The Diachrony of Political Terror:
Tracing Terror and Terrorism in Swedish Parliamentary Data 1867-1970

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Abstract

The paper explores the development of the closely related words 'terror' and 'terrorism' as manifested in the discourse of the Swedish Parliament, 1867–1970, drawing on digital history and language technology methodologies and tools. Combining distant and close reading, we show that terror-related words first gained traction from 1918 and onwards. The recorded uses of words and compounds indicate that terror-related phenomena were often associated with states rather than individuals, but also that terror-related words have been used metaphorically in relation to non-violent domestic issues. Our results confirm the argument that the word terrorism primarily gained its modern meaning in the early 1970s. We conclude by stressing the potential of combining LT-driven and interpretative approaches for investigating the diachronicity of words in Parliamentary corpora.

1   Introduction

This study provides a step towards a digital history of the Swedish political discourse on political terror by means of distant and close reading of parliamentary texts. Drawing on a mixed-methods approach, we explore the development of the closely related words 'terror' and 'terrorism' as manifested in the discourse of the bicameral Parliament throughout its existence, 1867–1970.

From an etymological perspective, terror (same spelling in Swedish and English) designates an intense state of fear or horror and has been used in Swedish written accounts since at least the 1600s. (To *terrorisera* ('terrorize') means to put people in such a state through one's actions.) *Terror* was rarely used before 1918 when it gained a second meaning, signifying not only state oppression and violence, but also the use of certain means *'i politiskt syfte för att sprida skräck o. därvid uppnå vissa mål'* by both state and sub-state actors (saob.se). Likely, this new use derived from English or Russian and was connected to the 1917 Russian Revolution and Finnish Civil War 1918–1919. *Terrorism* had entered Swedish in the early 19th century, primarily referencing the French Revolution's Reign of Terror (initially translated as *skräckväldet*) and was similarly associated with state repression. In the 1970s, *terrorism* gained its modern meaning, becoming distinctly associated with sub-state violence against civilians or non-combatants (Stampnitzky 2013).

The aim of this study is to explore how the words terror and terrorism have been used in Swedish parliamentary discourse, focusing on the different meanings that have been ascribed to them over time. To map these meanings we draw on the digitized parliamentary records and the resources of Språkbanken Text. Partly, we follow prior initiatives by the Swedish CLARIN node, Swe-Clarin, where humanities and social sciences scholars collaborate with researchers in natural language processing in using LT-based e-science tools for HSS research (Viklund and Borin 2016; Karsvall and Borin 2018). The present study builds on prior explorations of the newspaper discourse on terrorism in Sweden and Finland (Fridlund et al. 2019, 2020, 2022).

Specifically, we ask two research questions regarding the understanding of the phenomenon of terrorism in the Swedish parliamentary discourse during the period in focus: (1) What variations of meanings have the words terror and terrorism had when used in isolation and as compound words, and (2) what terror-related compounds have been added to the discourse over time?
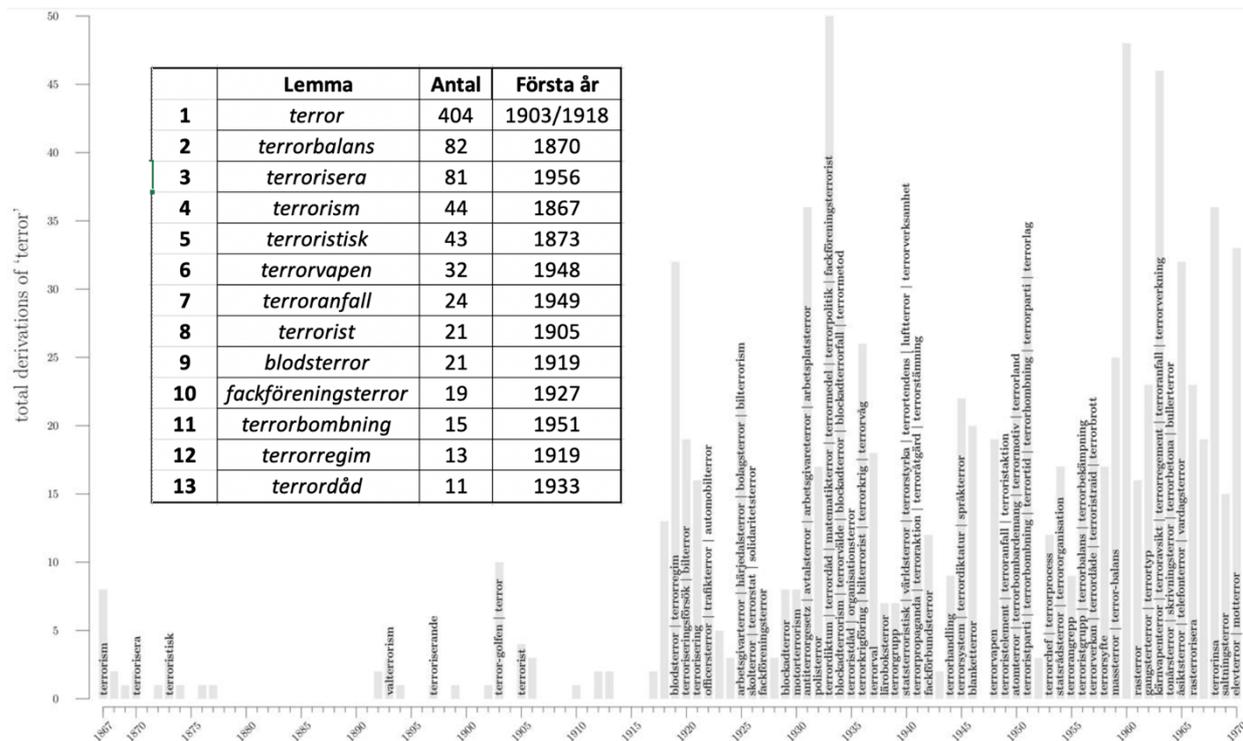
Figure 1 contains a chart with an embedded table:

	Lemma	Antal	Första år
1	terror	404	1903/1918
2	terrorbalans	82	1870
3	terrorisera	81	1956
4	terrorism	44	1867
5	terroristisk	43	1873
6	terrorvapen	32	1948
7	terroranfall	24	1949
8	terrorist	21	1905
9	blodsterror	21	1919
10	fackföreningsterror	19	1927
11	terrorbombning	15	1951
12	terrorregim	13	1919
13	terrordåd	11	1933

Figure 1: The diachrony of political terror in the Swedish Parliament 1867–1970. First occurrences of new derivations of terror in the bicameral corpus and staples showing the use of all derivations. The top left table shows the terror lexemes with more than 10 occurrences.

2 Analyzing the bicameral Riksdag parliamentary data

The parliament's texts available at the National Library of Sweden (riksdagstryck.kb.se/) (retrieved 2021-11-11) consist of 10 categories, such as motions, propositions and minutes of the debates. The material was processed for analysis with tokenization, lemmatization and dependency parsing by means of the Sparv Pipeline tool designed for automatic neural and statistical annotation of documents with textual structure and linguistic properties for Swedish applications (Borin et al. 2016; Ljunglöf et al. 2019; Henchen & Tahmasebi 2021). Our processed corpus was subsequently made accessible through the qualiquantitative Context tool (developed by Wåhlstrand Skärström) for investigating linguistic representations, i.e., words and phrases, in the texts. Context aids distant reading and enables the production of quantitative results, such as relative and absolute frequency for queries and close reading of the context of a search query, which enables qualitative and interpretative analysis.

For the analysis, the parliamentary texts were grouped by year, irrespective of their subcollection, and tokenized into individual words and subsequently lemmatized and queried for the head word, e.g. terror, per year. This filtered volume was then manually curated to remove errors from OCR or lemmatization. This produced data on a 'diachrony' of terror-related words – the frequency of usage of terror-related lexemes (staples in Figure 1) and innovation of new words – indicating the yearly growth in terror-related terms and production of compounds. In the analysis, significant individual occurrences (generally the first) were interrogated by closer readings of the parliamentary records.

2.1 Volume of roots and compounds

The search string *terror* generates 1.016 hits in our corpus. The majority (606) are different grammatical forms of the seven terms terror (404), terrorisera (81), terrorism (44), terroristisk (43), terrorist (21), terroriserande (10) and terrorisering (3), all of which may be considered derivations from the root word terror. However, since they are all separately productive, we will consider them roots by their own right The rest consists of 102 compounds from the root terror (82 different compounds), terrorist (12), terrorism (5), terrorisera (1), terrorisering (1) and terroristisk (1), either as the modifier or head constituent.

Focusing on the two core roots, terrorism was used already 1867, the bicameral parliament's first

year. However, close reading shows its 19th century use to be nonlethal metaphorical, primarily to denote *valterrorism*, perceived oppressive parliamentary voting procedures. In the 1900s *terrorism* becomes used for violent and even lethal activities. First in connection with labor disputes and later in 1918 with the Finnish Civil War, that also introduced *terror* as a significant concern for the Swedish Parliament. Usage and new compositions rose sharply from 1918 (from 53 to 542 1918–1970). Notably, *terror* had only been used on one occasion in 1903 to refer to the British warship HMS *Terror*. Furthermore, it is striking that although the use of terrorism preceded that of terror it is almost absent before 1970 (26 hits 1900–1969) something that we discuss further below.

Regarding most common usage, 13 words occurred 10 times or more (see table in Figure 1): 5 simple terms and the 8 compound words *terrorbalans* ('terror balance'), *terrorvapen* ('weapons of terror'), *terroranfall* ('terror attacks'), *blodsterror* ('blood terror'), *fackföreningsterror* ('trade union terror'), *terrorbombning* ('terror bombing'), *terrorregim* ('terror regime') and *terrordåd* ('terror deed'). Notably, four of these – *terrorbalans*, *terrorvapen*, *terroranfall* and *terrorbombning* – are used in reference to Cold War nuclear terror. Also, close reading reveals the first occurrence of *terrordåd* (in 1933) to refer to *individuella terrordåd* ('individual acts of terror'), i.e. political violence that today would be discussed in terms of *terrorism*.

2.2   Productivity of compounds

Our results show six roots and one compound (*valterrorism*) emerging before 1918 and one root (*terrorisering*) and 102 compounds after 1918. As far as compound words with *terror* is concerned, of the 83 in total, eight have more than 10 instances (Figure 1): *terrorbalans* ('-balance'), *terrorvapen* ('-weapon'), *terroranfall* ('-attack'), *blodsterror* ('blood-'), *fackföreningsterror* ('trade union-'), *terrorbombning* ('-bombing), *terrorregim* ('-regime'), *terrordåd* ('-deed). Furthermore, in line with the rare use of *terrorism* discussed above, there are only six uses of the four (methaphorical) compounds with *-terrorism* (*val-, bil-, motor-, blockad-*) as compared to those with *terror* and *terrorist* (12).

States' involvement in terror activities are referred to in several of the *terror* compounds such as *terrorregim* (13), *terrorvälde* (9), *polisterror* (6),

terrorland (2), *terrordiktatur* (1) and *terror-regement* (1), as well as others refer to warfare involving states, such as *terrorkrig* and *terror-bombning*. Notably, *statsterroristisk* (1) and *terror-stat* (3), were the only compounds with *stat* ('state'), although the former was metaphorically used to refer to domestic governance issues, which was also the case with *statsrådsterror* (1) (c.f. Ängsal et al. 2022 on state and terrorism compounds in the Swedish parliamentary debate 1993–2018). Thus, our results show the associations between states and terror to have a long Swedish history (c.f. Fridlund et al. 2020).

One can also distinguish periods of compound productivity grounded in domestic and geopolitical trends contexts, such as *arbetsmarknadsterror* in 1925–1935 referring to terror by and against labour unions and employers, *luftterror* in 1936–1940 denoting the threat of wartime aerial bombings against civilian targets, and *atomterror* in 1948–63 denoting the nuclear threat during the Cold War.

2.3   The rise of terrorism

What is missing from the above discussion is any references to words related to the insurgent violence perpetrated by militant organizations such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the West German Red Army Faction (RAF) that became synonymous with terrorism in the early 1970s (prior to this, other words were sometimes used as labels for similar forms of political violence, including *anarkism* ('anarchism')). In fact, Stampnitzky argues that the transnational character of this form of violence – skyjacking, hostage taking for political purposes, etc. – and its impact on the modern world order generated a need for a discursive term: 'the concern was with violence *out of place* – "spilling over" from local conflicts into the "international sphere"' (Stampnitzky 2013: 27).

The Swedish parliamentary debate provides a clear illustration of this argument when an MP in 1970 claimed that the use of *'terror och motterror''* ('counter terror') could have dire consequences: '*När terrorgrupper tillgriper sådana metoder som kapning eller rent av förstörelse av flygplan med oskyldiga civila passagerare, eller mord på diplomater från utomstående länder, hotas hela det regelsystem för den internationella samlevnaden, som mödosamt byggts upp under lång tid*. (1970–04–29)' The pejorative quality of the word terrorism also made it useful as a rhetorical tool.

Later that year, a liberal MP sarcastically commented on the New Left's advocacy of using violent means for political purposes and in doing this introduced in the Parliament *terrorism* in its new emerging meaning: '*När den nygamla vänstern vill försvara våldsmetoder får det inte sammanblandas med advokatyr för terrorism. Det skulle låta alltför illa!*' (1970–10–29)

3 Conclusions

This paper provides an attempt to understand the development of the closely related words *terror* and *terrorism* as manifested in the discourse in Swedish parliamentary discourse, 1867–1970. By applying the tools Sparv and Context, we have explored the development of these two words in isolation and as parts of compounds in MPs' speeches. Combining distant and close reading, we have shown that terror-related words gained traction from 1918 and onwards. Furthermore, the uses of the words of interest and their compounds clearly indicate that terror-related activities were, to a large extent, associated with states rather than individuals. At the same time, our results confirm the familiar argument that the word terrorism gained its modern meaning in the early 1970s. On another level, the paper illustrates the potential of combining LT-driven and interpretative approaches for analysing the diachronicity of words in Parliamentary corpora.

Acknowledgments

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