

ISSA Proceedings 2010 - Fudging Speech Acts In Political Argumentation



A *topos* in Danish public debate is former Prime Minister Jens Otto Krag's notorious remark: "You hold a position until you take another!" [i] Krag said this in 1966 when he formed the Social-Democratic Government, supported by the left wing party SF - the 'Red Cabinet' - in spite of his former statements that he would never do so (Wikipedia, retrieved June 22, 2010). Krag's one-liner is frequently alluded to when politicians go back on their words and make a decision that is considered a breach of promise, in particular when, after the election, they break an election pledge.

The case that I present in this paper concerns such an election pledge and its aftermath. It is known as 'the Five Thousand Cheap Flats' and is a case that has caused intense public debate in Denmark. The case relates to the prominent Danish politician Ritt Bjerregaard of the party The Social Democrats. In her election campaign to become Lord Mayor of Copenhagen she made it a top issue to provide housing that ordinary citizens could afford. She was elected and took office as Lord Mayor for the period 2006-2009, but the great construction plan failed.

I approach this case as an example of *unfair* political argumentation, [ii] one that belongs to a general kind of improper argumentative conduct, namely that of 'fudging speech acts'. By this expression I refer to violations of fair argumentation in which arguers communicate manipulatively with regard to the speech acts they perform: they deny the act they are performing or have performed, they pretend not to perform the speech act that they actually are performing, or they say that they are performing another speech act than the one they are engaged in. We encounter the fudging of speech acts when for instance arguers say that they are not making a *threat* while doing it, or when politicians avow that they only want to *inform* the citizens when actually trying to *persuade* or *convince*. Likewise, politicians and other public debaters tend to make *apologies* without really doing it - or to do it for other purposes than they pretend. [iii] As these examples indicate, I propose the 'fudging of speech acts' as a general term for a pattern of

political debate conduct that involves various illocutionary and perlocutionary types of speech acts, in which the arguers relay their speech act to the audience in a way that is misleading in the situation. The word 'fudge' seems appropriate for characterizing such discursive behavior because it may refer to more or less conscious and deceptive violations. The elasticity of the word allows the critic to evaluate the fudging of speech acts *by degrees* in the specific situation on a scale from minor offenses, e.g., involuntary blunders and instances of less importance in the context (more in the nature of 'fiddling'), to major ones, e.g., those that are consciously abusive and toxic to the notion of legitimate and fair deliberative rhetoric. The following case study illustrates the kind of analyses and discussions I suggest for further investigations into the fudging of speech acts.

The case at hand relates to the illocutionary speech act of *promising*, the standard example in speech act theory (Austin 1975, Searle 1969). As a result of the future oriented discourse characteristic of the deliberative genre, promises play an important role in political rhetoric addressed to the public. Especially during election campaigns, *advocating* main party issues for future politics easily turns into politicians actually performing the act of *promising* to implement a certain policy or to make sure that it shall not be carried out. In Denmark, this is a tendency that has increased along with the development of 'contract politics' launched in Denmark by the former Prime Minister Fogh Rasmussen. (The expression 'contract politics' refers to a set list of governmental issues that the politicians promise to enforce and uphold unconditionally until the next election.) When an election promise subsequently is broken, citizens usually feel deceived and, in retrospect, perceive the broken promise as a trick used to secure power by any means.

However, there are cases in which it is acceptable - even reasonable - not to keep a promise. This is the dual point of the topos introduced by Krag. On the one hand, his remark expresses the cynical pragmatism of political compromise, but on the other hand - or on second thoughts - it voices the absurdity of not allowing politicians the right to change their minds, either because of a change of circumstances or through the force of the better argument.

In my discussion of the case of the inexpensive flats, I contemplate the issue of public political promises from the rhetorical critic's point of view. I focus on two texts and apply notions from speech act theory in order to specify how Ritt Bjerregaard fudged her speech acts.**[iv]** I first present some background

information and next take a closer look at the two texts.

1. The communicative situations

Ritt Bjerregaard, born 1941, a teacher by profession, has been an influential Danish Social Democrat over the years. She was a member of the Danish Parliament for most of the period from 1971 till 2005. She has served several times as minister (for Education, Social Affairs, and Food, Agriculture and Fisheries). In between she was European Commissioner for the Environment, EU.

Throughout her political career, Ritt Bjerregaard has been involved in a number of controversies that have made spectacular top stories in the media. However, she has shown a remarkable capability of political survival in spite of the setbacks within the party and in the eyes of the public. Her ability to set the agenda for the issues she raises is outstanding. She has a reputation of arrogance, extravagance, exclusive taste, and coldness. She is admired for her courage, and criticized as well for her frankness, sometimes speaking her mind and raising issues to the inconvenience of the top leaders in her own party. She does not take orders in a crisis from her superiors, but has been accused of a dictatorial attitude to staff and colleagues. She has an image of a dedicated feminist with guts. She is considered intelligent, competent and knowledgeable about her issues, but in certain respects lacking in judgment. When she retired as Lord Mayor, comments were that she had excelled in positioning herself at the center of Danish politics rather than achieving political results (Davidsen-Nielsen 2009b; Wikipedia, retrieved May 27, 2010).

In her election campaign in 2005 to become Lord Mayor of Copenhagen, Ritt Bjerregaard presented her plan to secure housing in the city at a rent that people with ordinary incomes, such as teachers, nurses, policemen and young families, could afford. She did it under the slogan: 'Five thousand flats for five thousand DKR in five years', i.e., a monthly rent of approximately 670 Euro or 800 USD (exchange rates June 2010). I use the translation 'flats' for the less specific Danish word ('boliger'); alternatives would be 'dwellings', 'homes' or 'tenements'. Prices on the housing market were going up and up at that time, before the later financial crisis set in.

The election to the City Council was a victory for the Social Democrats, and Ritt Bjerregaard took office January 2006 as Lord Mayor of the City of Copenhagen with as much as 60,000 personal votes. The general opinion was that her plan for

the cheap flats was the main reason.

Everyone agreed that there was a housing problem. In Bitzer's terms, it presented an obvious *exigence* of pressing urgency to most Copenhageners, including those who did not themselves face the problem directly, but worried about the consequences for the city. We may also maintain that the plan was considered *fitting response* by large parts of the *audience* acting as *mediators of change*, in particular those who allegedly voted for her because of the cheap flats. The crux of the rhetorical situation of course rests with the *constraints* (Bitzer 1968). Predictably, Ritt Bjerregaard's opponents in the election campaign disputed the *feasibility* of the project.

After the election, the implementation of what everyone had taken to be an election pledge was followed closely in the media. It soon became apparent that the construction plan was dragging on. The debate surfaced intensively towards the summer 2007, after the project had met various hindrances, especially the refusal from the right wing Government to let the city sell municipal plots below market price for the purpose. At that time, 12 of the inexpensive homes had been built. Ritt Bjerregaard decided to explain her difficulties in a newspaper interview (Weiss 2007). She now claimed that she had never made the promise expressed in the slogan, and that she had only put forward what she would work towards if elected.

The denial instigated a stormy debate in the Danish media, conducted by citizens who felt deceived, gloating politicians of opposing parties, other social democrats and mayors who in interviews distanced themselves in diplomatic terms from the act of issuing hasty election promises and afterwards denying them, and a few supporters on the retreat.

After the summer 2007 it became more and more evident that the whole scheme would hardly ever be realized. In December 2008, still only 12 flats built, Ritt Bjerregaard admitted that the price could not be kept at 5,000 DKR (Nielsen & Knudsen 2008). In 2009, before the next election campaign, she proclaimed her resignation at the end of her term. She gave the administrative structure of the City Council as her main reason for not seeking reelection. The case of the cheap flats had nothing to do with her decision, she said. According to an opinion poll in the election campaign, 38 per cent of Copenhageners found that she had done "well or very well" as Lord Mayor, whereas 39 per cent answered that she had

managed the job “poorly or very poorly” (Davidsen-Nielsen 2009a).

2. *The promise before the election*

The question now is whether Ritt Bjerregaard made a promise in the first place? My answer is a definite Yes. To substantiate this, I refer to an election manifesto by Ritt Bjerregaard (2005) in a newspaper, see excerpts from text 1 in (1) below. Ritt Bjerregaard presented her housing plan in many other contexts, expressing herself in like ways. If Ritt Bjerregaard did issue a promise once during the election campaign, the other texts in which she said words to the same effect are in principle irrelevant.

(1) TEXT 1: Excerpts from election manifesto by Ritt Bjerregaard in the newspaper *Information*, October 27, 2005:

Copenhagen Must not Become a Ghetto for the Affluent

It is possible, *as I have promised*, to build 5,000 flats for 5,000 DKR a month within five years

[....]

Therefore *I have committed myself to building 5,000 flats for 5,000 DKR a month within five years*. But since *I first proposed* this, politicians representing the Liberals and SF (!) have raced to be the first to shoot down my *proposal*. [...] *I simply do not accept* the claim that it is not possible to lower the construction costs in Copenhagen.

[...]

Because of the large-scale advantages [...] *I am dead certain that it is feasible*.

[...]

The proposal for 5,000 flats for 5,000 DKR is of course a departure from received opinion in the construction industry and the housing policy apparatus in Copenhagen. And this is why the proposal meets opposition. But *of course it is feasible*, and of course the flats will be lovely. I would not be surprised if, once the election campaign is over, quite a lot of those politicians who now find fault with the idea, will take part in implementing it.

In my translation of the text I have emphasized the words in italics that most clearly are indicators of the speech acts she performs. **[v]** As it appears, Ritt Bjerregaard uses the word *promise* herself. As communicators rarely do, she does not use the performative formula “I hereby promise you ...”, but the sentence *as I have promised* leaves no doubt that she is issuing a promise. She even uses the

phrase that *she has committed herself* to the building of the flats etc. She next uses the weaker *propose* and *proposal*, but in the context it does not neutralize the promise: she first proposed the idea and then turned it into a promise. Her next words are equally insistent on the feasibility of the propositional content of her promise, note *simply*, *dead certain*, and *of course*.

3. The denial after the election

One year and a half after taking office, Ritt Bjerregaard decided to make her revision of the construction plan public, some said in order to have the foreseeable negative reactions over and done with in good time before the next election (Qvortrup 2007). She did it in an interview in July 2007 under the headline *I Never Promised 5,000 Cheap Flats in Five Years*, see text 2 in (2) below. Much of the interview deals with her explanations of legislative and political obstacles that have exceeded her expectations, including the strategy of shifting the blame to the government and other opponents.

(2) TEXT 2: Excerpts from interview with Ritt Bjerregaard in the newspaper *Berlingske Tidende*, July 10, 2007:

I Never Promised 5,000 Cheap Flats in Five Years

[...]

It is possible to build 5000 cheap flats - but not within five years.

[...]

That said, *I never promised that the cheap flats would be completed in five years.* It is one of my leading principles not to engage in contract politics, since I find it an unhealthy way of conducting politics in a democracy. In the election campaign *I merely stated what I would work towards* if I were to become Lord Mayor or my party were to gain sufficient influence.

Interviewer: [...] Did you not make sure that the project was feasible before presenting it to the electors?

Yes, I did - and I maintain that it is still possible - although not in five years. I can only say that every single time we meet with obstacles and need help, no help is available. [...] I am fully aware that, to some degree, the next election campaign will involve personal attacks against me on account of the cheap flats, but I can only say that we are in the middle of a long and tough pull, *and surely the flats will materialize - I promise.*

[...]

Ritt Bjerregaard attempts to make her denial appear as a modification of the election pledge, relating only to the time span. She maintains that building the flats *is possible*, but admits that it cannot be accomplished in five years; it may take up to ten years. The effort to restrict the promise is pronounced in the utterance *I never promised that the cheap flats would be completed in five years*. Out of context this might indicate that it would be taking the promise too literally to expect all flats to be ready after five years. But when she continues to say that she does not engage in “contract politics” and that she *merely stated what she would work towards*, she rules out this interpretation. The implication is that she denies the entire promise, not just one part of it, namely the five years. All the same, and quite absurdly, she repeats her promise below: the cheap flats shall be built - *I promise!* Note that on this occasion the price is not mentioned.

The argumentation presents a curious example of fudging speech acts. She seems to suggest that the locution of an utterance articulated as a promise in the context of elections campaigns does not count as a true promise! Such a distinction, however, is indeed odd; every normal communicator would respond that a promise is a promise. As demonstrated, she did make a promise in text 1, and her denying it now is a downright lie.

4. Evaluation

To further explore the fairness problem, I now turn to the *felicity conditions*. Cases of broken election pledges are typically related to the *sincerity condition* on the allegation that the politician made the promise deceptively in order to secure votes. In my reading, Ritt Bjerregaard cannot be accused of initially making a promise that she did not honestly wish to keep. A more likely interpretation is that she made a hasty promise, i.e., a promise she had not made sure she could fulfill. As the later events demonstrated, she had not done her homework properly and therefore could not keep the promise afterwards. This way of fudging the speech act relates to the *preparatory conditions*, as the question is whether Ritt Bjerregaard was in a position to authorize the promise. What makes the promise ‘unhappy’ in this respect, however, is not whether she is the right person or the circumstances are appropriate (Austin’s rule A.2, 1975, p. 15). According to Austin, breaches of this kind make the speech act ‘void’, i.e., the promise would be a ‘misfire’, not executed correctly to take effect (Austin 1975, pp. 16-17, 25ff). This does not apply here. As candidate in the election campaign, Ritt Bjerregaard was entitled to make election pledges. Thus, the main problem in her

argumentation in text 1 is the certainty with which she asserts that the propositional content of her promise is feasible. The illegitimacy thus does not concern the sincerity of her intentions, but the expertise that she is feigning. This is unfair argumentation because the arguer exploits the asymmetric relation between herself and the audience. In the situation, people would naturally expect her to have considered the legislative, technical, and political difficulties thoroughly before totally dismissing them. Applying the fairness standard as an evaluation by degrees, one may perhaps argue that Ritt Bjerregaard's insisting on the feasibility of the project on lose grounds does not constitute a grave violation, as she probably thought that the difficulties could be overcome. Even so, I find that the critic must maintain that in the situation she ought at least to have acknowledged their existence. And had she done this, she would have argued more fairly.

The denial of the promise in text 2 poses the real major fairness problem. Denying the fact that during the election campaign she made the promise to build the 5,000 flats for 5,000 DKR within five years is a lie and thus an 'abusive' speech act - a direct contradiction to the promise that she in her own word had *committed* herself to fulfill, not just work for.

The whole case may be seen as an illustration of a politician caught in the trap of her own catchy slogan, the numbers of 5,000 flats for 5,000 kr. in five years forming such a fine figure of speech! This suggestion underscores the danger of seeking persuasive victory in the short run by means that undermine *ethos* in the long run.

We may recapitulate that the promise was unwise, and that Ritt Bjerregaard should not have made it the way she did. But to deny the promise seems such a tremendous rhetorical blunder, that it is hard to understand why she did it? The answer could be that the alternative was to admit *incompetence* to some degree. She might have done this, saying something like: I regret that it is not possible for me to keep my promise. In hindsight, I should not have made the promise. I honestly thought the plan was feasible, but the fact that it is not is due to all the difficulties I could not predict and the many obstructions others have made.

Regardless, Ritt Bjerregaard's *ethos* was bound to suffer harm, and had she followed this line of defense, her *ethos* would have been lowered in the *competence* dimension (McCroskey 1997). But the damage to her trustworthiness

and *honesty* in the character dimension must be considered much worse because of her glaringly false denial of the promise. In view of her general ethos, to admit that she had been wrong might even have made her appear more human than the public tends to regard her.

In conclusion, let me add that communicators have always committed violations of the kind exemplified in the case. I do, however, suspect that the tendency to fudge speech acts is increasing in contemporary political discourse. Whether or not this is the case, I suggest rhetoricians and argumentation theorists pay special attention to the problem. The argumentative conduct of fudging speech acts flouts the norms of legitimate deliberative rhetoric in ways that are highly counterproductive to the formation of informed public debate. It adds fuel to the general distrust of politicians, confirming citizens of the futility of engaging in public deliberation.

NOTES

[i] In Danish: 'Man har et standpunkt til man tager et nyt'.

[ii] For a presentation in English of the standard of fairness, see Jørgensen 2007, p. 170ff.

[iii] For a Danish example in which the former Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen was accused of issuing an official apology for his own political purposes, see Villadsen 2008.

[iv] Both texts are used as exercises in our Danish textbook on argumentation (Jørgensen & Onsberg 2008).

[v] I have tried to keep my translations of text 1 and 2 by Ritt Bjerregaard as close as possible - *verbum verbo* - to the Danish expressions, especially in those passages that are in italics.

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