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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This study aims to provide a systematic explanation of how presentational choices can help politicians to get a priority issue of their party on the table in a parliamentary debate. To achieve this aim, cases are analyzed in which so-called one-issue politicians try to get the priority issue of their party discussed in Dutch Parliament. These politicians are the leader of the Party for the Animals, Marianne Thieme, and the leader of the Party for Freedom, Geert Wilders. In the selected excerpts pertaining to Thieme, the priority issue that she tries to introduce is related to environmental and animal welfare; in the selected excerpts pertaining to Wilders, the priority issue that he attempts to get on the table is the issue of the danger of Islamisation.

Getting a party’s priority issue discussed in Parliament can be considered a party-political strategy aimed at winning the support of potential voters – especially when the maneuvers concerned are used in debates that will attract a lot of media attention, such as the General Debate on the budget. The strategy is a way of showing the electorate that the party is more sincere and more committed to doing something about a specific problem than are the opponents. In this study, the presentational choices politicians make to conduct this strategy were examined by making use of the pragma-dialectical concept of strategic maneuvering. This pragma-dialectical approach to argumentation is useful because it is normative, considers the context in which the discourse takes place and views the aspect of formulation as a means to win the listener’s support.

To determine the function of presentational means in attempts to get the party’s priority issue discussed, it is first explained which particular argumentative moves can be viewed as such attempts (chapter 2). Depending on what exactly the politician tries to accomplish with his argumentative moves, such attempts can be characterized as topic shifts or as polarizing the parties’ standpoints (or as a combination...
of both). In the case of a topic shift, the politician tries to introduce a proposition that is different from the one put forward by his political opponent. In the case of polarization, he tries to show that the political opponent holds a position towards the proposition that is opposite to his own position. A polarizing attempt intends to realize a so-called mixed difference of opinion. A politician may try to shift the topic if the discussion is about an issue other than his party’s priority issue. A polarizing maneuver might be useful if the parties agree or seem to agree on the party’s priority issue. This is not to say that every topic-shifting or polarizing attempt is meant to initiate a discussion on a party’s priority issue. Examples from the General Debate of 2008 show that topic shifts can, for example, be used to evade a difficult question or to put the opponent in an awkward position. Polarization can also have the potential to elicit agreement from the political opponent.

The conventions (rules and practices) of parliamentary debate determine how a topic-shifting or polarizing strategic maneuver can be realized in this specific context. In line with the pragma-dialectical approach, in this study parliamentary debate is characterized as a specific communicative activity type in the domain of political communication. By examining the standing orders of the Second Chamber and established parliamentary practice, the rules and other conventions were determined that constrain the ways in which a politician can try to shift the topic or polarize the parties’ standpoints. In the case of a topic shift, for example, the rule that one should stick to the topic as set by the Chair constrains the potential propositions that can be put forward as the ‘new issue’. Only issues that relate to the agenda are allowed, which means that the new issue must not deviate too much from the agenda. In the case of polarizing maneuvers, the politician might be inclined to insult the political opponent or his electorate because that almost inevitably leads to a mixed difference of opinion. In parliamentary debate, however, insulting standpoints or insulting language use may lead the Chair to break off the polarizing attempt by ordering the politician to take back his words. Such a reprimand is based on the rule that MPs cannot use offensive language or urge others to act illegally (which might be the case when an offensive utterance also serves to discriminate).

The method introduced in this study to analyze the strategic function of presentational choices (chapter 3) is based on the pragma-dialectical starting point that every argumentative move can be identified as a specific speech act. The components of a speech act (the communicative function and the propositional content) can be presented in an explicit or implicit manner. The explicit-implicit distinction refers to the possibility of choosing between expressing the content of a move completely
and implying the content of a move by the surrounding discourse or the context in general. A presentational tactic involves creating a specific pattern of expressed and suggested moves and choosing particular devices to formulate the expressed moves. For both topic-shifting and polarizing strategic maneuvers, two presentational tactics are distinguished that can be effective in the context of parliamentary debate. These tactics can be understood as being opportune because they enable the politician to shift the topic or polarize the parties’ standpoints in a reasonable way with a minimal amount of effort.

By analyzing excerpts from parliamentary debates, the study highlights the presentational tactics that are helpful in shifting the topic (chapter 4) or polarizing the debate (chapter 5) and demonstrates how they are executed in actual practice. The selected excerpts are all parliamentary contributions in which Wilders tries to initiate a discussion on the dangers related to the Islamisation of the Netherlands. These contributions can be considered to be aimed at winning the support of potential voters since they all stem from a type of debate known to attract a lot of media attention, such as the General Debate and the Fitna-debate on the release of Wilders’ anti-Islam movie. The analyses show that for each specific tactic different combinations of presentational devices are used. These combinations help the politician to shift the topic or polarize the debate in a reasonable way – or at least to give the impression that the maneuver is conducted in a reasonable way. The excerpts also show that in making parliamentary contributions even a politician with extreme political views such as Wilders tries to comply with the rules that regulate parliamentary debate and with the standards of reasonableness. The analyses conducted in this study are compared with observations made by other analysts of Wilders’ language use. This comparison allows for a determination of the extent to which Wilders’ presentational choices can be considered as ‘typical Wilders’ or as typical for topic-shifting and polarizing maneuvers by politicians in general.

Based on the analyses, some considerations for the evaluation of the excerpts are provided. The evaluation is aimed at determining whether a politician’s effort to win the support of potential voters by addressing a priority issue frustrates a resolution of the difference of opinion with the political opponent. The considerations make clear that an attempt to get the party’s priority issue discussed can be either a reasonable discussion move or a fallacious discussion move, and that this evaluation is achieved irrespective of the presentational tactic that is used. However, the evaluation bears out the assumption that there are specific pragma-dialectical rules of critical discussion that could be more easily violated than others for each
tactic. The judgment of some critics that using a party political strategy, such as getting a priority issue on the table, is by definition unreasonable, is not supported by this study. However, in those cases in which getting a priority issue on the table frustrates the resolution of the difference of opinion, such a contribution should indeed be considered unreasonable.