Getting an issue on the table: A pragma-dialectical study of presentational choices in confrontational strategic maneuvering in Dutch parliamentary debate
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6.1 The main findings

The aim of this study was to provide an account of how presentational choices can help a politician to get the priority issues of his party discussed within a parliamentary debate. Initiating a discussion in Parliament on a priority issue can be considered a party-political argumentative strategy aimed at winning the support of potential voters. The strategy purports to show the electorate that the party is more sincere and committed to doing something about these issues (or problems) than the opponents. The criticism often heard about such strategies is that they solely serve to address the electorate and thus frustrate the problem-solving intentions of parliamentary debate (Duursma & van den Bos, NRC Handelsblad, September 2009; RMO 2009: 43-44). In this study I have shown that the use of the strategy of getting a specific issue on the table deserves a more accurate analysis and judgment.

In this study, the presentational choices in politicians’ attempts to get their priority issue on the table are analyzed by making use of the pragma-dialectical concept of strategic maneuvering. Using this concept has made clear that a politician’s presentational choices in a piece of discourse can be analyzed as a coherent presentational tactic serving a specific argumentative aim. When trying to initiate a discussion on a party’s priority issue in Parliament, this aim is to make the audience (whether it is the electorate, the political opponent or the Chair) accept that this specific issue should be debated at this specific moment in the discussion and to do so in a reasonable way. In some cases, using such a tactic indeed constitutes a reasonable attempt to get the party’s priority issue discussed. In other cases such an
attempt has to be considered an unreasonable – that is fallacious – discussion move, because it frustrates the possibility of resolving a difference of opinion on the merits.

The study consists of a theoretical and an empirical part. In the theoretical part, I have answered the research questions of how attempts to get a specific issue discussed in parliamentary debate can be characterized as specific strategic maneuvers within the institutionalized context of Dutch Parliament (chapter 2), and how in such strategic maneuvers the function of presentational choices can be determined (chapter 3). In the empirical part of the study, consisting of chapters 4 and 5, I have answered the question of how in parliamentary practice a politician can maneuver strategically with the choice of presentational means to get a specific issue on the table. The answer is provided by analyzing pieces of parliamentary discourse of the leader of the Party for the Animals, Marianne Thieme, and the leader of the Party for Freedom, Geert Wilders. In the excerpts pertaining to Thieme she tries to initiate a discussion on her party’s priority issue of environmental and animal welfare; the excerpts pertaining to Wilders illustrate how he tries to get his party’s priority issue of the danger of Islamisation on the table.

In this study, I have claimed that attempts to get a specific issue on the table can be characterized as a strategic maneuver of topic shifting or as a strategic maneuver of polarizing (or as a strategic maneuver involving a combination of both). In cases of a strategic maneuver of topic shifting, the politician tries to introduce a proposition that is different from the one put forward by his political opponent. In case of a strategic maneuver of polarizing, he tries to show that the political opponent holds a position towards the proposition that is opposite to his own position. A politician may use a topic-shifting strategic maneuver if the discussion is about a different issue than his party’s priority issue. A polarizing strategic maneuver might be useful if the parties agree or seem to agree on the party’s priority issue. Both topic shifts and polarization can be characterized as confrontational strategic maneuvers because they aim to steer the discussion towards a specific type of difference of opinion. In cases of a topic shifting or a polarizing strategic maneuver the type of difference that is aimed for is a mixed difference of opinion about a proposition that concerns the party’s priority issue: the politician tries to initiate a discussion on the preferred issue with his political opponent in which they hold opposite opinions.

To analyze the function of presentational devices in topic shifting and polarizing strategic maneuvers I make use of the distinction between an explicit and an implicit presentation of the speech acts constituting the argumentative moves. This
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distinction points to choices the arguer is faced with when presenting his moves. I have shown that the explicit-implicit distinction pertains both to ‘the argumentative move as a whole’ and ‘the elements the move consists of’. Concerning the argumentative move as a whole, the choice is to express the content of that move or to suggest its entire meaning by other moves and/or the general context. An arguer can, for example, start a discussion about whether the windows should be closed by putting forward his standpoint in the following way: “I am of the opinion that we should close the windows”. An alternative way to start this discussion would be to say “I am of the opinion that we should close the windows, otherwise we might all get sick”. In the latter example the standpoint is immediately followed by argumentation. By using this way of presenting a standpoint, two other argumentative moves are in fact implied. These moves are that the opponent possible has some doubt (Is it really necessary to close the windows?) and that, despite this doubt, the speaker maintains his standpoint (Yes, I really think we should close the windows). With regard to the elements a move consists of (the communicative function and the propositional content) the choice is in all cases to convey the meaning of these elements explicitly or to suggest their presence by means of the context or in some other indirect way. Compare, for example, the standpoints: “We should close the windows” and “I think you should close the windows”. In the former example the communicative function of making the addressee close the windows is left implicit, whereas in the latter example it is explicitly conveyed. In attempts to get a party’s priority issue discussed, all of these choices between explicit and implicit presentations of a move, whether it concerns the entire move or an element of a move, can have their own specific strategic effect.

I have argued that the possibilities of choosing with respect to the moves as a whole (either to express the content of the move explicitly or to suggest its meaning entirely by other moves or the general context) are a suitable basis for distinguishing between different presentational tactics. These choices constitute certain patterns of expressed and suggested moves designed to lead to the argumentative result preferred by the politician – which is in case with topic shifts and polarization creating a mixed difference of opinion about the party’s priority issue. A presentational tactic consists of the choice of such a pattern of expressed and suggested moves substantiated by a particular choice of devices for the presentation of the moves that are expressed. Together these choices of moves and devices constitute the presentational aspect of a specific confrontational strategic maneuver. For both topic-shifting and polarizing strategic maneuvers I have claimed that there are two
presentational tactics that can be effective in the context of parliamentary debate. These tactics are opportune because they enable the politician to shift the topic or to polarize the parties’ standpoints with a minimal amount of effort while still giving the impression that he complies with the general standards of reasonableness and the conventions of parliamentary debate.

If the politician’s aim is to shift the topic, a first opportune tactic is to *give a critical response before putting forward a new standpoint*. This tactic is a way to introduce the new issue while at the same time taking a clear stance on the issue proposed by the opponent. Taking a stance is important because avoiding to do so is not in line with the convention that MPs provide answers to questions asked. This convention is akin to the rule that members of the Government should provide an MP with the information he needs to judge the Government’s performance. This rule stipulates that members of the Government are obliged to give answers to questions, which de facto means that they have to defend their policies or actions. Although MPs are not officially obliged to answer a question, they hardly ever use this as a reason to refuse giving an answer when invited to take a stance. It can be considered parliamentary practice that MPs, too, provide answers to questions. When trying to shift the topic, this parliamentary practice eliminates the option of simply introducing a new discussion issue without responding in any way to the issue introduced earlier by the political opponent.

The second opportune topic-shifting tactic is to *imply a critical response by putting forward a new standpoint*. The main advantage of this tactic is that it is a way to realize a topic shift by advancing only one move: the introduction of the new standpoint. However, when using this tactic the politician runs the risk of being accused of evading important issues, since he implies a critical response but does not explicitly take a stance. As just explained, evading taking a stance is not in line with the convention that MPs provide answers to questions asked. It should be noted that the two topic-shifting tactics are interchangeable with regard to the problem that the new issue should not deviate too much from the agenda. In both tactics the politician has to present his standpoint in such a way that the new issue will be accepted as the issue to be discussed at this given moment in the debate. This restriction regarding the propositional content of a new standpoint follows from the parliamentary convention which stipulates that a politician’s contribution has to relate to the topic set by the Chair. If the Chair considers the newly brought in proposition irrelevant to the current stage of the discussion, he can break off the politician’s contribution.
If it is the politician’s aim to polarize the parties’ standpoints, a first opportune tactic is to *ascribe the opposite standpoint to the political opponent*. This tactic is advantageous for the politician because it creates a polarized discussion by putting forward only one move. By means of this move the politician expresses his point of view in a specific matter while at the same time saying that the opponent holds the opposite point of view. Such a move could be established in many ways, but an attractive one is to use insulting language. The politician then presents his standpoint in such a way that it insults the political opponent or his electorate. Since the political opponent will never agree with such a standpoint, it almost inevitably leads to disagreement. In parliamentary debate, however, insulting standpoints or insulting language use may make the Chair break off the polarizing attempt by ordering the politician to take back his words. Such an intervention is instigated by the parliamentary convention that a standpoint should not be offensive or incite people to act illegally. This convention determines (amongst other things) that a standpoint that promotes discriminating behavior is not allowed. In the case of a polarizing tactic, the rule that MPs cannot use offending language restricts both the possible standpoints the politician can put forward and the way in which these standpoints can be phrased.

The second polarizing tactic which is opportune is to *make it difficult for the political opponent to agree*. This tactic aims at forcing the political opponent into opposition. The main advantage of using this tactic is that it limits the risk of wrongly ascribing a standpoint to the political opponent (a risk inherent to the first polarizing tactic), because the political opponent himself makes clear that he disagrees with the politician. In using this tactic, it is, again, the use of insulting language that makes it risky. A way in which a politician can make the opponent explicitly say that he disagrees with a standpoint is to formulate his own standpoint in such a way that it insults the opponent or his electorate. Especially when the standpoint insults the opponent’s electorate, the opponent will in his capacity of representative of the people be more or less obliged to explicitly distance himself from the insulting point of view.

In the empirical part of the study (chapters 4 and 5) I have shown how the topic shifting and polarizing tactics distinguished in chapter 3 are used in actual parliamentary practice and how they can be evaluated.

The analyses of the cases under investigation have shown that in his parliamentary contributions even a politician with extreme political views such as Wilders
tries to comply with the rules and practices that regulate parliamentary debate and tries to maintain the general standards of reasonableness. The case studies I have carried out make clear how for each specific tactic different combinations of presentational devices are used to help Wilders in creating the impression that shifting the topic or polarizing the debate is a reasonable move. For example, Wilders effectively introduced his new standpoint (a move made in both topic-shifting tactics) by using the device of immediate other-repetition (repeating specific words of the previous speaker) or by adding a clause like “many voters think that…” These presentational choices help him to present his new standpoint as relevant to the debate. By using immediate other-repetition Wilders makes it seem as if the discussion on the initial standpoint continues. By introducing the electorate as a co-protagonist of the standpoint he makes it difficult for his political opponent or the Chair to say that his standpoint should not be discussed: if something is considered important by a large group of people, saying that it is irrelevant could be interpreted as silencing the electorate.

The evaluations of the case studies give reason to assume that each of the tactics used to realize the strategic maneuvers has its own specific ‘catch’ when it comes to committing fallacies. This means that for each tactic there are specific pragma-dialectical rules of critical discussion that could be more easily violated than others. In case of a topic shift a fallacy that is likely to occur is the straw man (violation of the standpoint rule): in order to make it seem as if still the same issue is being discussed, the politician might reformulate the opponent’s standpoint in such a way that the opponent cannot be held committed to this reformulated standpoint. Yet, topic shifts can also lead to less obvious fallacies. When using the tactic of critically responding before introducing the new standpoint, the politician’s critical response should end the discussion on the topic introduced by his political opponent. He might be inclined to try to achieve this result by using the wrong means to force his opponent to retract his standpoint, for example by uttering a threat or making a personal attack (violation of the freedom rule). In case of polarization a fallacy that is likely to occur is an argumentum ad hominem (violation of the freedom rule). Politicians trying to polarize are inclined to use insulting language in order to make their opponents disagree with them, which can easily lead to unreasonable personal attacks. Polarizing maneuvers could also lead to less obvious fallacies. For example, when using the tactic of ascribing the opposite standpoint to the opponent politicians are easily inclined to impute a fictitious standpoint to the opponent (violation of the standpoint rule).
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By themselves, the presentational devices used to exploit a specific tactic do not sufficiently indicate how a topic-shifting or polarizing maneuver should be evaluated. For example, in three of the four case studies of a topic shift the device of immediate other-repetition is used to make the new issue seem relevant to the current stage of the debate making it seem that the same issue is still being discussed by repeating specific words of the previous speaker. I have shown that each of the moves in which the device is used needs to be evaluated differently: either the fallacies committed in these moves were different, or the move was not fallacious at all. The analyses of polarizing strategic maneuvers have made clear that in the case of this strategic maneuver too the choice for a specific presentational device does not determine whether a specific move is fallacious. When a polarizing maneuver is conducted by means of insults addressed at the electorate – for example, by putting forward the standpoint that “violent young Moroccans are scum that keeps ruining the country” – the move cannot be viewed automatically as fallacious. Insulting language has to be evaluated as a fallacious personal attack only when it eliminates the opponent as a serious discussion partner. The fact that the content of a standpoint is insulting (as in the example that describes violent young Moroccans as scum) does not necessarily disqualify the opponent. Hence, in principle putting forward an insulting standpoint does not have any effect on whether the difference of opinion at issue can be resolved in a reasonable way. Whether such insulting and sometimes even discriminating language should be allowed in Parliament is thus not a matter of what is reasonable from a problem-solving perspective, but of what should be allowed from the perspective of determining the boundaries of freedom of speech in Parliament, of the accurateness of the parliamentary code of conduct, and of the strictness with which this code should be applied by the Chair.

The empirical part of the study has also made clear that, depending on the politician’s personal debating style, one tactic may be more suitable for use by a specific politician than another. The two tactics – shifting the topic by critically responding before putting forward a new standpoint, and polarizing by ascribing the opposite standpoint to the opponent – seem useful to every politician who aims to get his party’s priority issues discussed in Parliament. However, when trying to shift the topic, the tactic of critically responding before actually shifting the topic particularly suits a politician such as Wilders, who uses parliamentary debate to emphasize the differences between political parties rather than to achieve balanced decision making (Hilhorst, de Volkskrant 2 November 2010; Fennema 2010). The tactic entails an immediate exclusion of the opponent’s standpoint by putting forward a
critical response. Such an exclusion of the opponent’s standpoint is easier to realize when the politician does not care whether every claim he makes is well-founded (which is necessary for balanced decision making). Wilders, for example, often presents his contrary answer as indisputable by refraining from giving any support for his standpoint – he then, for example, confines his reaction to a simple “No!” or “Nonsense!” The polarizing tactic of making it difficult for the opponent to agree is especially useful to populist politicians. The tactic, which tries to force the opponent into opposition, is especially likely to succeed when the electorate is called in as a co-protagonist of the politician’s controversial standpoint. Presenting a standpoint on behalf of the electorate is a way to alienate one’s political opponents in a manner that might be considered reasonable by the electorate. The political opponent is then portrayed as being ignorant with regard to matters the electorate considers important, which might be regarded reasonable by the electorate because it sees itself represented Parliament.

The strategic use of presentational devices as employed by Wilders are described in the debate literature as “tricks” that can be used by politicians to win the support of potential voters. The case studies have made clear how these debate tricks are used in actual practice. In fact, Wilders seems inclined to use every trick in the book. As the analyses have shown, he “uses personal attacks, deviously changes the subject of discussion, raises false dilemma’s, simplifies and distorts the opponent’s standpoint, uses supporters [the electorate] to justify his position, and makes sure that every refutation is followed by his own story [standpoint]”. However, this study has made clear that just applying these tricks is not what makes parliamentary contributions effective. Simply making a personal attack or raising a false dilemma is not an effective way to argue because the audience (whether it is the opponent, the Chair or the electorate) might judge such tricks as unreasonable. The politician has to adapt his tricks to the argumentative goal they are to serve and the specific circumstances in which they are applied. The analyses of Wilders’s parliamentary contributions

174 According to Abts (2004), overcoming the electorate’s political dissatisfaction by appealing to the people’s opinion is a way of conducting politics that characterizes what he calls “respectable populism” or “popular politics” as well as “radical populism”. In case of the latter the appeal to the people’s opinion “is connected to a simple analysis in which truth results directly from the (common) people, it is hostile against political opponents and it rejects the representative democracy and its constitutional structure” (2004: 470-471).

175 These specific debating tricks were listed by van der Geer in NRC Handelsblad (30 September, 2006).
have shown what specific function such debating tricks have in realizing the party-political argumentative strategies of topic shifts and polarization, and how the choice of presentational devices can be of help in making these debating tricks effective.

6.2 Suggestions for further research

In this study, I have analyzed the function of presentational choices by considering these choices to be part of a presentational tactic that can be used to influence the outcome of the confrontation stage. A first topic for further research is to further develop the concept of presentational tactics by analyzing presentational choices in other discussion stages of political discourse. In contrast to, for example, the argumentation stage, in the confrontation stage the number of possible moves is limited. This makes it relatively easy to distinguish the possible patterns of expressed and suggested moves underlying a specific tactic. Applying the concept of presentational tactics to other stages could make clear whether the concept is also useful to analyze the presentational aspect of strategic maneuvers that aim for results other than the confrontational aim of getting a specific issue on the table. These could be strategic maneuvers by which arguers, for example, attempt to exclude starting points, promote a certain division of the burden of proof, apply particular argument schemes or structures, or end the discussion in a specific way. Incidentally, it would also be interesting to explore whether the way in which I examined the aspect of an effective presentation provides an adequate point of departure when the focus of analysis is the selection from the topical potential or adaptation to audience demand.

A second topic for further research concerns the kinds of topic shifts and polarizing moves that were not examined in this study. To provide a full picture of how politicians shift the topic or polarize the debate in Parliament, these other strategic maneuvers should be examined as well. For both topic shifts and polarization, only one specific kind of maneuvering distinguished in chapter 2 was analyzed in chapter 4 and chapter 5. Both kinds of maneuvering are characterized by the specific result of getting a particular issue on the table and taking a specific route to achieve this result. The kinds of topics shifts and polarization that were not examined either aim to realize the result of getting a specific issue on the table by other sequences of argumentative moves, or are aimed at achieving a result other than getting a specific issue on the table. As far as topic shifts are concerned, two interesting kinds of strategic maneuvering have been left unscrutinized which also
aim at getting the party’s priority issue on the table but do so by a sequence of argumentative moves that is different from the topic shift discussed in chapter 4 (topic shifts realized by means of a critical response). The first kind of topic shift that deserves closer examination is the one in which the original topic is reformulated. The example given in chapter 2 was the introductory phrase of Wilders’s speech in the General Debate of September 2008, in which he created an opportunity to introduce the topic of Islamisation by reformulating the aim of the debate. He said: “Today we are not only talking about the budget, we also talk about the state of the country”. In pragma-dialectical terms such a topic shift can be characterized as a precization or elucidation of the standpoint that was initially introduced – in this example the broader description of the debate is a precization of the purpose of the debate because it is a more accurate description of what the General Debate is about. This kind of topic shift is interesting because, as van Schagen points out, it is frequently used in Dutch Parliament to immediately incorporate the party’s priority issue(s) in the debate (1994: 26).

A second kind of topic shift that should be analyzed in closer detail is the one in which the shift is made after putting a forward a reaction of (partial) agreement with the opponent’s standpoint (a concession). The topic shift using a concession may not only help a politician to get his party’s priority issue on the table, but can, in certain circumstances, also be a way to improve or strengthen the politician’s image. A politician who admits that his opponent is right, portrays himself as an honest debater who is able to put his personal interests aside. Some debate trainers mention making a concession followed by an expression of the arguer’s own standpoint also as an effective countermove in fighting populist politicians in a political discussion (NRC Handelsblad, 30 September 2007). They describe this countermove as a way to frustrate these politicians in their endeavor to portray themselves as outsiders of the political establishment – which is in fact a way of polarizing. This kind of topic shift thus also seems to be a useful tool to frustrate an opponent’s attempt to polarize the parties’ standpoints. Research into this specific kind of topic shift should make clear whether it could indeed serve to frustrate a polarizing attempt and what function presentational devices can have in such a strategic move.

A third and final topic for further research is the use of presentational tactics in other political contexts than (Dutch) parliamentary debate. The current study focused on topic-shifting and polarizing strategic maneuvers in the specific case that an MP wants to get his party’s priority issue discussed in a parliamentary debate that attracts a lot of media attention, such as the General Debate on the budget. To make
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more general claims about how topic shifting and polarizing strategic maneuvers are conducted in a political context it is necessary to analyze these strategic maneuvers in other political contexts as well. Since politicians can be expected to bring their priority issues into the limelight whenever they can, they probably use the same topic shifting and polarizing maneuvers in other political contexts such as political interviews and election debates. Research into these specific political contexts should make clear whether in such political contexts politicians employ indeed the same presentational tactics, or need to employ different tactics when trying to shift the topic or polarize the parties’ standpoints.

Further research in the area of topic-shifting and polarizing maneuvers in the political context should also include the ways in which arguers other than MPs try to initiate a discussion on a specific issue. Such research would benefit from the work done by other pragma-dialecticians in the field of political discourse. It could, for example, include the ways in which the Prime Minister is engaged in party-politics during question time or – to mention a completely different political context that has been studied from a pragma-dialectical perspective – the ways in which online discussants emphasize the gap between the political establishment and the common people on a certain issue. Another interesting political context is that of broadcasted political interviews. In this specific context both the interviewer and the politician being interviewed can be expected to attract the listener’s attention by initiating a discussion on a specific issue. The politician will try to get his party’s priority issues discussed while the interviewer will try to discuss, as Andone points out, “debatable matters of political controversy” (2010: 37-38). In order to accommodate the listening, reading or television-watching audience, the interviewer can be expected to stick to such matters of political controversy when the politician tries to evade them. Or, when the politician claims that the difference has been resolved, the interviewer may regenerate the difference of opinion on these matters. In doing so, a political interviewer may use presentational devices that are different from those a politician engaged in party-politics uses to lure his interlocutor into the discussion he favors most. Since, due to the formal requirement of neutrality an interviewer should refrain from asserting opinions on his own behalf (Andone 2010: 40), other presentational devices might be necessary to realize a shift of topic or to polarize the discussion. A politician should preferably present his standpoints

176 See for studies of confrontational strategic maneuvering in these specific contexts Mohammed 2009 (British Question Time) and Lewinski 2010 (internet political discussion forums).
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in such a way that it is clear to the electorate which side he takes (for or against, right-wing or left-wing), while a political interviewer is not expected to take any side at all.