ISSA Proceedings 2006 – Evaluating Attacks On The Credibility Of Politicians In Political Debates

1. *Introduction*

When analysing political argumentative discourse, we regularly come across attacks on the credibility of the participants in the discourse. By discrediting tactics, politicians intend to discourage their colleague politicians and the general public from supporting the standpoint of their opponent. In Dutch media it is suggested that the use of personal attacks in Dutch political debates has increased under the influence of international politics.**[i]** Although there is no empirical evidence for this claim, very recently there have been several examples in Dutch politics in which the credibility of politicians has been subject of debate.

On June 24 2006 for instance, the Dutch progressive liberal party, Democrats 66 (D'66), organised elections in order to find a new party leader. The two most prominent candidates were the current Minister for Government Reform and Kingdom Relations, Alexander Pechtold, and chair of the parliamentary party, Lousewies van der Laan. In one of the debates in the build-up to the elections, van der Laan stated that her opponent Pechtold, had completely lost his credibility. First of all because Pechtold, when he was a minister, had agreed on the Uruzgan mission whereas, on an earlier occasion, he had said that under no circumstances he would agree on that mission. Secondly, because he characterised himself as an analytical person, whereas, according to van der Laan, this is not in keeping with the way in which he had profiled himself in an interview, claiming to be 'a man who often shoots and some shots are successful'. After the debate, Pechtold was furious about these accusations: 'she portrayed me as person who lacks credibility: that is damaging for me and for the party'.

In that same period, the credibility of the Minister of Immigration was under attack. On 15 May 2006, the Dutch parliament called an emergency debate to discuss the decision by Immigration Minister Rita Verdonk, to revoke the Dutch

nationality of the Somali-born Dutch politician, Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Most MPs didn't agree with the Minister's standpoint. They questioned her credibility and suggested that Verdonk had ulterior motives for defending this standpoint at this particular moment: she was accused of trying to boost her chances in the race to become the new leader of Conservative Liberal Party by taking this decision

Questioning an opponent's credibility in a political debate often involves an ad hominem argument. From a pragma-dialectical perspective, an attack on the credibility of the opponent may be regarded as a violation of one of the ten rules for critical discussion, the so-called freedom rule. This rule formulates the fundamental right to advance or criticise any desired standpoint without being hindered in any way. Attacking the opponent personally may constitute an infringement on this right. When analysing and evaluating political debates, it may, however, be difficult to decide when an argumentative move is indeed an infringement of the freedom rule. In this contribution I will look into the ways in which the credibility of a politician may be challenged and what complications may occur when deciding on the fallaciousness of these challenges. First I will look into what criteria there are to determine credibility. Then, I will discuss some examples of how the credibility of political opponents is challenged in parliamentary debate. Finally I will discuss some difficulties when classifying a personal attack as being a fallacy.

2. *Criteria for credibility*

The credibility of a protagonist of a certain standpoint may be criticised in different ways. In literature on argumentation and communication we come across various criteria for determining a person's credibility. Empirical studies in the field of political communication suggest that (source) credibility is made up of expertise and trustworthiness. In a research on negative political advertising by Yoon, Pinkleton and Ko (2005), the anchors for *expertise* include experience, knowledge, skills and qualifications. The researchers measured *trustworthiness* using the criteria honesty, reliability and sincerity.

In literature on argumentation, Govier (1999: 26) brings forward that in a normative sense, a person's credibility may be defined as his or her worthiness to be believed. It depends on a person's sincerity, honesty, and reliability.**[ii]** A person is normatively credible if and only if he or she is honest and is in an appropriate position to be a believable asserter of claim made.

When discussing ad-hominem arguments, van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992: 110) state that an opponent's credibility may be seriously undermined by

portraying him as stupid, unreliable, inconsistent or biased. Walton (2006: 122) says that attacking the other party's honesty or sincerity may lead to the conclusion that a person lacks credibility as an arguer who can be trusted to play by the rules.

All these different criteria as to how the credibility of the protagonist of a certain standpoint can be established, increased or undermined can be placed under two headings. The first criterion is *competence*: relating to expertise, reliability, being well informed, knowledgeable and adequately prepared. The second is *trustworthiness:* relating to honesty, fairness, sincerity, faithfulness and unbiased.
In political science and in political practice, the credibility of politicians is considered of great importance. It might even be argued that the credibility of individual politicians is to a large extent decisive for the quality of a democracy. According to Munnich (2000: 20) the very impression of a politician hiding something, having ulterior motives or promoting his own interests devalues the legitimacy of political decisions. This view is in line with one of Habermas's critical standards for deliberative politics, which is that everyone participating in a political discourse should express his or her views in a truthful way (Steiner et al, 2004).
The importance of credibility and related concepts in the eyes of politicians themselves can be derived from an empirical research that was carried out by van den Heuvel, Huberts and Verberk (2002). Thirteen different values were distinguished as belonging to the ethics of politicians and civil servants. When Dutch politicians were asked to select the three values that are most important for their own behaviour, they first of all selected honesty (60% mention this value), followed by integrity and openness (both 39.2%). Expertise (26.1%) was considered significantly less important.**[iii]**.
The ways in which standpoints and arguments in a political debate are formulated, too, may indicate the awareness of politicians of the importance of their credibility. When a politician anticipates doubts about his competence affecting his credibility, he may present a standpoint or an argument by making use of phrases such as 'to the best of my knowledge', 'to the best of my ability' or 'if I am well-informed'. When he anticipates doubts on his trustworthiness he may accompany a standpoint or an argument with formulations such as: 'I won't beat about the bush', 'in all candour', 'in all fairness' or 'with hand on heart'. These 'indicators for the awareness of the importance of credibility' are also used in non-political argumentative discourse. According to Fetzer (2002: 187), however,

compared to most other types of argumentative discourse, the concept of credibility is even of greater importance in a political-discourse-setting because of its mediated and therefore public status.
Given the importance of the concept of credibility in political argumentative discourse, it is only to be expected that, notwithstanding their formal and institutional context, attacks on the credibility of politicians do indeed occur in parliamentary debates (Plug, 2007).

3. *Discussing the credibility in parliamentary debates*
The corpus of Dutch parliamentary debates over the past five years (2001-2006) contains some examples of attacks on the credibility of opponents, either by discrediting their competence or by discrediting their trustworthiness. First I will present some examples of personal attacks on the competence of opponents. Then, I will present an example of an attack on the trustworthiness of an opponent.

Competence: inadequate expertise
The example under (1) contains a fragment of a debate on Dutch tax plans for 2005, in which State Secretary Wijn defends the standpoint that the VBP-tax (corporate income tax) should not be lowered:

(1)
State Secretary Wijn: (…) Last Monday I argued extensively that, in my view, the psychology of a lower VBP-tax will rank us once more among those countries in which people wish to establish businesses. This has not been proven by means of any model.

Mr Crone (Labour party): We should *always* be wary of *economists putting forward psychology as proof*.
(Proceedings of the House of Representatives, 18 November 2004)

In this case, MP Crone is criticising not so much the expertise of State Secretary Wijn as a politician, but as an economist. Crone is of the opinion that Wijn cannot bring his claim, as it were, since he is an economist who uses arguments from the field of psychology, which is not his field. He formulates his accusation as a general principle that is not only true for the economist Wijn, but for all economists.**[iv]**

Competence: inadequate preparation

In the next debate (2) between van Baalen (Member of Parliament for the Conservative Liberal Democrats) and Timmermans (Member of parliament for the Labour party), van Baalen suggests that Timmermans's standpoint need not be taken seriously since Timmermans is not well prepared.

(2)
Mr van Baalen (Conservative Liberal Democrats): I suspect that the haste *characteristic* of members of parliament has prevented you from reading the cabinet's letter. This letter clearly states that the European Parliament, (…) will have more control, not less.

Mr Timmermans (Labour party): I do not need to be lectured on what to read or what not to read. You should refrain from personal attacks. Why not proceed with the contents?
(Proceedings of the House of Representatives, 4 December 2003)

Van Baalen suggests that haste is typical for all members of parliament. And since haste is part and parcel of an MP's job, it should not be used as an excuse.

Competence: insufficiently knowledgeable
In a debate on an inquiry into expenditure for public health care (October 8, 2004), a difference of opinion arises between Kant (Socialist party) and Weekers (Conservative Liberal Democrats) on whether the study on the subject suggests that money has been spent ineffectively. Weekers is of the opinion that this conclusion could indeed be read between the lines of the study. He therefore thinks that it is important to see if more could have been done with the same amount of money. Kant does not share his opinion:

(3)
Ms Kant (Socialist Party): (…) You yourself have just said that this has not been investigated, yet you do draw conclusions from this study. Obviously money has not always been spent effectively, but this is a conclusion which cannot be drawn on the basis of this study.

Mr Weekers (Conservative Liberal Democrats): Ms Kant, *you always think* that all problems in this country will be solved by spending large sums of money. I maintain that it is not just a matter of money (…) At the same time it has, in part, to do with a lack of effectiveness and I would like to have focused on that aspect. That is my position and that is what I read between the lines of the study.

(Proceedings of the House of Representatives, October 8 2004)

In this discussion Weekers is portraying Kant as an ignoramus when it comes to serious economic problems. In doing so, he does not only ignore Kant's standpoint, he also commits a straw man by suggesting that she only argues for more money for public health care.

Trustworthiness: unfairness
Under (4) an example is given in which two members of Parliament (Halsema and van Aartsen) clashed in an emergency debate on the occasion of the resignation of the Minister for Administrative Reform, de Graaf. The disagreement focused on the question of de Graaf's reasons for resigning.

(4)
Ms Halsema (the Green Party): Mr President, (…) Mr de Graaf clearly indicates that he made his decision today, not yesterday. The decision was made because there was no longer any prospect of reaching an agreement over the electoral system. (…)

Mr van Aartsen (Conservative Liberal Democrats): Mr President, Ms Halsema's fantasies know no bounds. Her contributions are all very interesting but do not make any sense at all. *And they have a familiar ring to them*. (…)
(Proceedings of the House of Representatives, 23 March 2005)

Here, van Aartsen disagrees with Halsema when she claims that Minister de Graaf decided to resign because of the attitude of the coalition partners concerning the electoral system. Van Aartsen does not reject her standpoint by means of sound arguments, but by portraying her as a person who is making things up and is therefore an unreliable discussion partner.

4. *The fallaciousness of personal attacks*
From literature on personal attacks and ad-hominem arguments it becomes clear that there are serious difficulties with regard to criteria that should be used when deciding on the fallaciousness of an attack on a person's credibility. Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1995) criticise the criterion 'relevance' that is used in the Standard Treatment and that qualifies the ad hominem as a fallacy of relevance. They consider the notion of relevance unclarified and therefore as the origin of the problem of the many exceptions to the rule that an *argumentum ad hominem* is a fallacy.

According to van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1995), an *argumentum ad hominem* is not fallacious on the grounds that it is an argument with irrelevant premises. In their pragma-dialectic approach, a personal attack in argumentative discourse should be interpreted as a fallacy if it hinders the resolution of a disagreement by undermining the other party's right to advance or criticize a standpoint. This 'right to speak' may be violated by all three variants of the *argumentum ad hominem*. In the *abusive* variant the protagonist denigrates the other party's intelligence, expertise or good faith. In the *circumstantial* variant the protagonist suggests that the other party has personal interests in adopting a particular position. In the *tu quoque* variant, moreover, the other party is confronted with inconsistencies in his opinions or actions. The general criterion that applies to all three variants is whether a party has said something that is calculated to undermine the other party's position as a credible discussion partner (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1995, 226).

An evaluation of the examples from parliamentary debates presented in the last paragraph, reveals that proponents of personal attacks do not address the (sub)standpoint that is brought forward by the other party but, instead, question the credibility of the other party as the protagonist of the (sub)standpoint. Such an attempt to ignore the standpoint and exclude its proponent from the discussion clearly hinders the resolution of the standpoint and should therefore be interpreted as an argumentum ad hominem.

In the pragma-dialectical approach there are no exceptions to the rule that an argumentum ad hominem is a fallacy; the term argumentum ad hominem is used solely for the fallacy of an incorrect personal attack. However, this does not mean that there are no situations in which a personal attack may well be justifiable. These situations may depend on the institutional context in which the attack is brought forward. In the following I will demonstrate how the institutional context in which parliamentary debates take place may be of influence on the evaluation of attacks on a politician's credibility.

4.1 *Questioning a politician's credibility in view of a certain standpoint*

A protagonist of a personal attack may be of the opinion that his doubts about the credibility of his opponent hinder the resolution of the difference of opinion on the subject that is under discussion. This criticism on the credibility of the protagonist of a certain standpoint may then be interpreted as an attempt to discuss if the correctness conditions (i.e. the sincerity conditions) for advancing a (sub) standpoint are met. The standpoint defended in this sub-discussion would be that

the protagonist ‘does not believe that his opponent believes in the truthfulness of the standpoint the latter advanced.’ A discussion on this standpoint could be seen as part of the opening stage of a critical discussion in which parties try to find out whether there is sufficient common ground to make a resolution-oriented discussion profitable. Van Eemeren et al (1993: 27) points at this possibility when they say that the opening stage of a discussion can be seen as representing both a “repair” function and a reflexively open possibility of meta-discussion or sub discussion. The authors emphasise that participants in this sub-discussion have the same argumentative obligations as those in the main discussion.
In the examples from parliament I discussed earlier, the arguers don’t seem to live up to these obligations. For the acceptability of the standpoint at hand it doesn’t matter whether a politician, on an earlier occasion, didn’t do his homework or wasn’t trustworthy. Only if it can be justified that the proponent’s credibility is injured with respect to the standpoint that is under discussion, we may assume that we are not dealing with an ad hominem argument.

The possibility to start a sub-discussion on whether preconditions are fulfilled may however be restricted by institutional customs and regulations. In parliamentary debates these restrictions are supervised by the President of the House of Parliament. In a parliamentary debate (20 March 2001) in which a State Secretary argued in favour of the necessity of certain changes in the Dutch civil code, an MP of the Conservative Liberal Democrats replied that these changes could not yet be discussed because ‘the State Secretary had not been quite prepared for this subject’. This attack could have been meant as an attempt of the MP to start a sub-discussion on a precondition that should be fulfilled in order to discuss and decide on changes in the civil code. The President of the House of Parliament rejects this sub-discussion as follows: ‘On behalf of the Chamber I state that we take it for granted that matters are always well prepared, in much the same way that we assume that members of government always properly prepare issues at hand.’ The preparedness of MPs or members of government may obviously not be brought under (sub)discussion: it is presupposed that these politicians are well prepared.

4.2 *Questioning a politician’s general credibility*
According to van Eemeren en Grootendorst (1992, 114), there are indeed situations in which a personal attack on the credibility of a discussant is justified, for example when the standpoint at issue has a direct bearing on the person of

one's opponent. In a discussion on whether a person is acceptable as a witness and should be allowed to the legal process, serious grounds for doubting his good faith cannot be neglected. The arguer, who sustains these grounds by pointing out that this person has a vested interest, doesn't commit an argumentum ad-hominem, since these personal characteristics are crucial for a person holding the position of witness in a trial.

This situation corresponds to one of the examples that were presented in the introduction (paragraph 1). The example is about the debate in which van der Laan attacks the credibility of Pechtold. Van der Laan brings this attack forward to defend the standpoint that Pechtold is not the right politician to hold the position of party leader; her criticism against his inconsistency is used to question the qualifications of a politician to become the number one candidate of a political party. Since the personal attack is not an attempt to restrict his freedom of speech or exclude him as a discussion partner, it is not a fallacious argumentative move. However, this does not mean that the argumentation cannot be criticised.

In the context of a parliamentary debate, the credibility of a member of government may be questioned by way of a motion of no confidence. In Dutch parliament the Second Chamber, as well as the First Chamber, has the task to review government policy. An unwritten basic principle of the Dutch parliamentary system that is closely related to this task, is the rule of confidence. This means that a member of government or the government as whole should resign if they no longer enjoy the confidence of the Second Chamber. It is an essential constitutional rule that has evolved in the course of time and now is considered to be customary law.

For most of her duties, Parliament has to rely on information that is provided by the government. Therefore, confidence of the Second Chamber will certainly be violated if it finds out that the information provided by a member of government is incorrect, incomplete or suppressed. What is important is if a member of government reasonably could have known (but didn't know) or in all fairness could have taken action (but didn't). Loss of confidence comes to light in a debate, when a majority of the Second Chamber carries a motion of no confidence.

In this situation, the discussion in parliament is not about the standpoint that a member of government is not credible as a protagonist of a certain standpoint. The discussion is about the standpoint that a member of government is not credible as a representative of the government. This difference becomes clear if we turn back to the discussion on the credibility of Immigration Minister Verdonk.

In the parliamentary debate on the nationality of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Verdonks credibility was questioned in view of her standpoint in that particular case. In that discussion, the accusation of having personal interest in bringing forward her standpoint on the Dutch citizenship of Hirsi Ali should be interpreted as an argumentum ad hominem. The personal attack on the credibility of the Minister undermined her right to advance a standpoint.

However, some days after the parliamentary debate on the nationality of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, there was a debate in which Verdonk's credibility as a Minister was discussed by way of a motion of no confidence. In this discussion, a personal attack on her credibility could very well have been justified because the majority of parliament had decided that the position of the Minister was, at that moment, subject for discussion.

The decision on the fallaciousness of a personal attack in political debates may thus depend on the propositional content of the standpoint under discussion: whether or not the position of a politician is at stake in the discussion. In the context of a parliamentary debate, the institutional rules determine if and under what conditions the position of a politician may be brought up for discussion.

NOTES

[i] In a Dutch newspaper, NRC Handelsblad (May 18, 2002), journalist Michele de Waard writes: 'The Netherlands has become a bit more European. Political polarization, discrediting tactics, hate campaigns: our neighbouring countries are already used to it. (…) In Germany, the United Kingdom, France and Belgium making personal attacks is part of the political game in their parliaments.

[ii] In contrast to normative credibility, Govier (1999: 26) distinguishes rhetorical credibility: the extent to which one is regarded as believable, and is believed, by others.

[iii] This empirical study on ethics was carried out among 1687 politicians and civil servants with an average response of 40.7%.

[iv] Ilie (2004: 77) gives a similar example from a British parliamentary debate that took place in the House of Commons in June 1998. In this debate Conservative MP St. Aubyn discusses the higher rate of tax, when the Liberal Democrat MP Burnett brings forward the following: 'Did the hon. Gentleman get a degree in mathematics? I cannot understand his preposterous extrapolation.' According to Ilie, derogatory statements focussing on a political adversary's education standards, and implicitly IQ levels, are not too uncommon in the House of Commons.

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