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**Suggesting outsider status by behaving improperly:  
the linguistic realization of a populist rhetorical  
strategy in Dutch Parliament**

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# 7. Suggesting outsider status by behaving improperly: the linguistic realization of a populist rhetorical strategy in Dutch Parliament

**Ton van Haaften and Maarten van Leeuwen**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

One of the key characteristics of populist discourse is that populists present themselves emphatically as political outsiders who stand up for the will and interest of the common man (e.g. Pauwels, 2014; Vossen, 2010; Jagers and Walgrave, 2007).<sup>1</sup> According to political scientists, one of the strategies often employed by populists to create and maintain an anti-elitist image is the use of ‘bad manners’, that is, a disregard for ‘appropriate’ modes of acting in the political realm (Moffitt, 2016, p. 44; see also e.g. Ostiguy and Roberts, 2016; Canovan, 1999). By violating the decency standards that politicians are supposed to observe in political debates and political communication in general, populist politicians create the impression of being different from the ‘political elite’. Exactly what constitutes bad manners cannot be characterized in an absolute sense: the decency standards with which politicians are expected to comply in political debates can vary considerably between countries (e.g. Bayley, 2004; see Ilie, 2010 for a concrete example). This means that behaving properly or improperly is culture-specific (cf. Moffitt, 2016, p. 44).

In (political science) literature on populism it is generally assumed that language use is an important tool for showing bad manners (cf., for instance, Moffitt, 2016, p. 44 and the references mentioned there), and more specifically the use of a ‘tabloid’ style of communicating, which includes adversarial, offensive and insulting language (e.g. Oliver and Rahn, 2016, p. 191;

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<sup>1</sup> Both researchers contributed equally to this research. It is an adaptation of a lecture given by van Haaften and van Leeuwen (2011). Parts of this analysis have been presented in van Haaften (2011a; 2011b; 2017) and van Leeuwen (2015; 2016).

Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008, p. 7; Ostiguy, 2009). There is a lack, however, of more precise analyses of the specific linguistic choices populist politicians make to violate the decency standards of political debate in order to distance themselves from the political elite. In this chapter we aim to give such an analysis, by focusing on improper behaviour in the Tweede Kamer (Second Chamber) of Dutch Parliament.

More precisely, we will focus on how the Dutch populist politician Geert Wilders, leader of the Party for Freedom, systematically violates the decency standards of the Second Chamber of Dutch Parliament verbally to create and maintain the image of a political outsider. Wilders has often been criticized for improper behaviour in Parliament (cf. Section 2). We will argue that Wilders' 'improper' way of debating consists of the systematic violation of four important unwritten decency standards of Dutch parliamentary debate and show how he uses a variety of systematic and sometimes subtle linguistic choices in order to do this.<sup>2</sup>

The structure of this chapter is as follows. After a section with relevant background information about Geert Wilders (Section 2), in Section 3 we analyse the decency standards that Wilders violates with his parliamentary contributions. In Section 4 we will show the specific linguistic techniques with which he violates these decency standards.

## 2. THE CASE STUDY: GEERT WILDERS' IMPROPER BEHAVIOUR IN DUTCH PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

Geert Wilders is the leader of the Party for Freedom (in Dutch: Partij voor de Vrijheid; PVV), a party that he founded in 2006. Currently, the PVV is the second largest political party in the Netherlands. According to political scientists, Wilders is a 'textbook example' of a populist politician (Pauwels, 2014, p. 118; Vossen, 2016). In the last decade, he has systematically pointed to a dichotomic division between 'the people' and 'the elite' in his parliamentary speeches and interruptions, fiercely attacking his fellow politicians for ignoring major problems that the people are facing, and repeatedly suggesting that he, more than any other politician in the Netherlands, voices the concerns of the people. In this sense Wilders tries to create an opposition between 'us',

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<sup>2</sup> It is still debated how 'populism' should be conceptualized precisely – is it, for instance, an ideology or a communication style (cf. Moffitt, 2016; Pauwels, 2014)? Our study fits in with a 'communication style' approach to populism (cf. Moffitt, 2016), but this does not imply that we reject other conceptualizations (such as populism as an ideology): we agree with Blassnig, Büchel, Ernst and Engesser (2019, p. 110) that the various conceptualizations of populism are not mutually exclusive.

that is, ‘the people and Wilders and his PVV’, and ‘them’, that is, ‘the political elite’, which is said to be the cause of the problems that the country is facing now, especially the problems related to what he calls the ‘Islamification’ of the Netherlands.

Wilders is a very experienced politician: he has been a member of Dutch Parliament since 1998.<sup>3</sup> As such, it is quite paradoxical that he has succeeded in maintaining the image of a political outsider for more than a decade (cf. Vossen, 2016). This paradox has been noted in the media more than once (cf. van Leeuwen, 2015, pp. 94–6 and the references mentioned there). As Rusman (2015, p. 9) puts it: ‘The fourth longest-serving member of Parliament does not identify himself as a politician, but as the personification of the people’.

One of the major strategies used by Wilders to create and maintain this image of a political outsider vis-à-vis the political establishment, is to behave improperly and to violate verbally standards of decency in parliamentary debate.<sup>4</sup> His debating style has often been criticized for its improper character: colleagues (cf. Section 3 below for examples), the media and opinion makers have complained about his behaviour in parliamentary debates. The general theme of these complaints is that Wilders does not play the game according to the rules (cf. Wolthuis, 2012, p. 59; see also de Bruijn, 2010, p. 17).<sup>5</sup> In particular Wilders’ language use has often been criticized – as is for instance illustrated by the debate on ‘Islamic activism’, which we discuss in the next section. But exactly which codes of conduct does he violate? And what kind of linguistic choices does Wilders employ to this end? These questions will be dealt with in Sections 3 and 4.

### 3. GEERT WILDERS’ VIOLATIONS OF DECENCY STANDARDS IN DUTCH PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

The question of what constitutes appropriate conduct in Dutch parliamentary debates is not easy to answer. In the Netherlands, the modern Parliament goes

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<sup>3</sup> Geert Wilders became a member of the Second Chamber in 1998 for the People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (in Dutch: Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie; VVD), a conservative liberal party. In 2004 he left the VVD and started his own party: ‘Groep Wilders’ (Group Wilders); in 2006 it was renamed the ‘Party for Freedom’.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed discussion of some other strategies used by Wilders to create an ‘anti-elitist’ image, and their linguistic realization, see van Leeuwen (2015, pp. 89–152; 2016).

<sup>5</sup> For instance, the Dutch member of Parliament (MP) Femke Halsema of the GreenLeft party (in Dutch: GroenLinks; GL) once lamented that Wilders ‘evades all the standards for debating’ (Peepkorn, 2007).

back to the amendment of the Constitution in 1848. Since that time, Dutch Parliament has determined its own codes of conduct, practices and rituals.<sup>6</sup> Even though there are a number of explicit rules that regulate the debate in the Dutch Second Chamber, which are formulated in the Standing Orders,<sup>7</sup> many of the norms and conventions for Dutch parliamentary debate remain largely implicit – including the most important ones defining what ‘decent behaviour’ entails in this specific context (cf. van Haaften, 2011a; 2011b; 2017; Hoetink, 2018).

It is helpful in this regard to study the subdiscussions in the Second Chamber about how a debate should be conducted, which often arose after contributions by Wilders. In these subdiscussions his debating behaviour and language use were criticized by his fellow MPs, who explicitly referred to a number of intersubjective decency standards that normally remain implicit. We analysed subdiscussions taken from the so-called General Political Debates (in Dutch: Algemene Politieke Beschouwingen; APB) between 2007 and 2018, a period in which Wilders’ debating style was frequently discussed, supplemented with other debates in the same period.<sup>8</sup>

A good example of a subdiscussion revealing implicit decency standards in Dutch parliamentary debate is one that arose in reaction to a speech by Wilders during a debate on ‘Islamic activism’, held in the Second Chamber on 6 September 2007. Wilders called for the Koran to be banned and argued that what he termed ‘the Islamification of the Netherlands’ had to be stopped. The speech caused quite a stir, particularly because Wilders said that Ella Vogelaar, the Minister of Integration at that time and a member of the Labour Party (in

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<sup>6</sup> For a study of the design of the modern Dutch Parliament in its early years, particularly the Second Chamber, see Turpijn (2008).

<sup>7</sup> See [https://www.tweedekamer.nl/over\\_de\\_tweede\\_kamer/reglement\\_tweede\\_kamer](https://www.tweedekamer.nl/over_de_tweede_kamer/reglement_tweede_kamer) (last accessed 22 March 2019).

<sup>8</sup> The General Political Debate is a debate held annually at the start of the parliamentary year, which receives a great deal of media attention; as such, it is mainly used by the leaders of the various political parties to present their political profile to a wide audience. This may explain why Wilders especially targeted these debates to display improper behaviour. We chose 2007 as the starting point for our study because it is from this year onwards that Wilders can be characterized as a populist according to political science standards (cf. Vossen, 2011).

Dutch: Partij van de Arbeid; PvdA), had gone ‘stark raving mad’ (in Dutch: *knettergek*): see excerpt (1).<sup>9</sup>

(1) Mr Wilders (PVV):

Minister Vogelaar babbles about the future Netherlands as a country with a Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition, and that she aims to help Islam take root in Dutch society. In saying this, the Minister shows that she has obviously gone stark raving mad. She is betraying Dutch culture and insulting Dutch citizens. Madam Speaker, my party, the Freedom Party, demands that Minister Vogelaar retract her statement. If the Minister fails to do so, the Freedom Party parliamentary group will withdraw its support for her. No Islamic tradition must ever be established in the Netherlands: not now and also not in a few centuries’ time.

After this speech, some of his fellow MPs initiated a subdiscussion about Wilders’ debating style. In the excerpts below, a part of this subdiscussion is quoted; it illustrates the disquiet that Wilders’ debating style generally creates and the way he typically deals with it. The participants in this subdiscussion, apart from Wilders, were: Arie Slob, a member of the ChristianUnion (in Dutch: ChristenUnie; CU), a small, quite progressive Christian party; Kees van der Staaij, a member of the Calvinist Party (in Dutch: Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij; SGP), a small, conservative Christian party, and Jan de Wit, a member of the Socialist Party (in Dutch: Socialistische Partij; SP), a left-wing party.

(2) Mr Slob (CU):

You are talking about values and norms. You want to have a debate here and you set the stakes very high. This is certainly your right. And it is even our duty as members of Parliament to do that, but in doing it we should show respect for others. We should always strive for goodness and peace in society, and in our mutual relationships. In this respect, I consider it highly inappropriate that you ‘cast doubt on the Minister’s intellectual capacities’, instead of discussing the substance of the topic with her. This also applies for everything you say against Muslims. From time to time, you touch a sore point. This is permitted, but we must always try to keep Dutch society together in all its diversity. We should strive for good things for society. These are what I consider to be values and norms. This is what I would like you to consider. The way you operate, the way you relate to colleagues (. . .) and the way you look at society, it only has a divisive effect. Then we are overshooting the mark.

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<sup>9</sup> Excerpts (1)–(7) are taken from this debate. The English translation of excerpt (1) is taken from the Geert Wilders Weblog: <https://www.geertwilders.nl/77-in-the-press/in-the-press/1214-mr-wilderss-contribution-to-the-parliamentary-debate-on-islamic-activism> (last accessed 30 March 2019).

- (3) Mr Wilders (PVV):  
I am not divisive. I just speak the truth. If I think that there are a lot of cowards here because they aren't say – as the substance of a proposal makes me think – that a Minister has gone stark raving mad, then I will just say so. It has nothing to do with being divisive. If only more people would speak their minds. If only more people would say that they are sick of the government looking the other way when problems arise with Muslims and Islam. (. . .) If only more people would say that!
- (4) Mr van der Staaij (SGP):  
I heard you make some positive comments about the Judeo-Christian tradition. That is a good thing but, according to the Judeo-Christian tradition, in any interpretation whatsoever, it is beyond dispute that we should never ever, and especially not in a parliamentary debate, say that a Minister has gone stark raving mad. Would you like to revert to the standards of decency of the Judeo-Christian tradition and withdraw that description?
- (5) Mr Wilders (PVV):  
Tradition or no tradition, the Minister has, in my view – because she talks about a future Christian, Jewish and Islamic tradition – gone stark raving mad. I am not going to withdraw that, I am going to repeat it.
- (6) Mr de Wit (SP):  
What does Mr Wilders think the effect of his speech will be in society? Like me, he is concerned about the differences that are found in the ordinary neighbourhoods and districts, which we all have to deal with. What is the effect of his speech, and all those characterisations that he has used about Islam?
- (7) Mr Wilders (PVV):  
I hope that by saying this I am voicing the opinion – and in fact I am quite sure of it – of many, many Dutch people, (. . .) who think we have enough problems with Islam in the Netherlands, who think (. . .) that you are almost called a racist if you dare to say anything about them. (. . .) I am proud to have the opportunity here to give voice to that opinion and the indignation of these people.<sup>10</sup>

The way in which Slob, van der Staaij and de Wit react to Wilders' statements in this subdiscussion makes clear that they consider his way of debating to be at odds with the norms and conventions that hold for Dutch parliamentary debate in general: in this subdiscussion, Wilders is accused of improper behaviour. What norms and conventions does Wilders violate in the specific context of Dutch parliamentary debate?

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<sup>10</sup> All excerpts from debates have been taken from the official Proceedings (in Dutch: *Handelingen*) of the Dutch Second Chamber via <http://www.zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl> (last accessed 22 March 2019). The references in brackets refer to the publication date of the debate on this website and, where possible, a dossier number.

A first decency standard in Dutch Parliament that Wilders violates in his contributions to debates is that members of Dutch Parliament are expected *to discuss in a dignified way: they must be polite and should refrain from using vulgar and pejorative language*. An appeal to this decency standard can be found in various excerpts of the subdiscussion from the debate on Islamic activism quoted above. The idea that MPs should behave decently is evident in (2), where Slob (CU) criticizes Wilders for saying that the Minister for Integration has ‘gone stark raving mad’; he argues that ‘we should show respect for others’. In a similar vein, van der Staaij (SGP) says in (4) that Wilders’ characterization of Minister Vogelaar is not acceptable, and ‘especially not in a parliamentary debate’. Another clear illustration of the existence of this standard is excerpt (8), taken from the General Debate of 2011, in which Kees van der Staaij (SGP) criticizes Wilders’ debating style by explicitly referring to the idea that MPs should behave in a dignified manner:

(8) Mr van der Staaij (SGP):

It is my opinion (. . .) that we should be able to conduct a robust substantive debate about all kinds of topics. Yet I was struck by the fact that today, and not for the first time, there are occasionally utterances that evoke in many, and also in myself, the feeling *that you transgress the limits of courtesy and decency*. Mr Wilders will say that my feeling is not the same as his feeling, but *are there any limits for him in the interaction with others who hold completely different opinions and yet still show a degree of courtesy and etiquette, matters which are surely also part of the parliamentary tradition?* (15 December 2011; 33000) (our italics)

A second parliamentary decency standard is that MP’s *must not overstate or polarize the issue, for instance by using adversarial language*. This decency standard comes to the fore in excerpt (2) again: Mr Slob not only invokes the standard that MPs should participate in a discussion in a dignified way, but also ends his interruption by saying that Wilders’ behaviour in Parliament ‘only has a divisive effect’ and that this is ‘overshooting the mark’. Also excerpt (6) from the debate on Islamic activism above clearly illustrates that Dutch MPs rely on this standard. In this excerpt, De Wit (SP) reacts to the wording used by Wilders for his opinions on Islam: ‘What is the effect of his speech, and all those characterisations that he has used about Islam?’

A third parliamentary decency standard that Wilders violates on a regular basis is that Dutch MPs are expected to *play the ball, not the man*. In other words, they are expected to refrain from personal attacks. This is, again, indicated by Slob’s response in (2): Slob reproaches Wilders that he ‘casts doubt on the Minister’s intellectual capacities’, instead of ‘discussing the substance of the topic with her’. As noted above, the actual formulation chosen by Wilders to cast doubt on the Minister’s intellectual capacities was ‘stark



raving mad', which has highly pejorative connotations. The presumption that personal attacks contravene the decency standards of Dutch Parliament is also illustrated by excerpt (9), which is an intervention by Marianne Thieme of the Party for the Animals (in Dutch: Partij voor de Dieren; PvdD). After a critical interruption by Alexander Pechtold, the leader of Democrats 1966 (in Dutch: Democraten 1966; D66), a social-liberal party, Wilders made a reference to Pechtold's extramarital affair with a lady from Meppel, as follows:

(9) Mr Wilders (PVV):

I'm not surprised that Mr Pechtold doesn't go along with them (i.e. the PVV's ideas). And I know that he has more to do in Meppel and other places than just law-making.

Ms Thieme (PvD):

I would like to object to Mr Wilders' tone (. . .) Can we please keep private and public matters separate? People are waiting for a debate about their future, about their worries. Let's not turn the debate into some glorified tabloid story. (10 October 2018)

Finally, a fourth standard of Dutch parliamentary debate is that MPs are expected *to argue, that is, to defend their standpoints with arguments and engage seriously with the arguments of others – especially when they are asked to do so*. The final response of Pechtold (D66) in the exchange with Wilders in (10) is a case in point:

(10) Mr Pechtold (D66):

You say that politics is a matter of making choices, and the Party for Freedom makes choices. So, when are you going to present your alternative budget?

Mr Wilders (PVV):

I am not going to present an alternative budget.

(. . .)

Mr Pechtold (D66):

Engage with my arguments, Mr Wilders, do not walk away. I do not want a cordon sanitaire for you. *I am going to argue with you. It is right to argue if you make accusations against someone. You accuse the government of all kinds of things. You make nasty remarks about us, and also about the people of this country. Can you explain to those same people, who are so keen on black and white, where your alternative budget is? Where do you present your solution for all those things that you have listed (. . .)?* (19 September 2007; 31200) (our italics)

Pechtold's words make it clear that it is the basis of parliamentary debate that standpoints are defended with arguments, and that one responds to questions, doubts, criticisms and arguments put forward by others. Not wanting to engage

in a serious exchange of views with your parliamentary colleagues implies that you do not take them seriously, and do not want to associate yourself with them in any kind of way and is regarded as a violation of a decency standard. This is, however, exactly what Wilders does on many occasions: a debate with him often remains limited to a confrontation of opinions, with no clear exchange of arguments. When MPs interrupt Wilders and criticize him, his answers are such that they thwart any discussion. In the subdiscussion quoted above we see this happening in excerpts (5) and (7), where he does not seriously address the objections put forward by his colleagues, but only repeats his view again and again. Consider also in this respect his response in (11) to an interruption by Femke Halsema of the GreenLeft party (in Dutch: GroenLinks; GL), another example where he violates the unwritten rule that MPs should defend their views with arguments:

(11) Ms Halsema (GL):

to conclude, you know that I and GreenLeft will always defend your right of free speech, even when you use it to hurt us. *Now I would like to ask you to practice the virtue of giving honest answers and engaging in open debate.* (our italics)

Mr Wilders (PVV):

What I would like to say to Ms Halsema is: Forget it! (. . .) (15 April 2008)

The four standards discussed above, which are summarised in Table 7.1, form the basis of decent behaviour in Dutch parliamentary debate; most Dutch MPs generally conform to these standards. It goes without saying that Table 7.1 is not an exhaustive list of decency standards for Dutch parliamentary debate. But in the subdiscussions in the Second Chamber that we analysed about how a parliamentary debate should be conducted, MPs who criticize Wilders' debating style mainly invoke the four decency standards we discussed in this section. We infer from this that they are the ones that are the most important. The fact that Slob in excerpt (2) appeals to three of these four decency standards illustrates that the decency standards under discussion can be separated analytically, but often coalesce in debating practice (and Wilders sometimes violates several decency standards at once – see also Section 4.3). The rationale behind the four decency standards in Table 7.1 (and others) can be best understood from an argumentation-theoretical perspective: they are part of a set of rules of behaviour required for conducting a reasonable and critical political discussion (see van Haaften, 2017).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> In the same line of reasoning, Wolthuis (this volume) argues that the notion of rationality or reasonableness at work in parliamentary argumentation games is an age-old standard in politics itself. For a discussion of rules for a reasonable and criti-

*Table 7.1 Four decency standards of Dutch parliamentary debate that Geert Wilders regularly violates*

A member of the Dutch Parliament must . . .	
Standard I	. . . discuss in a dignified way: be polite and refrain from using vulgar and pejorative language (swear words, curses, insults)
Standard II	. . . not overstate or polarize the issue: refrain from using adversarial language
Standard III	. . . play the ball, not the man
Standard IV	. . . argue, that is, defend standpoints with arguments and engage seriously with the arguments of others – especially when asked to do so

By violating these standards, Wilders exhibits bad manners and behaves improperly. For him, behaving improperly is an important strategy in presenting himself as an outsider vis-à-vis the political establishment.

It should be stressed that the decency standards of Dutch parliamentary debate that Wilders violates are not universal (cf. Section 1). Although the debating culture outlined here is not unique to the Netherlands – it is quite similar to that in Sweden, for instance (cf. Ilie, 2004) – there are also debating cultures where the approach is completely different. This is the case, for example, in British Parliament: the nature of debate in the House of Commons is generally highly polarizing and antagonistic. British MPs have a tendency to be extremely confrontational, which can involve subjecting opponents to all kinds of ridicule, including casting doubt on their intellectual capacities, and this seems not to be regarded as unreasonable, improper or at odds with parliamentary dignity (cf. van Haaften, 2011b). So, the four standards that apply for Dutch parliamentary debate seem absent in Great Britain.

In the case of British parliamentary debate, the prevailing language norms are a manifestation of a political constellation in which two major political parties traditionally take turns to be the government or the opposition. The main aim of political – and especially parliamentary – debate is to make the differences between the government and the opposition as clear as possible. This goes together with a strongly polarizing debating culture, with virtually ‘no holds barred’. By contrast, in the Dutch political constellation the aim is to avoid confrontations, to minimize or cover up any differences of opinion, and to achieve consensus. This is because the Netherlands has a multiparty system within which a coalition must always be formed, where compromises must always be agreed upon. A strongly polarizing debating style does not fit in with this, if only because formulating viciously antagonistic standpoints

cal discussion in general, see van Eemeren (2018) and van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992).

and opinions about other parties and individuals can have a boomerang effect as soon as people are required to work together politically (cf. van Haaften, 2011b). In other words, Wilders' debating style would be viewed much less as a form of bad manners in the British House of Commons. In a debating culture like that of British Parliament, one would therefore need to use different tools for the rhetorical strategy of 'suggesting outsider status'.

#### 4. GEERT WILDERS' STRATEGIC VIOLATION OF FOUR DECENCY STANDARDS WITH LINGUISTIC CHOICES

As we discussed in Section 1, the academic literature on populism suggests that language use is an important tool for displaying bad manners, but there is a lack of more detailed analyses of exactly how systematic choices of formulation contribute to violating the decency standards of a specific debating culture. We would therefore like to show in this section in more detail which linguistic choices are used by Wilders to violate the decency standards of Dutch parliamentary debate. We will demonstrate that Wilders' 'bad manners' go further than using insulting, person-directed expressions: this is just one rhetorical device in a much more overarching rhetorical strategy. Our analyses here are based on the same series of debates where the subdiscussions in Section 3 have also been drawn from, that is, Wilders' contributions to the General Political Debates 2007–18, supplemented with a number of other debates in which his debating style caused commotion.

##### 4.1 Violation of Decency Standard I: Using Vulgar and Negative Language

Wilders has mainly been criticized by his colleagues and in the media for his 'offensive' language use. These critical reactions usually highlight incidental choices of vocabulary, such as 'stark raving mad' (see Section 3). More detailed analysis reveals, however, that his use of vulgar and negative language goes far beyond incidental word choices: he violates decency standard I with a whole range of linguistic techniques, which he often uses *in combination* (van Leeuwen, 2016).

A first technique that can be distinguished is the use of pejorative similes and metaphors. For instance, Prime Minister Mark Rutte is 'the biggest wind vane in the Netherlands', State Secretary Fred Teeven is a 'doormat' for asylum seekers, GreenLeft leader Jesse Klaver is laughing 'a bit like a sheep', Labour Party member Hans Spekman is 'a walking woolen sweater', Labour Party leader Job Cohen is a 'company poodle', the government is 'FC Knudde' (incompetent soccer team in Dutch newspaper strip cartoon), an 'ailing team'

made up of ‘bunglers’ and ‘nobodies’. Labour Party leader Diederik Samsom and Liberal Party leader Mark Rutte are ‘the Bassie and Adriaan (clown/acrobat circus duo, popular on Dutch TV) of Dutch politics’, who ‘snuggle up like spoons under their little quilt’, the other opposition parties are ‘political beggars’ and ‘groupies at a boy band concert’, GreenLeft is a ‘beach party’, and interruptions from D66 leader Alexander Pechtold are ‘diarrhea’.

Wilders often combines such pejorative descriptions with other word choices that also have a negative connotation and reinforce the impression of a patronizing tone. Thus, his political opponents are regularly linked to verbs with a pejorative meaning, such as ‘bleating’, ‘babbling’, ‘squeaking’, ‘chattering’ and ‘toadying’. He also uses diminutives (formed in Dutch by adding the suffix ‘-je’ = ‘little’), which have a denigrating effect. His colleagues’ contributions are characterized as, for example, ‘prepared *little* texts’ (‘tekstjes’), ‘*little* speeches’ (‘praatjes’) or ‘*little* plans’ (‘plannetjes’). Socialist Party leader Jan Marijnissen has ‘Maoist *little* fists’ (‘vuistjes’); Pechtold is not a ‘pathetic, puny and hypocritical man’ (a description that in itself is pejorative, of course, in view of the chosen adjectives), but rather a ‘pathetic, puny and hypocritical *little* man’ (‘mannetje’) – which makes the description even more patronizing.

Finally, he sometimes addresses his colleagues by their first name. Using a first name is often an indication of solidarity, but in his case, it adds an air of denigration – especially because he combines those first names with other (already patronizing) word choices. In the following excerpt, for instance, he combines the (denigrating) use of the first name with pejorative diminutives:

- (12) Mr Pechtold is standing with a *little* pout near the interruption microphone and thinking back to (. . .) when his *little* friends in the press had actually already crowned him as the new Prime Minister of the Netherlands. Strange things can happen, *Alexander!* (5 November 2010; 32500) (our italics)

The *combination* of different pejorative formulation choices is, as we noted above, characteristic of Wilders’ language: the impression that he treats his colleagues pejoratively is usually the result of *clusters* of formulation choices, which taken together mean that he infringes the unwritten norms. In addition to (12), this is also clearly demonstrated by excerpt (13) in Section 4.3.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> A further example is also (1) in Section 3: in that excerpt, Wilders’ pejorative language use lies not only in the notorious ‘stark raving mad’, but also in the verb ‘babble’, which clearly has a negative connotation.

#### 4.2 Violation of Decency Standard II: Overstating or Polarizing the Issue

Unlike many other Dutch politicians, Wilders often speaks in hyperbolic language.<sup>13</sup> For instance, problems relating to the integration of Muslims are usually described in superlatives: according to Wilders, Islam is an ‘*enormous* danger’, which poses a ‘*megaproblem*’ for the Netherlands. He says that the Netherlands is facing ‘a *tsunami* of asylum seekers’, who are ‘*overrunning*’ the country. His criticism of his colleagues is also usually expressed in hyperbolic terms: he says that his colleagues are ‘*totally* refusing’ to do anything in the area of integration problems; other political parties are ‘*massively*’ to blame, and the government is leaving the borders ‘*completely* wide’ open. More in general, the government, which is a ‘*disaster*’ for the Netherlands and which Wilders opposes ‘to the *utmost*’, should be ‘*terribly* ashamed’: it is ‘*failing dramatically*’ on ‘*all* the themes that are so important to the Dutch people’. ‘*A great many* people’ think that what is happening now is ‘a *disgrace*’, elderly people are being ‘*hit brutally* hard in their pockets’, and so on.

Such examples illustrate that Wilders’ frequent use of superlatives serves to polarize both societal and political relationships.<sup>14</sup> his abundant use of ‘intensifying language’ (Liebrecht et al., 2016) gives an emphatically adversarial character to his debating style. As we argued in Section 3, this polarization of societal and political relationships is at odds with the second decency standard of the Dutch Parliament.

#### 4.3 Violation of Decency Standard III: Playing the Man, not the Ball

We discussed in Section 3 that Wilders often uses personal attacks, which he frequently further reinforces by combining them with many pejorative formulation choices. An illustrative example is the way he described the former D66 MP Bert Bakker in the 2008 General Political Debate (cf. van Leeuwen, 2015, p. 106):

- (13) Let me give one example of someone who really characterises that political elite. It is Mr Bert Bakker. We still remember him. Until recently he was a member of Parliament for D66. And what tough, politically correct words he *spouted!* He said that the Party for Freedom are racists, are all scum. He even had this written down, Bert Bakker, in the newspaper. But anyway,

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<sup>13</sup> For quantitative evidence, see Kalkhoven and De Landtsheer (2016).

<sup>14</sup> See also Pander Maat (this volume) who, among other things, shows that the PVV stands out in antagonistic representations of ‘the elite’ versus ‘the people’ and much more than other Dutch political parties refers to foreigners in a negative way.

thanks to the actions of the Turkish Ministry of Religious Affairs, his seat in the House for D66 was taken by Ms Koşer Kaya. And now *Bert* is trying to *scrape* together some money as a lobbyist for an aircraft manufacturer. And so he even came along to the Party for Freedom: a bit of *bootlicking*, a bit of *toadying*. Well, Madam Speaker, we told Bert Bakker to *go to hell*. Lobbying, OK, but don't come to us. And then suddenly – and this is characteristic of the elite – *Bert does a U-turn*, and look what I now find in the post: an actual letter of apology from Bert Bakker. (. . .) You see, Madam Speaker, that's what our elite are like. In public, it's all tough, politically correct little speeches, but as soon as they have a *little job*, they send a *little apology letter*. Some people have ideals and stand up for them, but others have a *spine made of jelly*. (26 September 2008; 31700)

Wilders links negative descriptions of his colleagues, for example, with verbs that have a negative connotation ('screech', 'spout', 'toady', and so on), and his diminutives ('little speeches', 'little job', 'little apology letter') and pejorative metaphors ('does a U-turn', 'spine made of jelly') also express disparagement. He additionally refers to Bert Bakker with his first name, which here (in combination with the other stylistic tools) further helps to create a patronizing effect.

As this example shows, Wilders' formulation choices often violate several decency standards at once. In (13) he emphatically plays the man, not the ball (violation of standard III), and in doing so makes numerous linguistic choices that in conjunction mean his language use can be characterized as 'offensive' (violation of standard I). Furthermore, he violates standard II as well: by suggesting that Bert Bakker exemplifies the elite to which he is so strongly opposed, his combination of personal attack and highly pejorative treatment serves here to also polarize the relationship between Wilders and his political colleagues.

#### 4.4 Violation of Decency Standard IV: Minimizing Room for Discussion

Wilders' violation of decency standard IV is not only a matter of explicitly refusing to provide arguments for standpoints (cf. Section 3 and the examples given there). It is striking that he also offers very little room for discussion in the way he *formulates* his standpoints. A relevant characteristic of his language use in this respect is the way he constructs his sentences grammatically, as can be illustrated with the comparison between our reformulation in (14) and Wilders' actual words in (15).

- (14) Madam Speaker, *the PVV believes that* the Koran is a book that incites violence. *We think that* the distribution of such texts is unlawful according to Article 132 of our Penal Code. In addition, *we are of the opinion that* the Koran

incites hatred and calls for murder and mayhem; (...) *We therefore believe that the Koran is a highly dangerous book; a book which is completely against our legal order and our democratic institutions.*

- (15) Madam Speaker, the Koran is a book that incites violence. I remind the House that the distribution of such texts is unlawful according to Article 132 of our Penal Code. In addition, the Koran incites to hatred and calls for murder and mayhem; (...) The Koran is therefore a highly dangerous book; a book which is completely against our legal order and our democratic institutions. (18 September 2007; 30800-VI)

The difference in formulation between (14) and (15) is the presence versus absence of so-called ‘complementation constructions’: sentence structures combining a main clause and a subordinate clause, where the main clause explicitly indicates someone’s viewpoint on an issue (‘we think that . . .’, ‘we believe that . . .’), which is then described in the subordinate clause (e.g. ‘distribution of such texts is unlawful’). Using such complementation constructions means that standpoints are not presented as facts but as opinions – which offers an opening for *other* views or opinions about the same question, and hence also room for discussion (cf. Van Leeuwen (2018) and the references mentioned there). A striking characteristic of Wilders’ grammatical choices is the relative *absence* (compared with the language use of other MPs) of complementation constructions (van Leeuwen, 2014; 2015, pp. 74–82).<sup>15</sup> In other words, he grammatically constructs his sentences in such a way that he offers minimal room for discussion: he states his opinions as *facts*. Offering minimal room for discussion fits in with his debating style, which is primarily aimed at confronting standpoints instead of an ‘open debate’ with an exchange of arguments.

The relative absence of complementation constructions is not the only linguistic factor that hinders the proper exchange of arguments in support of standpoints. The use of hyperbolic language, as discussed in Section 4.2, is another relevant factor here. Speaking in superlatives makes it difficult to hold a ‘reasonable’ discussion about the issues that are raised by Wilders: it is instantly all or nothing; he offers no room for a middle way.

A third factor is his use of definite articles: he systematically speaks about ‘*the* Dutch citizens’, ‘*the* Islam’, ‘*the* elite’, and so on: apparently univocal, clearly demarcated categories, which offer no room for a discussion about

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<sup>15</sup> For a *diachronic* study of Wilders’ use of this grammatical construction, see van Leeuwen (2018).



diversity found within such a group or phenomenon. Excerpt (16) illustrates this:

- (16) The majority of *the* Dutch citizens have become fully aware of the danger and regard *the* Islam as a threat to our culture. (. . .) However, their representatives in The Hague are doing precisely nothing. (. . .) (18 September 2007; 30800-VI)

The fourth and final factor that we would like to highlight here is that Wilders, although well-known for his ‘clear language use’ in Parliament (van Leeuwen, 2014), for which he has even won prizes, often formulates his standpoints in an implicit way. In these cases, he does not make his standpoint explicit, but merely creates the suggestion that he adopts a certain standpoint; see excerpt (17) for an illustration:<sup>16</sup>

- (17) Mr Wilders (PVV):  
However, even established political parties are waking up. This is something new. Christian Democrats in Germany are starting to understand it more and more. (. . .) The party leader of the CSU [Christian Social Union], Horst Seehofer, actually goes even further. He wants a complete halt to the immigration of Turks and Arabs to Germany. (. . .) He says: *multiculti is dead*. Even the German Chancellor, Mrs Merkel, says that the multicultural society has proved to be an absolute failure. Not a slight failure, but an absolute failure. *If she says that, it is saying quite a lot*. (. . .)

Ms Halsema (GL):

You are saying: Islam does not belong in our country. At least, that is what I assume.

Mr Wilders (PVV):

No, I did not say that.

Ms Halsema (GL):

No, but you quote German politicians and I assume that this is what you mean.

Mr Wilders (PVV):

No, I only quoted them.

Ms Halsema (GL):

Are you now standing there, quoting all those German politicians because they are so brave and dare to say all that, and then concluding that you do not dare to say it yourself?

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<sup>16</sup> Another illustration of how Wilders formulates his standpoints in an implicit way can be found in Jansen and van Leeuwen (2019). They argue, for instance, that his frequent references to ‘the people’ seem to have an argumentative function, but that it is hard to pin down what this argumentative function is, precisely because of a combination of several stylistic choices.

Mr Wilders (PVV):  
I used a quotation, nothing more. (5 November 2010; 32500)

In this example, Wilders creates the suggestion that he thinks Islam does not belong in the Netherlands. Not making that standpoint explicit is a linguistic choice that makes it difficult for his political opponents to engage in debate with him about it; because he formulates his standpoint in such an implicit manner, he offers less room for discussion than if he stated that standpoint explicitly. In this way, he in fact evades his burden of proof. Moreover, we can again see in his responses here the ‘uncooperative’ approach to providing answers that we discussed in Section 3 above: not actually addressing the points put forward by his political opponent, and thus ‘killing’ the debate.

Our detailed linguistic analysis in Sections 4.1–4.4 has revealed that Wilders employs a whole range of linguistic techniques that, also often *in combination*, make his debating behaviour come across as ‘improper’: his improper language use goes much further than merely using insulting, person-directed expressions – this is just one linguistic device in a much more overarching rhetorical strategy, in which more or less ‘hidden’ linguistic choices, such as not using complementation constructions, also play a role.

The linguistic analysis in Sections 4.1–4.4 has also made clear that there is no *necessary* relation between the specific linguistic choices Wilders has made in the excerpts we discussed, and the effect of violation of the four decency standards. Generally, there is no one-to-one correspondence between a specific linguistic technique and a specific rhetorical effect. A specific linguistic technique can be used to achieve different strategic rhetorical effects; vice versa, a specific strategic rhetorical effect can be achieved choosing different linguistic techniques. The relation between a certain specific linguistic choices and a specific strategic rhetorical effect can only be established in the linguistic-stylistic analysis of a specific speech event or a series of specific speech events in relation to its or their (institutional, situational and textual) context. The fact that there is no one-to-one correspondence between a specific linguistic choice and a specific rhetorical effect also means that there is no one-to-one correspondence between a specific linguistic technique and the violation of a specific decency standard. A specific linguistic technique can be used in practice to violate several decency standards and the violation of a specific decency standard can be achieved choosing different linguistic techniques.

## 5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

As yet, very little research has been carried out focusing on the question which specific linguistic choices populists employ in violating the decency standards of a political debating culture exactly, and in what way, in order to create and maintain the impression of being different from the political elite. The aim of our chapter was to contribute to filling this gap with a case study about the debating style of the populist leader of the Party for Freedom, Geert Wilders, and by analysing how he violates the mostly unwritten decency standards of *Dutch* parliamentary debate verbally. These decency standards (cf. Table 7.1 in Section 3) are observed by most of the members of the Second Chamber of the Dutch Parliament; as such, *violating* these decency standards on a regular basis is an important strategy used by Wilders to distance himself from the political elite.

In (political science) literature the use of a tabloid style of communicating, which includes adversarial, offensive and insulting language, is seen as an important tool for showing ‘bad manners’ (cf. Section 1). As our analysis has shown, this strategy is also relevant for behaving improperly in Dutch Parliament: using insulting, pejorative and adversarial language is at odds with two of these decency standards, and Wilders violates them systematically. However, as we have argued in Section 3, Wilders’ improper behaviour goes further than that. He not only frequently combines pejorative language with personal attacks (argumentative moves that – unlike in the British House of Commons, for example – are, in principle, not allowed in the Dutch Parliament) but also behaves ‘improperly’ by refusing to take part in real debate: he often does not engage seriously with his colleagues’ arguments. In other words, our analysis has revealed that Wilders’ improper behaviour goes, rhetorically speaking, *further* than just the use of a tabloid style of communicating. As such, this chapter shows that detailed analysis of the verbal violation of decency standards by studying subdiscussions in parliamentary debates gives added value: such analyses provide a more encompassing picture of what ‘improper behaviour’ in a specific debate culture entails.

A similar point can be made about studying *the precise linguistic realization* of violating decency standards. Our detailed linguistic analysis in Section 4 has revealed that Wilders employs a whole range of linguistic techniques that, also often *in combination*, make his debating behaviour come across as ‘improper’. The fact that a linguistic analysis reveals such relevant factors is again of added value: it provides insight in the concrete linguistic ‘building blocks’ that (populist) politicians use to create and maintain an anti-elitist image (cf. van Leeuwen, 2019, p. 336).

In this chapter we only highlighted *one specific* rhetorical strategy – and its linguistic realization – that populists often (but not necessarily) employ in creating an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ distinction. It should be stressed that the linguistic approach we used in Section 4 could also be of added value for studying *other* strategies said to be employed by populists. As van Leeuwen (2019, pp. 335–6) argues, other key characteristics of populist discourse, such as ‘focusing attention on “the people”’ or using ‘accessible, everyday language’, are ultimately the result of a series of specific linguistic choices (and their combination), which form the building blocks of these more overarching strategies. Analysing such linguistic building blocks, and also counting the frequency with which politicians use them, makes it possible to measure populism in an empirical, in-depth and nuanced way.

Finally, our analysis also elucidates why it is often so difficult for other politicians to deal with populist politicians in parliamentary debate, which has indeed been true for Wilders’ colleagues in the last decade. Debating with a politician who systematically violates the decency standards that regulate parliamentary debate means debating with a politician who does not accept or follow a prevailing system of norms (van Haften, 2011a; 2011b; 2017). In conclusion, we illustrate this with Wilders’ response to Pechtold’s criticism later in the interruption debate that we quoted in Section 3 above (see excerpt (10)). Pechtold asks Wilders to assess the financial implications of an alternative budget proposal that Wilders has in mind and calls on to ‘argue’ with him ‘in this political arena with its political rules’ – as befits a good politician in a consensus-oriented debating culture. Wilders’ reaction is most revealing:

(18) Mr Pechtold (D66):

I am trying to reach a serious comparison with you, Mr Wilders. If you are able to move 5 billion to 6 billion euros – I would not be able to do that myself, but never mind – then in this political arena with its political rules, which you also find so important for your politics, you must consent to an assessment of the financial implications. I would like to help you with the contacts. It can all be arranged in two weeks. Are you willing to do this?

Mr Wilders (PVV):

*I have no use whatsoever for the rules that Mr Pechtold is setting here. I have my own input.* I am indicating where we take away 5 billion to 6 billion euros, how we want to spend it, and he will have to be satisfied with that. *If not, then hard luck.* (19 September 2007; 31200)

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