

# ISSA Proceedings 2010 - Dutch Parliamentary Debate As Communicative Activity Type



## 1. Introduction

The debate in Dutch parliament can be characterized as a rather formal discussion. [i] Techniques of persuasion are only being used moderately. These characteristics of Dutch parliamentary debate originate from the shaping of the modern Dutch parliament during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Historical analyses of the origin and development of modern Dutch parliament and its culture have shown how much their 19<sup>th</sup> century liberal founding fathers under the leadership of the much respected politician J.R. Thorbecke have aimed at a dialectical ideal while shaping the new parliament (Turpijn 2008, te Velde 2003). In their ideal parliament, the members of the Chamber would attain the 'truth' via worthy, free and rational debate (Turpijn 2008, p. 79). It is with this perspective in mind that the formal and informal rules for the conduct of the debate were shaped, and it has remained basically unchanged to this very day, notwithstanding the great societal and political changes that have taken place since.

At several periods in history this dominant culture with respect to Dutch parliamentary debate has been challenged by some left - or right - winged political parties as a whole or by some individual members of parliament; these parties or individual representatives make a substantial use of persuasive techniques, and in doing so, exasperate many Dutch members of parliament. Nowadays for example, the dominant debate culture in Dutch Parliament is challenged by the *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV, Party for Freedom), a political party on the extreme right that focuses on one issue in its political program: the danger of Islamization of Dutch society. In the elections for Dutch Parliament, held on June 9<sup>th</sup> 2010, this political party was the big winner: it gained 24 of the 150 parliamentary seats and became The Netherlands' third political party in size. It is generally assumed that this enormous election success is a direct consequence of the way the leader of this party, Mr. Geert Wilders, operates in

Dutch parliamentary debates. Mr. Wilders is not only well-known for what he says. He also draws attention with the way in which he puts his message into words. On the one hand he is criticized for using words like ‘bonkers’, ‘insane’ or ‘completely nuts’ to characterize his opponents in parliamentary debates. On the other hand, he is able to formulate his standpoints very clearly, as is for instance indicated by the fact that he won a ‘plain language award’ in 2007.

So, Mr Wilders’ way of debating has aroused questions and meta-political and meta-communicative discussions amongst citizens, journalists, opinion leaders and also members of parliament, on the nature of the debate in the Lower Chamber of Dutch Parliament, and on which contributions to a parliamentary debate are allowable or reasonable in a very broad sense. These two questions are also the central ones in a project of the Dutch political-historian Henk te Velde and myself, that studies the development of the rules in Dutch parliamentary debate since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century both from an argumentation-theoretical and a political-historical perspective.

The project focuses on the historical development of *conventions* and *norms* for parliamentary debate, including conventions and norms for parliamentary language use. As in the case of many other activities, many of these rules and conventions are implicit and thus not all articulated in the Rules of Order, for example. Besides, these implicit rules and conventions are often highly culturally biased, and have been shaped in a long period of time. This means that one needs to perform an empirical and praxeological analysis of parliamentary debates over the years to find these rules and conventions.

This all is still work in progress, and I will not report about very concrete results of research in this paper, but I will deal with some basic argumentation-theoretical assumptions of the project. More specifically I would like to speculate on one fundamental aspect of this project, namely the characterisation of (Dutch) parliamentary debate as ‘communicative activity type’, a concept discussed by van Eemeren (2010).**[ii]** I will do so on the basis of a case study.

## *2. A case study: a sub-discussion in Dutch parliament*

In a speech during a debate on ‘Islamic activism’ in the Dutch Lower Chamber on 6 September 2007, Mr. Wilders incited a ban on the Koran, and argued that what he calls ‘the Islamization of the Netherlands’ has to be stopped.**[iii]** The speech caused quite some commotion, especially because Wilders called the then

Minister of Integration and member of the Social Democrats, Ella Vogelaar, 'insane', see the excerpt of it under (1).

(1) *Mr. Wilders (PVV)*: Minister Vogelaar babbles that the Netherlands will know a Jewish-Christian-Islamic tradition in the future, and that she wants to help the Islam to strike roots in Dutch society. As for me, she thereby proves that she is going bananas. She thereby proves that she is betraying Dutch culture. She thereby proves that she does not understand that many Dutch do not want the Islamic tradition. I find this terrible, and I now ask her to take back these words. I ask her to oppose Islamization and to take back that the Netherlands will, albeit within some centuries, know an Islamic tradition. If she does not comply with this - which is her right - we will be obliged to vote against her.

The speech is quite representative for the way in which Wilders presents himself in addresses, and for the way in which he operates in a parliamentary debate: with radical standpoints, breaking through political etiquette, and in wordings which can impressionistically be described as 'clear' (van Leeuwen 2009).

After his speech a sub-discussion (or, as others would say: 'a meta-discussion'; see van Eemeren 2010, pp 257-261) was initiated by some fellow-representatives which is illustrative for the uneasiness his way of debating creates in the minds of his fellow-members of parliament. The participants in this sub-discussion are, besides Mr. Wilders: Mr. Slob, member of the *Christen Unie* (CU, the Christian Union), a small, more progressive Christian party; Mr. van der Staaij, member of the *Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij* (SGP, the Calvinist Party), a small conservative Christian party, and of Mr. de Wit, member of the *Socialistische Partij* (SP, the Socialist Party), a left wing party. This sub-discussion runs as follows:

(2) *Mr. Slob (CU)*: You are talking about values and norms. You want to lead a debate and start off in a sharp way. You certainly have the right to do this. It is our duty as representatives to do so, but when we do it, we are supposed to show respect for others. We should always seek for goodness and peace in society, as well as in our mutual relationships. It is in this respect that I consider it very inappropriate to contest the cognitive capacities of the minister, instead of discussing the contents with her. This applies to everything you say to Islamic people. You do sometimes point out questionable issues. You may do so, but we are always bound to keep Dutch society together in all its diversity. We ought to seek the good things for society. These constitute what I consider values and

norms. This is what I want you to account for. The way in which you operate, in which you relate to colleagues (...) and direct society, only results in division. This is overshooting the goal.

(3) *Mr. Wilders (PVV)*: I do not divide. I simply say the truth. If I (...) believe that, because of the contents of a proposal, the minister has gone bananas, I shall just say it. Division has nothing to do with it. If only more people would say what bothers them. If only more people would say that they are fed up with the cabinet looking in another direction when problems arise with Muslims and Islam. If only more people would say that the borders have to be shut finally because the immigration policy since the sixties is responsible for the fact that the Netherlands do not remain the Netherlands. More people should say that!

(4) *Mr. van der Staaij (SGP)*: I have heard you make positive comments about the Jewish-Christian tradition. That is a good thing, but according to the Jewish-Christian tradition, in whatever interpretation, it is obvious that one should never, never qualify a minister as 'gone bananas', and certainly not in a parliamentary debate. Would you go back to the norms of decency of the Jewish-Christian tradition and take back that qualification?

(5) *Mr. Wilders (PVV)*: Whether tradition or not, the minister has, in my view, by mentioning a future Christian, Jewish and Islamic tradition, gone bananas. I am not going to take that back, I am going to repeat it.

(6) *Speaker*: You have made that point. (...) You maintain that word. We have heard it several times now. You have heard the reactions of the colleagues, and I propose that you do not use this word further.

(7) *Mr. Wilders (PVV)*: When I am being asked, I name it, it is as simple as that.

(8) *Speaker*: You have done so a number of times now.

(9) *Mr. de Wit (SP)*: What does mister Wilders think that the effect of his speech will be in society? Like me, he is preoccupied by the oppositions which affect ordinary neighbourhoods and areas, which we are all dealing with. What is the effect of his speech and the qualifications with which he addresses Islam?

(10) *Mr. Wilders (PVV)*: I hope that I express the opinion here, and in fact I am quite sure of it, of very many Dutch, who feel that we have had enough Islam in the Netherlands, who feel that we have enough problems with Islam in the Netherlands, who feel that we should not brush these problems aside, and that one is nearly being called a racist, when one dares to comment on this. Mister de Wit, these people are not racists, they are decent, fine people that find it a problem to be beaten up on the streets, who find it a problem that their country is not their country anymore, that their neighbourhood is not their neighbourhood

anymore, that their street is not their street anymore. I am proud to express this view and the anger of these people here.

(11) *Mr. de Wit (SP)*: I recognize the problem that you sketch, I have said so earlier, but what concerns me is the effect of your speech and of the qualifications that you give of Islam and all the people who are believers of this religion. You do make a difference between moderate and not-moderate, but your story seems to show that this is a very difficult problem. You have hurt these people in the deepest of their heart. Do you think that the problems in these neighbourhoods, which I do recognize – again – will be solved in any way or even partially, by your speech or your qualifications? It will lead to a sharpening of the oppositions, causing people to radicalize even more, under the influence of your words.

(12) *Mr. Wilders (PVV)*: The purpose is that people are going to think and that Muslims as well are going to think: ‘Damn, what is it with the Koran?’. Does that make sense? What is in it? What is being said in it? How do we deal with it? It would definitely help if you and others would support my proposal to ban the Koran and would assert that horrible things are said in it. I am quite sure that mister De Wit finds these things awful as well. So these things should not be open to discussion as the word of God and as a possible incentive to action, calling for murder, instigating to hatred. If one fights against these things, and is doing its best for them, this can only have a very positive effect. If this weren’t the case, then it shows once more to what extent people there are wrong.

(13) *Mr. de Wit (SP)*: You know that you are also dealing with a large group of people that are turning to radicalism and who will be incited by this type of speeches to follow a wrong course. That should make you reflect on the tone which you use in debate and on the way in which you qualify everybody.

(14) *Mr. Wilders (PVV)*: Madam Speaker, I do have a fantastic tone, so I will do nothing to alter it.

The extended pragma-dialectical argumentation theory – the framework that is adopted here – assumes that people engaged in argumentative discourse are maneuvering strategically. ‘Strategic Maneuvering’ refers to the efforts arguers make in argumentative discourse to reconcile rhetorical effectiveness with the maintenance of dialectical standards of reasonableness. In order not to let one objective prevail over the other, the parties try to strike a balance between them at every stage of resolving their differences of opinion. Strategic maneuvering manifests itself in argumentative discourse (a) in the choices that are made from the topical potential available at a certain stage in the discourse, (b) in audience

directed framing of argumentative moves and (c) in the purposive use of presentational devices. Although these three aspects of strategic maneuvering can be distinguished analytically, in actual argumentative practice they will usually be hard to disentangle (van Eemeren 2010, pp. 93-127).

From the quotations of Mr. Wilders it becomes clear that he makes uses of strategies such as, (a) putting pressure on the other party by threatening with sanctions, (b) a direct personal attack, (c) referring to the opinion of the majority of the Dutch people, (d) polarising the difference of opinion, etc. **[iv]** In doing so he makes uses of many rhetorical techniques. In his wording he often uses concrete nouns and verbs which have a strong connotation, often accompanied by intensifiers, adjectives and adverbs which denote an endpoint on a semantic scale; they leave nothing to the imagination. Another characteristic of Mr. Wilders' speech is that he makes uses of a lot of rhetorical figures of speech: all kinds of parallelisms and figures of repetition give his speech a clear structure. Furthermore Mr. Wilders makes uses of clear imagery to present his ideas (van Leeuwen 2009).

The way in which Mr. Slob, Mr. van der Staaij and Mr. de Wit react to the statements of Mr. Wilders, makes clear that they consider his way of strategic maneuvering at odds with the norms and conventions which hold for Dutch parliamentary debate in general. Their critique seems to address a lot of the choices which Mr. Wilders makes from the topical potential, his audience-directed framing of argumentative moves, but most of all his purposive use of presentational devices. According to them the strategic maneuvers of Mr. Wilders are not allowable and are thus fallacious. But then one could ask: what norms and conventions are violated in this specific context of a Dutch parliamentary debate?

### *3. Dutch parliamentary debate as communicative activity type*

As van Eemeren (2010) points out, in practice, argumentative discourse takes place in different kinds of *communicative activity types* which are to a greater or lesser degree institutionalized, so that certain practices have become conventionalized. The concept 'communicative activity type' is intended to contribute to a better grasp of argumentative reality in the analysis of argumentative discourse. In the various communicative activity types that can be distinguished in argumentative practice, the conventional preconditions for argumentative discourse differ to some extent, and these differences have an effect on the strategic maneuvering that is allowed.

So, in order to answer the question *Which strategic maneuvers are allowable in a debate in Dutch parliament?* it is necessary to find out what the characteristics of this specific communicative activity type are. To do that, we will first have to discover what the specific institutional goal or goals of a parliamentary debate are. This specific institutional goal affects the pursuit of both dialectical and rhetorical aims for the participants in an activity type by posing constraints and providing opportunities for them to win the discussion while maintaining certain standards of reasonableness (see Mohammed 2008).

Crucial to the characterization of (Dutch) parliamentary debate as communicative activity type, is the concept of *representative* or *indirect democracy*, a form of government in which the population chooses representatives to execute political ideas. The aim of indirect democracy is to achieve compromises between several civil groups with opposed interests. In this system, the majority will be able to impose its views, but not without taking good care of the interests of minorities. It is generally assumed in political theory that (free) representation consists of two layers: one of them being the individual responsibility or autonomy, the other the formulation of problems which exist in society. In this sense a parliament of representatives can be characterized in one way as an organisation with rules and rituals which enable its members to formulate civil questions in a way acceptable to the public, and in another way as a public discussion arena which opens possibilities to engage the public so as to bridge the gap with the voters (Te Velde 2003, p. 18). This entails that a representative should keep a balance between on the one hand her or his independence (albeit not isolation), and on the other hand her or his focus on the public (albeit not surrender to the public) (te Velde 2003, p. 28). This duality inherent in representation affects the institutional goals of parliamentary debate in a representative democracy: such a debate does not only aim at reaching decisions independently according to the prevailing rules and procedures, an aim that is connected with the autonomous position of the representative, but it also aims at giving an account to the public, at legitimizing politics and formulating the civil or societal problems which deserve political priority, the goals which are linked to the representative's relation to public or voters (te Velde 2003, pp. 26-27), see (15).

(15) *Institutional goals of (Dutch) parliamentary debate:*

(a) reaching decisions according to the prevailing rules and procedures (*the goal which is connected to the autonomous position of the representative*);

(b) accounting to the public, legitimizing politics, formulating and selecting civil problems which deserve political priority (*the goals which are connected to the representative's relation with society or voters*).

Following the sociological analysis of the political field by the French sociologist Bourdieu (1991), one could say that a representative plays a 'double game': the representative is simultaneously playing a game in the political field of the parliament, against the government or her or his fellow-representatives, and a game in the social field in which she or he represents her or his electorate. In a very interesting paper on 'Legitimation and Strategic Maneuvering in the Political Field' Ietcu-Fairclough relates the theory of Bourdieu to the theory about strategic maneuvering. According to her there is a 'homology' between the two games of Bourdieu, in the sense that a successful move in one game is also a successful move in the other game (Ietcu-Fairclough 2008, p. 411).

Putting this line of reasoning a bit further, one could argue that the dualistic institutional goal of parliamentary debate in a representative democracy and the ensuing role and task of representatives entails that they will always and simultaneously have to deal with two audiences: the parliament, of which they are part themselves, as well as the society which they represent. This means that in the strategic design of their argumentative moves – that is: in their choice from the topical potential, in their audience-directed framing of argumentative moves, and in their purposive use of presentational devices – members of parliament have to deal with the specific rules for the debate in the Lower Chamber but also with their responsibility for society.

This entails that a participant of a parliamentary debate has to maneuver strategically in a more complex way than a participant of most other communicative activity types; she or he should not only make efforts to reconcile aiming for rhetorical effectiveness while maintaining dialectical standards of reasonableness, but she or he should also perform this, given the complexity of the public, while sharply observing her or his own double task and role, the latter being perceived as a specific constraint within this communicative activity type. In principle then, representatives can thus lose their balance in a debate contribution in two possible ways: they can disturb the balance between the dialectical standards of reasonableness and the rhetorical effectiveness, as well as the balance between their independence and their public focus. This entails that a parliamentary debate contribution can derail in a more complex way than a



contribution to another kind of activity type.[v]

The sub-discussion between Mr. Wilders and his fellow-representatives discussed above shows that they are well aware of the dual institutional goals of parliamentary debate described under (15) and of the constraints on parliamentary argumentative discourse that are associated with them. The core of the reproach seems to be that Mr Wilders' strategic maneuvers in parliamentary debates in general have negative consequences for society as a whole. In this line of reasoning, stating that minister Vogelaar is going bananas for example is not only a personal attack on an opponent in a specific speech event but also an attack on the wellbeing of society as a whole. According to his fellow-representatives Mr. Wilders endangers by his language use the goal of parliament to arrive at socially acceptable solutions. So according to his fellow-representatives Mr. Wilders' contributions to the debate are not allowable because they endanger both objectives of a parliamentary debate and violate constraints which are associated with them.

But it is also clear from the case study that Mr. Wilders and his fellow-representatives have a difference of opinion about how the two games should be played. According to the dominant norms, a moderate discussion in parliament is also the best for society, whereas Mr. Wilders seeks polarisation both in parliament and society. In this sense Mr. Wilders seems to challenge the norms and conventions for Dutch parliamentary debate of the majority of the representatives.[vi] For this majority however it is more or less impossible to sanction Mr. Wilders for violating these norms. Because of a representative's relation with his voters and his obligations to them it is very difficult to forbid him to choose his own topics, his ways of audience adaption and his words within a parliamentary debate. The detached way in which the speaker reacts to Mr. Wilders argumentative strategies, illustrates this.

#### *4. Conclusion*

In this paper, I have tried – on the basis of a case study – to characterize Dutch parliamentary debate as a specific type of communicative activity by pointing out its double institutional goals: such a debate does not only aim at reaching decisions independently according to the prevailing rules and procedures, an aim that is connected to the autonomous position of the representative, but also aims at giving an account to the public, at legitimizing politics and formulating which civil or societal problems deserve political priority, the goals which are linked to

the representative's relation to public or voters.

This entails that a participant of a parliamentary debate has to maneuver strategically in a more complex way than a participant of most other communicative activity types: representatives in a parliamentary debate should ideally not only make efforts to reconcile aiming for rhetorical effectiveness while maintaining dialectical standards of reasonableness, but they should also perform this, given the complexity of their public, while sharply observing their own double task and role. Further research has to prove whether this is a fruitful approach for analyzing Dutch parliamentary debates.

## NOTES

**[i]** I would like to thank Henrike Jansen and an anonymous reviewer for their valuable comments on an earlier version of this paper.

**[ii]** In this paper, I restrict myself to Dutch parliamentary debate, but I do not want claim that the tradition and the conventions and norms of Dutch parliamentary debate are unique. There are of course a lot of similarities between Dutch parliamentary debate and parliamentary debates in other countries. But there are also differences which can be observed, also from an historical perspective. Generally, Dutch parliaments had little regard for attempts to impress the members by emotional or grandiloquent language. Many of the orators who were held in high esteem in Great Britain or France would not have made much of an impression in the Dutch Lower Chamber. There, what counted was the force of legal arguments and authority based on restrained superiority. (See: Te Velde 2010, pp. 97-121). The comparison between parliamentary debate in the Netherlands and those in other countries from the perspective of the theory on communicative activity types is a very interesting topic of research, but is not dealt with in this paper.

**[iii]** The excerpts (1) - (14) are taken from this debate; see: TK 93-5268 (translation TvH).

**[iv]** In the Pragma-Dialectical Argumentation Theory, these (and other) discussion strategies are analyzed as *potentially* fallacious, see Van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992, pp. 107-217. It depends on several micro- and macro-contextual determinants whether a discussion strategy derails and becomes fallacious, and to what extent it does. In this paper I circumscribe the discussion strategies instead of referring to them by their 'classical' names like *ad baculum* (strategy (a)), *ad hominem* (strategy (b)) or *ad populum* (strategy (c)),

because these names are often solely associated with the fallacious variants of these discussion strategies.

**[v]** An anonymous reviewer of this paper has remarked aptly that in many other communicative activity types a speaker could pursue two or more goals and address two or more audiences at a time and hence accordingly has to shape her or his strategic maneuverings in a rather complex way. The point I want to make in this paper is that a representative who is engaged in a (Dutch) parliamentary debate not only *could* but also *should* do this, because the institutionalized communicative activity type demands it. There are perhaps other institutionalized communicative activity types which demand the same. Judicial debates in courtroom could be an example. As the reviewer notes, in this communicative activity type the aim of decision-making in the special case at stake under the specific norms and rules applying is often concomitant to broader goals of social accountability and the setting and developing of social norms.

**[vi]** An anonymous reviewer of this paper has observed correctly that there are differences in the *types* of argumentation of the opponents of Mr. Wilders involved in the sub-discussion. The Christian Union representative mainly argues based on social harmony, on “keeping society together” and on seeking the “good things”, the Calvinist representative uses arguments which are based on the Jewish-Christian tradition as well as on decency, whereas the Socialist representative entirely focuses on the “effect” of Mr. Wilders’s speech “in society”, on the dangers of exasperation and radicalization. These very different argumentation types very clearly reflect the different basic political or ideological standpoints of the debaters, as one would expect. It is an interesting topic for further research how these standpoints relate to the (historical development of) norm and conventions of Dutch parliamentary debate.

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