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## 18. Parliamentary Debate and Political Culture: The Dutch Case

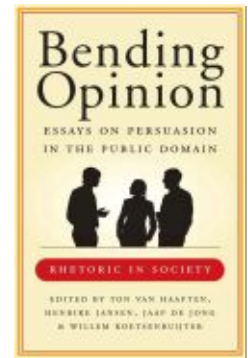
### Published by

Van Haaften, Ton, et al.

Bending Opinion: Essays on Persuasion in the Public Domain.

first ed. Leiden University Press, 2011.

Project MUSE. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/46348>.



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[148.135.83.86] Project MUSE (2025-02-16 13:17 GMT)

# 18 Parliamentary Debate and Political Culture: The Dutch Case

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## 18.1 Introduction

Contrary to what one sees in, for example, the British or French parliaments, the debate in the Dutch parliament can be characterized as a rather formal and clinical discussion, which only uses rhetorical techniques in great moderation. It can be argued that this way of debating, and the do's and don't's of it, originate from the shaping of the modern Dutch parliament during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Historical analyses of the origins and development of the 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, aimed at a dialectical ideal when shaping the new parliament (Turpijn 2008; Te Velde 2003, 2010). 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 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 points in history, this dominant culture of Dutch parliamentary debate has been challenged by left and right-wing political parties as a whole, and by individual members of parliament. These parties, or individual representatives, make a substantial and often purposive use of rhetorical techniques and, in doing so, often exasperate and confuse many Dutch members of parliament. Currently, for example, the dominant debate culture in the Dutch Parliament is undergoing a challenge from the *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (pvv, Party for Freedom), a political party on the extreme right which focuses on a single issue in its political program: the danger of the Islamization of Dutch society. In the elections for the Dutch Parliament, held on June 9<sup>th</sup> 2010, this political party was the big winner: it gained twenty four of the hundred and fifty parliamentary seats and became the third largest po-

litical party in the Netherlands. It is generally assumed that this enormous election success is a direct consequence of the way in which the leader of this party, Mr. Geert Wilders, conducts himself in Dutch parliamentary debates. Mr. Wilders is not just well-known for what he says, he also attracts a lot of attention because of the way 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 but, on the other, he is able to formulate his standpoints very clearly, illustrated, for example, by the fact that he won a *Plain Language Award* in 2007 from the Dutch National Youth Council.

So, the way that Mr. Wilders debates has aroused a lot of questions and meta-political and meta-communicative discussions amongst citizens, journalists, opinion makers and members of parliament, about the nature of the debate in the Lower Chamber of Dutch Parliament, and about what contributions to a parliamentary debate are admissible or reasonable in the very broadest sense. These two questions are also central to the project which is currently being undertaken by the Dutch political historian Henk te Velde and myself: a project which investigates the development of the rules governing Dutch parliamentary debate since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century from both a rhetorical and argumentation-theoretical perspective, and a political-historical perspective.

The project focuses on the historical development of conventions and norms which govern parliamentary debate, including those which govern parliamentary language-use. As is the case with many other activities, a lot of these rules and conventions are implicit and are not all articulated in, for example, the Code of Order of the Dutch Parliament. Besides, these implicit rules and conventions are often highly culturally biased and have been developed over a long period of time. This means that a long-term empirical and praxeological analysis of parliamentary debates needs to be made to establish what these rules and conventions are.

As this investigation continues to be a work in progress, concrete results from the research will not be included in this chapter, but I will deal with some of the basic argumentation-theoretical assumptions that the project makes. More specifically I would like to discuss one fundamental aspect of this project; namely, the characterization of Dutch parliamentary debate as a “communicative activity type”, a concept recently discussed by Van Eemeren (2010). I will do so on the basis of a case study.<sup>1</sup>

## 18.2 A case study: A sub-discussion in Dutch parliament

In a speech during a debate on “Islamic activism” which was held in the Dutch Lower Chamber on 6 September 2007, Mr. Wilders called for a ban on the Koran and argued that what he described as “the Islamization of the Netherlands” had to be stopped.<sup>2</sup> The speech caused quite a stir, in particular, because Wilders called the current Minister of Integration and Social Democrat, Ella Vogelaar, “crackers”, see the excerpt below:

(1) Mr. Wilders (pvv):

Minister Vogelaar kwekt dat Nederland in de toekomst een joods-christelijke-islamitische traditie zal kennen, en dat zij de islam wil helpen te wortelen in de Nederlandse samenleving. Zij toont daarmee wat mij betreft aan dat zij knettergek is geworden. Zij toont daarmee aan dat zij de Nederlandse cultuur verraadt. Zij toont daarmee aan dat zij niet begrijpt dat veel Nederlanders de islamisering en de islamitische traditie niet willen. Ik vind dat verschrikkelijk, en ik vraag haar dan ook om die woorden terug te nemen. Ik vraag haar, zich te verzetten tegen de islamisering en terug te nemen dat Nederland, al is het over een aantal eeuwen, ook een islamitische traditie kent. Als zij dat niet doet – dat is haar goede recht – zullen wij het vertrouwen in haar moeten opzeggen.

Minister Vogelaar babbles on about the Netherlands having a Jewish-Christian-Islamic tradition in the future, and that she wants to help Islam take root in Dutch society. She thus shows, for me, that she is going crackers. She thus shows that she is betraying Dutch culture. She thus shows that she does not understand that a lot of Dutch people do not want the Islamization (of the Netherlands) and the Islamic tradition. I find this terrible and so I ask her now to take back these words. I ask her to oppose Islamization and to retract her statement that the Netherlands will have an Islamic tradition, albeit within a few centuries. If she does not comply with this – which is her right – we will be obliged to withdraw our confidence in her.

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Henrike Jansen and Henk te Velde for their valuable comments on an earlier version of this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> The excerpts (1) – (14) are taken from this debate; see: *Handelingen voor de Tweede Kamer* (Proceedings of the Lower Chamber), 6 September 2007 (TK 93-5268) [translation TvH].

The speech is quite representative of the way in which Wilders presents himself in his addresses and for the way in which he operates in a parliamentary debate: adopting radical standpoints, breaking through political etiquette and using language which can impressionistically be described as “clear” (see 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 of his fellow-representatives; this is illustrative of the unease that his style of debating had created. The participants in this sub-discussion, besides Mr. Wilders, were: Mr. Slob, a member of the *Christen Unie* (CU, the Christian Union), a small, more progressive Christian party; Mr. Van der Staaij, a member of the *Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij* (SGP, the Calvinist Party), a small conservative Christian party, and Mr. De Wit, a member of the *Socialistische Partij* (SP, the Socialist Party), a left-wing party. This sub-discussion went as follows:

(2) Mr. Slob (CU):

U heeft het over waarden en normen. U wilt hier een debat voeren en dat zet u scherp in. Dat is uw goed recht. Dat moeten wij als parlementariërs ook doen, maar dat doen wij wel met respect voor anderen. Wij proberen altijd het goede en de vrede te zoeken in de samenleving en in onze onderlinge verhoudingen. In dat opzicht vind ik het zeer ongepast dat u “aan de verstandelijke vermogens van de minister twijfelt”, terwijl u met haar over de inhoud moet spreken. Dat geldt ook voor alles wat u zegt tegen de islamieten. U legt bij tijd en wijle de vinger op gevoelige plekken. Dat mag, maar wij moeten er altijd voor zorgen dat wij de Nederlandse samenleving bij elkaar houden in al haar diversiteit. Wij moeten het goede zoeken voor de samenleving. Dat zijn waarden en normen. Daar wil ik u op aanspreken. De wijze waarop u opereert, zich tot collega's verhoudt – u noemt ons lafaards – en zich op de samenleving richt, werkt alleen maar splijtend. Dan schieten wij ons doel voorbij.

You are talking about values and norms. You want to lead a debate and start off in a very acute manner. That is your right. It is our duty as representatives to do this, but when we do it, we are supposed to show respect for others. We should always strive for goodness and peace in society, as well as in our mutual relationships. It is in this respect that I consider it very inappropriate of you “to contest the intellectual capacities of the minister”, instead of discussing the contents with her. This ap-

plies to everything you say to Islamic people as well. You do sometimes point out sensitive issues. One may do this, but one always has to make sure that we keep Dutch society together in all its diversity. We ought to strive for the good things for society. These are the values and norms. This is what I want you to account for. The way you operate, the way you relate to colleagues – you call us cowards – and your attitude to society, only results in division. This is overshooting the goal.

(3) Mr. Wilders (pvv):

Ik werk niet splijtend. Ik zeg gewoon de waarheid. Als ik vind dat hier veel lafaards zitten omdat zij het niet aandurven als ik vanwege een inhoudelijke voorstel vind dat een minister knettergek is geworden, dan zeg ik dat gewoon. Dat heeft niks met splijten te maken. Zeiden maar meer mensen wat zij op hun hart hadden. Zeiden maar meer mensen dat zij het spuugzat zijn dat het kabinet iedere keer de andere kant op kijkt als zich problemen voordoen met moslims en de islam. Zeiden maar meer mensen dat de grenzen eindelijk een keer dicht moeten omdat het immigratiebeleid er al sinds de jaren zestig voor zorgt dat Nederland Nederland niet meer blijft. Zeiden maar meer mensen dat!

I am not being divisive. I am simply saying the truth. If I want to say a lot of you are cowards because you daren't say that the minister has gone crackers because of the contents of a proposal, then I will say so. It's nothing to do with creating divisions. 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 the other direction when problems arise with Muslims and Islam. If only more people would say that the borders have to finally be closed because immigration policy, since the sixties, is responsible for the fact that the Netherlands has not stayed the Netherlands. More people should say that!

(4) Mr. Van der Staaij (SGP):

Ik heb u positieve opmerkingen horen maken over de joods-christelijke traditie. Dat is een goede zaak, maar volgens de joods-christelijke traditie, in welke interpretatie dan ook, staat het volgens mij buiten kijf dat wij een minister nooit maar dan ook nooit, en zeker niet in een parlementair debat, voor knettergek uitmaken. Wilt u terugkeren naar de fatsoensnormen uit de joods-christelijke traditie en die kwalificatie terugnemen?

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, ever characterize a minister as having gone crackers, and certainly not in a parliamentary debate. Would you go back to the norms of decency of the Jewish-Christian tradition and retract that characterization?

(5) Mr. Wilders (pvv):

Traditie of geen traditie, de minister is in mijn ogen, doordat zij praat over een toekomstige christelijke, joodse en islamitische traditie knettergek geworden. Ik ga het niet terugnemen, ik ga het nog herhalen.

Tradition or not, the minister has, in my view, by mentioning a future Christian, Jewish and Islamic tradition, gone crackers. I am not going to take that back, I am going to repeat it.

(6) Speaker:

U hebt dat punt nu gemaakt. (...) U handhaaft dit woord. Dat hebben wij nu een aantal malen gehoord. U hebt de reactie van de collega's daarop gehoord en ik stel voor dat u dit woord niet verder gebruikt.

You have made that point. (...) You are standing by that word. We have heard it several times now. You have listened to the reactions of your colleagues, and I propose that you do not use this word anymore.

(7) Mr. Wilders (pvv):

Als ik erom word gevraagd, noem ik het, zo simpel is het.

When I'm asked, I speak as I find, it's as simple as that.

(8) Speaker:

Dat hebt u nu een aantal keren gedaan.

You have done so a number of times now.

(9) Mr. De Wit (SP):

Wat denkt de heer Wilders dat het effect is van zijn toespraak tot nu toe in de samenleving? Hij maakt zich net als ik druk over de tegenstellingen in de gewone buurten en wijken, waar wij allemaal mee te maken hebben. Wat is het effect van zijn toespraak en de kwalificaties die hij allemaal gebruikt over de islam?

What does Mr. Wilders think the effect of his speech on society will be? Like me, he is concerned by the divisions affecting ordinary neighbourhoods and districts which we are all familiar with. What is the effect of his speech and the characterizations he uses when he addresses Islam?

(10) Mr. Wilders (PVV):

Ik hoop dat ik hier het geluid vertolk, en dat weet ik eigenlijk wel zeker, van heel veel Nederlanders, die vinden dat het genoeg is met de islam in Nederland, die vinden dat wij genoeg problemen hebben met moslims in Nederland, die vinden dat het niet onder het tapijt moet worden geschoven en dat je bijna voor racist wordt uitgemaakt, als je daar wat over durft te zeggen. Mijnheer De Wit, die mensen zijn geen racisten, het zijn nette, keurige mensen, die problemen hebben, dat zij in elkaar worden geslagen op straat, dat zij zien dat hun land hun land niet meer is, dat hun wijk hun wijk niet meer is, dat hun straat hun straat niet meer is. Ik ben er trots op om dat geluid en de ergenis van die mensen hier te mogen vertolken.

I hope that I express the opinion here, and in fact I am quite sure of it, of very many Dutch people, 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 almost called a racist when one dares to comment on this. Mr. de Wit, these people are not racists, they are decent, good people who find it a problem to be beaten up on the streets, who find it a problem that their country isn't their country anymore, that their neighbourhood isn't their neighbourhood anymore, that their street isn't their street anymore. I am proud to express this view and to interpret the anger of these people here.



(11) Mr. De Wit (SP):

Ik onderken het probleem dat u schetst, dat heb ik daarnet ook gezegd, maar het gaat mij om het effect van uw toespraak en van de kwalificaties die u geeft over de islam en over al die mensen die dit geloof aanhangen. Daarbij maakt u wel onderscheid tussen gematigd en niet-gematigd, maar in de praktijk blijkt uit uw verhaal dat dit toch een heel moeilijk probleem is. Al die mensen hebt u in het diepst van hun hart gegriefd. Denkt u dat wordt bevorderd dat de problemen in die buurten, die ik nogmaals erken, door uw toespraak en door uw kwalificaties worden opgelost of enigszins worden verbeterd? Zou het niet zo zijn dat dit juist tegen al die mensen werkt? Het leidt tot een verharding van de tegenstellingen, waardoor mensen inderdaad nog meer radicaliseren, onder invloed van uw woorden.

I recognize the problem that you outline, I said so just now, but I am concerned about the effect of your speech and the way that you characterize Islam and all the people who follow this religion. You do make a distinction between moderate and not-moderate, but in practice your story seems to illustrate just how difficult a problem this is. You have hurt these people to the bottom of their hearts. 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 characterizations? It will lead to a hardening of the divisions, causing people to become even more radicalized under the influence of your words.

(12) Mr. Wilders (PVV):

De bedoeling is dat mensen na gaan denken en dat ook moslims na gaan denken. Verdorie, wat is dat met die Koran? Klopt dat inderdaad? Wat staat erin? Wat wordt er gezegd? Hoe gaan wij daarmee om? Het heeft zeker effect als u en anderen mijn voorstel zouden steunen om de Koran te verbieden en te zeggen dat er allerlei verschrikkelijke dingen in staan. Ik weet zeker dat de heer De Wit die ook afschuwelijk vindt. Dat moet gewoon niet meer bespreekbaar zijn als het woord van God en als iets wat men dus moet gaan doen; oproepen tot moord, aanzetten tot haat. Als je daarvoor strijd[t] en daarvoor je best doet, kan dat toch alleen maar een positief effect hebben? Mocht dat niet zo zijn, dan toont dat eens te meer aan hoezeer sommige mensen daar niet deugen.

The purpose is that people are going to think and that Muslims as well are going to think: Darn it, what is it with the Koran? Does it make sense? What's in it? What's 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 assert that horrible things are said in it. I am quite sure that Mr. De Wit finds these things awful too. So these things should not be open to discussion as if they were the word of God and as possible incentives for action, calling for murder, inciting hatred. If one fights against these things, and does one's best, this can only have a very positive effect. If this weren't the case, then it shows once again the extent to which people there are in the wrong.

(13) Mr. De Wit (SP):

U weet dat u te maken hebt met een grote groep van mensen die juist aan het radicaliseren zijn en die ook door dit soort toespraken van u nog verder aangezet worden om een verkeerde weg te volgen. Dat zou tot nadenken moeten stemmen over de toon die u aanslaat in het debat en over de manier waarop u iedereen kwalificeert.

You know that you are also dealing with a large group of people who are turning to radicalism and who will be incited by this type of speech to follow the wrong course. That should make you reflect on the tone that you use in debate and on the way that you characterize everyone.

(14) Mr. Wilders (PVV):

Voorzitter. Ik heb een fantastische toon, dus ik ga daar niets aan veranderen.

Speaker, I do have a fantastic tone, so I will do nothing to alter it.

From Mr. Wilder's quotations, it is clear that he is making use of discussion strategies such as<sup>3</sup>: (a) *putting pressure on an opponent by threatening sanctions*,

<sup>3</sup> In the Pragma-Dialectical Argumentation Theory these discussion strategies are analyzed as potentially fallacious; see Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992, pp. 107-217) for an overview of these types of discussion strategies. See Tonnard (2009) for a pragma-dialectical analysis of some of the discussion strategies used by Mr. Wilders.

see especially excerpt (1); (b) *attacking the other party in the debate directly and personally*, see excerpts (1), (3) and (5); (c) *distorting the other party's standpoint by taking utterances out of context, oversimplification or exaggeration*, see excerpts (1) and (10); (d) *presenting a premise as self-evident*, see especially excerpts (3) and (12); (e) *parading one's own qualities*, see excerpts (3), (10) and (14); (f) *polarising the difference of opinion*, see especially, of course, excerpt (1) although this strategy is employed in almost all the quoted contributions that Mr. Wilders made to this debate.

It is not only his abundant use of these discussion strategies which is remarkable, but it is the way Mr. Wilders puts his message into words that attracts such attention. He often, for example, uses verbs, nouns, adjectives and adverbs which denote an endpoint on a semantic scale: *going crackers, betray, terrible, to oppose*, excerpt (1); *simply, the truth, are fed up, to be closed, finally*, excerpt (3); *as simple as that*, excerpt (7); *very many, had enough, racists, beaten up, the anger*, excerpt (10); *horrible, quite sure, awful, fight, very positive*, excerpt (12); *fantastic*, excerpt (14). In this sense Mr. Wilders often makes use of hyperbole, especially when he wants to amplify the danger of the Islamization of Dutch society and the lax attitude of the political elite in the face of it. Using all kinds of parallelisms and figures of repetition, which give his contributions to the debate a clear structure, is also characteristic of Mr. Wilders' speeches, see excerpts (1), (3), (10) and (12), as is his use of exclamation, see excerpts (1) and (3).<sup>4</sup>

The way in which Mr. Slob, Mr. van der Staaij and Mr. de Wit react to the statements of Mr Wilders in this sub-discussion makes clear that they consider his way of debating to be at odds with the norms and conventions which hold for Dutch parliamentary debate in general. In large part, their critique seems to address his purposive use of discussion strategies and rhetorical techniques. But then one could ask: what norms and conventions do they believe are being violated in the specific context of Dutch parliamentary debate?

### 18.3 Parliamentary debate as a communicative activity type

The framework adopted here, the Extended Pragma-Dialectical Argumentation Theory (see Van Eemeren 2010), assumes that people who are engaged in argumentative discourse are maneuvering strategically. 'Strategic maneu-

<sup>4</sup> See Kuitenbrouwer (2010) and Van Leeuwen (2009) for specific analyses of Mr. Wilders' language-use in political debates.

vering' refers to the efforts that arguers make in argumentative discourse to reconcile rhetorical effectiveness with the maintenance of dialectical standards of reasonableness. To prevent one objective from prevailing over another, 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 in: (a) the choices that are made from the topical potential available at a certain stage in the discourse; (b) the audience-directed framing of argumentative moves; and (c) the purposive use of presentational devices. Although these three aspects of strategic manoeuvring can be distinguished analytically, in actual argumentative practice they will usually be hard to disentangle (Van Eemeren 2010, pp. 93-127).

In this chapter, it is assumed that, in most cases, a parliamentary debate is an example of an argumentative discourse, and that the members of parliament who are engaged in such a debate are maneuvering strategically. In this sense then, in the sub-discussion described above, we could say that the critique of the statements made by Mr. Wilders which Mr. Slob, Mr. Van der Staaij and Mr. De Wit put forward, seems to address a lot of the choices which Mr Wilders makes from the topical potential and his audience-directed framing of argumentative moves but, most of all, they address his (purposive) use of presentational devices. According to these critics, the strategic choices that Mr. Wilders makes in his contributions to the debate are not admissible.

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 admissible.

So, in order to answer the question: *What strategic choices are admissible in a debate in Dutch parliament?* it is necessary to determine what the characteristics of this specific communicative activity 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 participant's pursuit of both dialectical and rhetorical aims in a communicative activity

type by imposing constraints but also by providing opportunities for them to be effective – to win the discussion – while maintaining certain standards of reasonableness (see Mohammed 2008).

Crucial to the characterization of Dutch parliamentary debate as a 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 which have opposing interests. In this system, the majority will be able to impose its views, but not without taking good care of the interests of the minorities. It is generally assumed in political theory that (free) representation consists of two layers: one of them being the representative's 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 organization with rules and rituals which enable its members to formulate civil questions in a way which is acceptable to the public and, in another way, as a public discussion arena which opens up opportunities for engaging with the public and bridging the gap between themselves and the voters (Te Velde 2003, p. 18). This involves representatives having to keep a balance between their independence (but not isolation), and their focus on the public (but not surrendering to them) (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 strive to reach decisions independently within the prevailing rules and procedures, an aim that is connected with the autonomous position of the representative, but it also strives to give an account to the public, to legitimize politics and formulate the civil or societal problems which deserve political priority, goals which are linked to the representative's relationship with the public or the voters (Te Velde 2003, pp. 26-27), see (15).

(15) Institutional goals of parliamentary debate:

- (a) reaching decisions within the prevailing rules and procedures (the goal connected to the autonomous position of the representative);
- (b) being accountable to the public, legitimizing politics, formulating and selecting civil problems which deserve political priority (the goals connected to the representative's relationship with society or voters).

Following the sociological analysis of the political field completed by the French sociologist Bourdieu (1991), one could say that a representative plays a “double game”: the representative is simultaneously playing a game against the government or his fellow representatives in the political field of the parliament, and a game in which he represents his electorate in the social field. Developing this line of reasoning a little further, one could argue that the dualistic institutional goal of parliamentary debate in a representative democracy, and the ensuing role and task of a representative, means that when he is participating in such a debate, he will always have to deal with two audiences at the same time: parliament, which he is a part of himself, and society, which he represents. It may be assumed that this duality is reflected in the strategic design of his argumentative moves – that is: in the choices he makes from the topical potential, in his audience-directed framing of argumentative moves, and in his purposive use of presentational devices.<sup>5</sup>

Following this line of reasoning, one might say that, in a parliamentary debate, the orientation to reaching a decision, goal (15a), represents the dialectical aspect of the debate, while the orientation to society, goal (15b), represents the rhetorical aspect of the debate. If one looks at it this way, strategic manoeuvring in the context of a parliamentary debate boils down to keeping a balance between one’s independence, on the one hand, and one’s focus on the public, on the other. A representative who focuses too much on his relationship with society or his voters, goal (15b), in his contribution to a parliamentary debate risks losing sight of his role in parliament and, concomitantly, the reasonableness of the debate, while a representative who is fully focused on achieving results with his fellow representatives in a parliamentary debate, risks committing a rhetorical blunder.

This approach, however, as an analysis of parliamentary debate seems to me to be too simple; it considers the discussion with fellow representatives as too dialectical, and the one with society as too rhetorical. What would be more in the spirit of the theory of strategic manoeuvring, so it seems to me,

<sup>5</sup> In the literature about political language in general, it is usually assumed that a politician is always dealing with a complex audience (see, e.g., Zarefsky 2008). What is meant by this is that the public targeted by the politician is very heterogeneous in their social and religious opinions, value systems, social status, level of education, etcetera. That is not the sort of heterogeneity that I have in mind here but, rather, two functionally distinct *types* of public, each of which can be of a very heterogeneous composition.

would be an approach in which a representative, in the strategic design of his argumentative moves, has to take the requirements of reasonableness as well as considerations of effectiveness into account, both as regards his orientation to his fellow representatives and in his orientation to society and his voters. Or, to borrow from Bourdieu's game terminology: in both games which the representative is playing, he must try to maintain the balance between the effectiveness and reasonableness of his argumentative moves.<sup>6</sup>

This line of reasoning implies that a participant in a parliamentary debate has to maneuver strategically in a more complex way than a participant does in most of the other communicative activity types; he should not only make efforts to reconcile his aim for rhetorical effectiveness while maintaining dialectical standards of reasonableness in each game he has to play, but he should also perform this, given the functional complexity of his public, while sharply observing his own double task and role, the latter being perceived as a specific constraint within this communicative activity type. In principle then, a representative can lose his balance in a contribution to a debate in two possible ways: he can disturb the balance between the dialectical standards of reasonableness and the rhetorical effectiveness, and the balance between his independence and his public focus in either game. This means that parliamentary debate contributions, in general, can derail in a more complex way than contributions to another kind of communicative activity type.<sup>7</sup>

#### 18.4 Dutch parliamentary culture

The general characterization of parliamentary debate as a communicative activity type in a representative democracy given in the preceding section,

<sup>6</sup> 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 (un)successful move in one game is also a (un)successful move in the other game. For example: if a politician allows himself to be discredited by a political opponent, he is at the same time doing a disservice to his own electorate (Ietcu-Fairclough 2008, p. 411). I am not sure that this homology always holds, but it is a thought which is worthy of further research, in my opinion.

<sup>7</sup> Because the purpose of this chapter is to give a general characterization of parliamentary debate, I am abstracting here from the differences which exist between various types of parliamentary debate. But such differences should be investigated in any further research, of course.

also applies to the Dutch parliamentary debate, needless to say. And the sub-discussion between Mr. Wilders and his fellow representatives quoted 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 made against Mr. Wilders seems to be that his strategic choices in parliamentary debates, in general, have negative consequences for society as a whole. In this line of reasoning, stating that Minister Vogelaar is going crackers, for example, is not only a personal attack on an opponent in a specific speech event, but it is also an attack on the wellbeing of society as a whole.<sup>8</sup> According to his fellow representatives, by using this language, Mr. Wilders threatens the parliamentary goal of arriving at socially acceptable solutions and the goal of achieving stability in society. This becomes clear, in particular, in the following contributions to the sub-discussion referred to above.

(2) Mr. Slob (CU):

You are talking about values and norms. You want to lead a debate and start off in a very acute manner. That is your right. It is our duty as representatives to do this, but when we do it, we are supposed to show respect for others. We should always strive for goodness and peace in society, as well as in our mutual relationships. It is in this respect that I consider it very inappropriate of you “to contest the intellectual capacities of the minister”, instead of discussing the contents with her. This applies to everything you say to Islamic people as well. You do sometimes point out sensitive issues. One may do this, but one always has to make sure that we keep Dutch society together in all its diversity. We ought to strive for the good things for society. These are the values and norms. This is what I want you to account for. The way you operate, the way you relate to colleagues – you call us cowards – and your attitude to society, only results in division. This is overshooting the goal.

(9) Mr. De Wit (SP):

What does Mr. Wilders think the effect of his speech on society will be?  
Like me, he is concerned by the divisions affecting ordinary neighbourhoods and

<sup>8</sup> See Plug (2010) on *ad hominem* argument in parliamentary debates in general.



districts which we are all familiar with. What is the effect of his speech and the characterizations he uses when he addresses Islam?

(11) Mr. De Wit (SP):

I recognize the problem that you outline, I said so just now, but I am concerned about the effect of your speech and the way that you characterize Islam and all the people who follow this religion. You do make a distinction between moderate and not-moderate, but in practice your story seems to illustrate just how difficult a problem this is. You have hurt these people to the bottom of their hearts. 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 characterizations? It will lead to a hardening of the divisions, causing people to become even more radicalized under the influence of your words.

(13) Mr. De Wit (SP):

You know that you are also dealing with a large group of people who are turning to radicalism and who will be incited by this type of speech to follow the wrong course. That should make you reflect on the tone that you use in debate and on the way that you characterize everyone.

According to his fellow representatives, Mr. Wilders' contributions to the debate are not admissible because they endanger both the objectives of a parliamentary debate and violate the constraints which are associated with them.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, excerpts (2), (9), (11) and (13) seem to support the general characterization of parliamentary debate as a communicative activity type in a representative democracy, as described above.

But these excerpts also give us an insight into the opinion within the dominant Dutch political culture about how parliamentary debate should be conducted, that is, as a reasoned and temperate discussion, as that is also best for society. This opinion about parliamentary debate dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century – as shown by Te Velde (2010, pp. 97-121) – and essentially has not changed since. Te Velde writes:

<sup>9</sup> Note that this view seems to agree strongly with the idea of homology developed by Ietcu-Fairclough (2008), see Footnote 6.

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. When great orators made their appearance in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, it was not in the houses of parliament but at party assemblies held in meeting halls or in the open air. A phenomenon such as William Gladstone, who could captivate the public in Great Britain at mass meetings, as well as in the House of Commons, was unthinkable in the Netherlands. The Lower Chamber of Parliament was a place for doing business, preferably with a minimum of fuss. This attitude continued in the twentieth century. (Te Velde 2010, p. 108 [translation TvH])

In Dutch political culture, the emphasis in parliamentary debate on argumentation and persuasion rather than rhetorical effectiveness is, therefore, based on a preference for pragmatism, but Te Velde (2010, pp. 111-112) points out that other cultural factors also play a role. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century this was, above all, decency: one ought to conduct oneself with restraint and politeness in debate. During the Interbellum period, when communists and national socialists made their appearance in parliament and wanted to make propaganda for their causes by behaving raucously and over-stepping the rules, an overly rhetorical presentation was considered to be anti-parliamentary and uncivilized and, after the Second World War, it was particularly associated with having an undemocratic attitude. For this reason, making an overly rhetorical presentation was usually taboo. The underlying idea was that it was incompatible with the dignity of parliament. The importance attached to the dignity of parliament within the dominant political culture, therefore, also determines to a large extent the way in which a representative is supposed to maneuver strategically within a Dutch parliamentary debate.<sup>10</sup>

It is 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 best if one wants to achieve the two objectives of a parliamentary debate, whereas Mr. Wilders seeks polarization, both in parliament and society.

<sup>10</sup> We also see this in the case study, in particular, in the contribution of Mr. Van der Staaij (SGP), see excerpt (4).

In this sense, Mr. Wilders seems to challenge the dominant debating culture in Dutch parliament; i.e., the norms and conventions for Dutch parliamentary debate held valid by the majority of the representatives.<sup>11</sup>

### 18.5 Concluding remarks

In this chapter, on the basis of a case study, I have characterized Dutch parliamentary debate as a culturally determined, specific type of communicative activity and I have done this in two stages.

In the first place, I have pointed out the two institutional goals of a parliamentary debate in a representative democracy in general: such a debate does not only attempt to reach decisions independently according to prevailing rules and procedures, an aim which is connected to the autonomous position of the representative, but it also attempts to give an account to the public, to legitimize politics and formulate which civil or societal problems deserve political priority, goals which are linked to the representative's relationship to the public or the voters. This involves a participant in a parliamentary debate having to strategically maneuver in a more complex way than a participant would in most other communicative activity types: a representative in a parliamentary debate should ideally not only make efforts to reconcile the attempt to be rhetorically effective whilst maintaining dialectical standards of reasonableness in the two games, but should also perform this, given the complexity of his public, while keenly observing his own two tasks and roles.

<sup>11</sup> For this majority, however, it is more or less impossible to sanction Mr. Wilders for violating these norms. Because of a representative's relationship with his voters and his obligations to them, it is very difficult to forbid him the choice of his own topics, or his ways of adapting to his audience or the ways he chooses his words within a parliamentary debate. The detached way in which the speaker reacts to Mr. Wilders' argumentative strategies, illustrates this, see the excerpts under (6) and (8) in the main text. The Code of Order of the Dutch Parliament gives the Speaker the formal authority to interrupt the debate and to sanction a politician if he or she uses offensive language. But nowadays the Speaker in the Dutch parliament seldom uses this authority. And – as Plug (2010, p. 313) correctly points out – from a study of the contributions made to parliamentary debates which were considered inadmissible by the Speaker over the period 1934-2001 (see Bootsma and Hoetink 2006), it is clear that there are no unambiguous norms indicating what should be considered offensive or un-parliamentary language.

In the second place, I have tried to demonstrate that the opinions about the way in which a parliamentary debate ought to be conducted and, in particular, what the ideal relationship should be between the argumentative-dialectical and the rhetorical-effective strategies in a parliamentary debate is determined to a high degree by the dominant political culture. Further research has to prove whether this is a fruitful approach for the analysis of Dutch parliamentary debates and the use of political language.

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