continue into the future (*Verder met resultaat* 1998), or that continued efforts to make the budget more effective had been an important element of developing the reform initiative (*Regering, myndigheter en myndigheternas ledning* 1985). In Australia, unlimited development was associated with the efforts of Centrelink to improve customer service.

The speakers in all countries also accentuated the reasonableness of continuous improvement through traveling metaphors such as agencies undertaking *step by step* improvements (The Netherlands), being on a *path* to better budgetary arrangements (Sweden), or being *on the road* to improved customer service (Australia). Furthermore it was typical that the metaphor of *flexibility* and a *causal link* association between efficiency and agency reform appeared across the countries in the documents exhibiting the argument of unlimited development. The use of more arguments based upon reasonable belief in the Dutch and Swedish documents constituted a shift away from the more durable quasi-logical style of speaking in those countries. Indeed, the production of such similar rules of speaking in all three different countries, including both consensus and adversarial political contexts, provide evidence that there has been a common international template used to describe agency reforms. Since this template replicates ways of speaking that were more typical of the Australian context, it can be argued that it is an Anglo-Saxon story that has been traveling.

Table 6.0 An international template of reform across contexts

| | The Netherlands (1991, 1998) | Sweden (1985) | Australia (1998) |
|----------------------------|--|--|--|
| Particular audience | <i>Business consultants</i> | Financial expert | <i>Business consultants</i> |
| Pathos | <i>The difficult</i> | Precarious | <i>The difficult</i> |
| Logos | <i>Unlimited development Causal link Traveling metaphors Flexibility</i> | <i>Unlimited development Causal link Traveling metaphors Flexibility</i> | <i>Unlimited development Causal link Traveling metaphors Flexibility</i> |

A comparison of the documents in which the similar rules of speaking appeared also indicated that an Anglo-Saxon style of speaking was replicated to different degrees in The Netherlands and Sweden. The rhetorical features of the Dutch document *Verder met resultaat* were more similar to Australian styles of speaking than those of the Swedish document *Regering myndigheterna en myndigheternas ledning*. In the Dutch case it was not just the *logos* of agency talk that corresponded to Australian styles of speaking, but also aspects of the *ethos* or rather the particular audience. For example, the Dutch speaker constructed a particular audience of business consultants. The use of management slogans such as learning by doing, or terms such as business redressing, together with the presentation of self help guides for prospective agencies, was reminiscent of the strong consultancy tones in the Australian documents (Vardon 1998; MAC 2004). Alternatively there was never a business consultant audience constructed in Sweden, rather the particular audience was always constructed as an expert, including financial experts. To this extent The Netherlands demonstrated a greater propensity than Sweden to adopt official symbols of agency reform that were similar to Anglo Saxon contexts such as Australia.

Finally, it is most remarkable that the similar template of agency reform only appeared in the consensus democracies when financial officials were the predominant actual speakers. More specifically the documents *Verder met resultaat* (The Netherlands) and *Regering, myndigheter en myndigheternas ledning* (Sweden), were produced by commissions in which financial officials dominated. It was in these documents that agency reform was presented in a way that was most similar to the Anglo-Saxon country Australia. This would suggest that financial officials have been important carriers of an Anglo Saxon story about agency reform. They have provided a link between fashionable international stories and the national style of speaking. In the case of The Netherlands it can be argued that there was greater adoption of Anglo Saxon styles of speaking because financial officials were more often privileged to present their accounts of agency reform in the Dutch context. This does not discount the strong role of financial officials in the modernization of Swedish agencies, but rather recognizes that they have had less opportunity to give their accounts of agency reform in the Swedish commission documents examined, or indeed the Swedish commission system more generally. These findings suggest that financial officials produce the same kinds of stories wherever they are speaking, and that these stories have a business consultant flavor. They provide support for theoretical concepts such as translation and the notion that national actors are selecting reform ideas from international networks that are then edited in national contexts. Indeed, there is some further recent research which would support the idea of an international epistemic community within which financial officials and business consultants play an essential role in the exchange of management ideas (Christianson, Newberry and Potter 2007). The influence of such actors upon national reform trajectories, whether symbolic or in practice, and their contacts with one another requires further analysis.

7.0 Conclusion

This paper has presented new international comparative data on the symbolic features of agency reform over time. It has been shown that there is evidence of convergence in management talk across different political administrative regimes with distinctive histories. More specifically a similar way of speaking about agency reform was, temporarily, identified in The Netherlands, Sweden and Australia. This would lend plausibility to the notion of an epistemic community of public management reformers functioning beyond national borders and exerting exogenous pressure upon national reform initiatives. Indeed, the identification of financial speakers as the articulators of the international template in consensus democracies would suggest that they are important carriers of Anglo-Saxon styles of speaking to these contexts. More recently, one has also noted international shifts towards a different kind of story about whole of government. While we can also expect that this has provided a new kind of template to be incorporated within national repertoires of reform, the evidence in this paper would suggest that adoptions of new fashionable ways of speaking will always be tempered by the more durable national styles of speaking about public management reform.

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