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**Text and Context  
in Dutch Television Election Debates**

## **Abstract**

During the weeks before the elections of September 2012, several debates were broadcasted in the Netherlands, giving politicians the opportunity to show their skills. The candidates, perhaps unconsciously, had to follow a communication contract consisting of rules and habits brought forward by the format of the television program. To what extent did this contract structure the content of speech that was established throughout the debates? And how much freedom did the participating politicians have for strategically maneuvering and negotiating the program? In this thesis numerous fragments are analyzed, showing that candidates have many ways of performing the strategies they want. Both moderator questioning parts and direct debates are included in the research. The format and the moderator prove to be not very stringent if it comes to time limits, prescriptions of form, content and strategy. Consequently, there needs to be a greater emphasis on the role of politicians in both critical texts and content analyses of election debates.

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## Introduction

During the weeks before the elections of September 2012, several debates were broadcasted in the Netherlands, giving candidates the opportunity to present their political identities. With high amounts of viewers (see p.8), a large attendance of the politicians and a generally accepted influence on the election results (Praag & Brants, 2000), it is important to gain a broader understanding of the debates in general.

One step towards this goal is to uncover the framework of rules and conventions that is present in the program. Following Charaudeau (2002), this framework will be analyzed as a **communication contract**, characterizing the genre of all election debates, although in some aspects it is different for each separate program. This communication contract contains restrictions, imposed by the designers, that shape the state of affairs during the debates. The format, for instance consisting of limitations to speaking time, tends to have a constraining effect upon the candidates and therefore affects their behavior. Many critical texts in newspapers and blogs seem to exaggerate this effect. They are based upon a notion of an all determining format, reducing participating politicians to non-agents.<sup>1</sup>

However, as this research will show, there is a certain amount of freedom for the participants to perform their own strategies. First, the candidates turn out to **strategically maneuver** within the restrictions of the communication contract. This concept of strategically maneuvering has been elaborated by Eemeren (2008), and can be applied to many uses of argumentation. Second, the contract will be found to evolve, as various aspects are negotiated through language. This practice of **negotiation** is derived from the study of Atifi and Marcoccia (2006), who analyzed a similar debating genre in France.

Using these concepts, three of the September election debates will be analyzed, in order to find out how much freedom the candidates have for carrying out their strategies. Van Eemeren (2011)

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<sup>1</sup> - Johan Fretz, 5/9/2012, *Samsom gewonnen? We zijn niet achterlijk, salonsocialist!*  
[http://www.volkskrant.nl/vk/nl/9284/Johan-Fretz/article/detail/3311393/2012/09/05/Johan-Fretz-Samsom-gewonnen-We-zijn-niet-achterlijk-salonsocialist.dhtmlutm\\_source=scherm1&utm\\_medium=button&utm\\_campaign=Cookiecheck](http://www.volkskrant.nl/vk/nl/9284/Johan-Fretz/article/detail/3311393/2012/09/05/Johan-Fretz-Samsom-gewonnen-We-zijn-niet-achterlijk-salonsocialist.dhtmlutm_source=scherm1&utm_medium=button&utm_campaign=Cookiecheck)  
 - John Bijl, 24/5/2010, *RTL Premiersdebat: Hoe het format niet de inhoud bevorderde*  
<http://www.debatblog.nl/2010/05/24/rtl-premiersdebat-hoe-het-format-niet-de-inhoud-bevorderde/>  
 - Roderik van Grieken, 25/8/2012, *Verkiezingsdebat is te amateuristisch*  
<http://www.volkskrant.nl/vk/nl/11009/Roderik-van-Grieken/article/detail/3305844/2012/08/25/Verkiezingsdebat-is-te-amateuristisch.dhtml>

has demonstrated the relevance of contextual information to argumentation studies. In his article, he has concluded that “we need to take account ... of the extrinsic conventional constraints imposed on the strategic maneuvering” (2011, p. 157). My purpose is therefore to bring forward a broader understanding of the textual content in relation to the contextual constraints, established in the election debates.

### ***Embedding in the field***

This research will be positioned between the field of media genre and of argumentation theory. Relevant resources therefore are derived from these fields, and will be set out in this paragraph. I will bridge a gap between these two fields by taking a generic approach for analyzing argumentative speech.

In *Philosophical Investigations* the philosopher Wittgenstein (1953) has shown that language should not be contemplated by determining sentences being true or false. He argued for regarding them as acts, their meaning depending on the situational “language game”. The language philosopher Austin has afterwards elaborated this idea in his book *How to do things with words* (1975), and constituted a new paradigm called speech act theory. Wittgenstein used the concept of ‘language game’ to show how the meaning of words differ according to the context, pointing out that “you have to know something, to be able to ask how its called” (1953, p. 31). This ‘thing’ that one has to know corresponds with the concept of context.

Genres, in particular television genres, have often been researched focusing on audiences. Studies with this focus have raised questions such as “What cultural evaluations and hierarchies do audiences draw on?” and “How do audiences locate particular programs within this generic framework?” (Mittell, 2003). Despite the natural importance of audiences to the exploration of a television program, which is essentially relying on audience ratings, I have however chosen to leave audiences out of this thesis, and focus on the context established within the format.

A different study that has explored a television genre including its implicit uses and conventions was done by Dima Mohammed (2008). She used the pragma-dialectical analysis and integrated institutional factors into this methodology. Although the research subject was the British Prime-

Minister's question time, the integration of institutional rules and conventions to argumentation theory is quite relevant for this thesis.

### ***Methodology***

The analysis will be based upon a mix of two frameworks. First, I will use a semio-pragmatic approach of the election debates. This methodological framework goes back to Charaudeau (2002), who has introduced the communication contract to media studies. Atifi and Marcochia (2006) have exceeded the method in a study on French television, similar to mine. They offered a very useful model for the systematic analysis of a debating genre. Atifi and Marcochia started with an outline of the historical background of the genre, then they uncovered the communication contract, the visual codes at work and finally the transgression from the frame and accompanying negotiation of the participants. As for the communication contract and several forms of negotiation by the participants, I will follow their example.

Second, the pragma-dialectical framework offers a method for analyzing strategic maneuvering such as the spoken content of political debates. Eemeren and Houtlosser have provided a theoretical background for this approach. According to them "*The dialectical angle of the theory is manifested in the maintenance of critical standards of reasonableness, the pragmatic angle in the definition of all argumentative moves as speech acts functioning in a context of disagreement*" (1999, p. 480). Many studies have already employed the pragma-dialectical method for varying purposes. One of them was done by Morris and Johnson (2011). In their recent study of the American 2008 presidential debates they have attempted to uncover the "*interaction between the function of trying to win elections and the constraints imposed by the structure and format*" (2011, p. 286). Their quantitative method is to subdivide the utterances into categories of strategy, and draw conclusions from the amount of times every category is used. The pragma-dialectical aspect of my study lies in using the same strategy categories as Morris and Johnson, but only to qualitatively analyze how the candidates maneuver within their given space. By this, I will show to what extent the structure and format actually are a constraining factor to the candidates.

The three major debates are included in the analysis, by the following broadcasters:

-RTL, at August 26

-EO, at August 30

-NOS, at September 11

The corpus comprises in total 4 hours and 18 minutes in which candidates, moderators and audience members speak in various settings. The fragments that are relevant in this report, are transcribed following the conventions of transcription, outlined in Mazeland (2008). Additional aspects that will be included in the research are mise-en-scene, information about the broadcasters and some literature about election debates.

## Results

In this section the outcomes of the analysis will be outlined. First, the general communication contract is presented, consisting of the communication domain, the material circumstances, the identity of the participants and their purpose. The features of this contract will be provided with a historical background. Second, I will take a closer look at the specific parts of the contract that are made explicit during the program. The communicative activity that is bound by this contract will be analyzed to determine how the discourse constructs itself through interaction. Different forms of negotiation will be discussed.

### ***Communication Contract***

The communication contract consists of two parts: a general part that accounts for all Dutch election debates, and a specific part that is made explicit during the program. The general part will now be outlined.

The debates are part of a political **domain of communication**, and take place in the context of parliamentary elections. Political communication surrounding elections has had various media throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as flyers, written media, television talk shows and press conferences. Brants and Praag (2005) distinguish the Dutch campaigning culture from other countries as short and formal, cheap and little professional.

The form of a television debate was not chosen until 1963. In this year, a debate was organized in the program *'Op de degen'*. Vondeling (PvdA) and Toxopeus (VVD) had a discussion about contemporary political issues, regulated by Ferry Hoogendijk. Image 1 shows the sober setting in which this took place. Amusing detail is that the same Ferry Hoogendijk moderated the NOS-debate included in this study. After this event, every election campaign was accompanied by one or more debates. Most of them covered two party leaders (in Dutch: 'lijsttrekkers'), but sometimes more than two leaders participated, as in Dutch



**Picture 1: Election debate April 7, 1963**



politics many small parties are involved. The following picture shows the atmosphere of the second election debate, in 1966:



**Picture 2: Election debate March 22, 1966**

The debates of 2012 that constitute the corpus of this research, gave the floor to at least four party leaders. The Dutch political domain of communication consists of some features that need to be defined in order to obtain a sufficient understanding of the debates. (Praag & Brants, p. 112-115)

One feature that is important to mention is the relative strong position of public broadcasting in the Netherlands, whose traditional core functions are to inform people and critically monitor the political domain (Becker & Praag 2006, p. 165). Electoral debates fit in this tradition because of the function of informing the electorate and giving the politicians a chance to elaborate on their political motives.

As shown by Philip van Praag, Dutch democracy is often characterized by the appreciation of consensus (Becker & Praag 2006, p. 267). This '*poldermodel*' originates from before the Second World War, and implies a habit of compromises and deliberation between conflicting actors. However, research demonstrated a movement from this habit, resulting in more offensive campaigning during the last decade (Walter 2010).

The **material circumstances** range from the number of participants to the moment and place of the exchange (Charaudeau 2002, p. 304). Some are slightly different in each of the three debates. Prior to the debates, the program is subjected to a process of planning and designing by the makers. In the US, this process is very intensely influenced by the parties, who try to optimize all the circumstances for themselves. Also in the Netherlands there is a tradition of pressure from the political actors, although not as detailed as in the US. According to Praag en Brants (2000), in 1998 the NOS sent letters with format proposals to the candidates. In 1994, there even was a fight because none of the parties wanted to debate one-to-one with the party 'Groenlinks'.

The exchanges were all transmitted in the evening: at eleven PM (EO); at half past nine PM (NOS) and at half past eight PM (RTL). According to news items, the audience ratings were approximately 1.297.000 (EO); 1.673.000 (RTL) and 1.734.000 (NOS). The NOS-debate took place in the hall of the Lower House, and all of the eleven parties already in the parliament were represented. The RTL-debate covered only four party leaders, and the EO debate six.

NOS and EO are both public broadcasters, which means they are mainly funded by the government. RTL is a commercial broadcaster, depending on advertising incomes. The NOS keeps the following as a central mission, according to their website:

*"The NOS, as an integral part of public broadcasting, aims at being the primary source for information in the areas of news, sports and events, so that the Dutch citizens can judge developments in the world and determine their behavior. ..."* (Freely translated, [www.nos.nl](http://www.nos.nl))

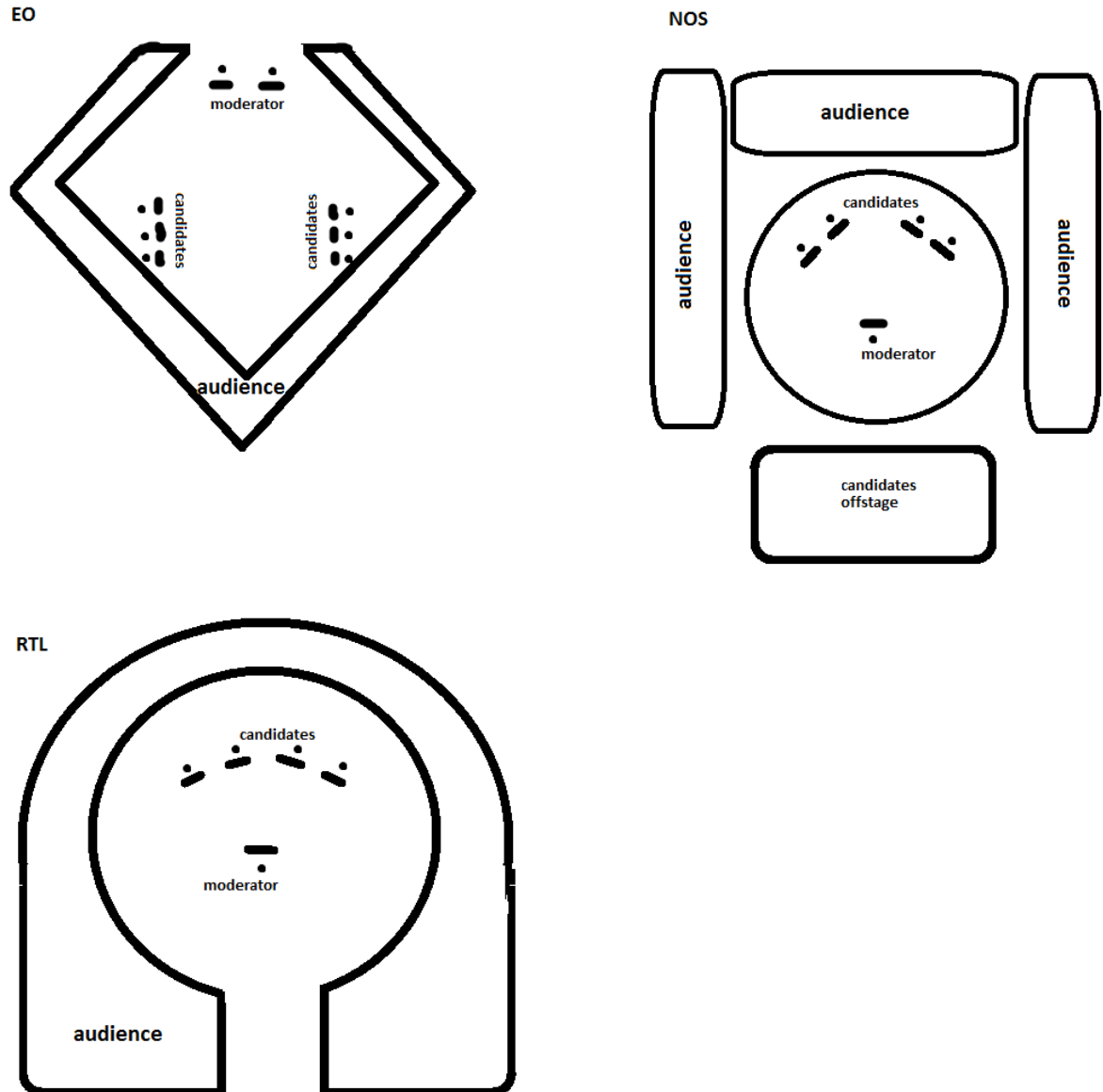
The EO also has a mission:

*"Our employees have the desire to, departing from a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, shape and pass the Good News of God's Kingdom. Because of this desire the EO wants to reach as many people as possible and contribute to society."* (Freely translated, [www.eo.nl](http://www.eo.nl))

RTL strives to:

*RTL Netherlands is a trendsetting multimedia company with a leading position in the Dutch consumer and advertising markets. The objective of RTL Netherlands is to serve our viewers and users of interactive media and advertisers the best we can by offering high quality and distinctive programming and services.* (Freely translated, [www.rtl.nl](http://www.rtl.nl))

In the debates, the position of the candidates was as follows:



On these graphics, three actors are involved with each a different **identity**. First, the politicians are present, who are each the leader of a party fraction in the Lower House. They are the public face of their party during the election campaigns. Second, in each debate there is at least one moderator. He or she leads the conversation and, as we will see, tries to move it in a certain direction. In the NOS-debate, there are two moderators with different roles: Ferry Hoogendijk

moderates the actual conversation, as Sasha de Boer only introduces general parts of the program. In the EO-debate, Andries Knevel and Tijs van den Brink alternate each other, and the RTL-debate is led by Frits Wester. Third, the audience generally has a passive role. Only a few times in the NOS-debate, someone from the audience is asked on the floor to introduce a discussion topic. In those cases, this person is described as a 'normal civilian', wanting to ask a question.

Roderik van Grieken, founder of the Dutch Debating Institute, has stated in his book *Een feest van de democratie* that multiple **purposes** of actors in debates can be defined. First, the general purpose of any debate is to generate new insights, and finally a consensus, through the exchange of arguments. However, this purpose appears to be the least important in the case of election debates. Second, the purpose specifically for producers is to inform many voters of the political standpoints they can choose from, regarding important societal issues. The third purpose Grieken has pointed out is for politicians to persuade the voters of their opinion, in order to win the elections. (2012, p. 11-22)

At the beginning of new parts of the debate, moderators often make explicit specific aspects of the communication contract. These often concern the length of speech that candidates are permitted to use for making their point. There are several manners in which this is done. Sometimes the moderator just says '*korte reactie*' or '*nog een laatste zin*', and sometimes he makes explicit the number of seconds that candidates are allowed to speak. A last manner of limiting speech length is to ask '*eens of oneens*', which happens frequently in the NOS-debate. As we will see in the next two chapters, the candidates easily find ways to circumvent these sorts of constraints.

### ***Moderator questioning***

During all of the three debates, a large amount of time is spent on questioning the candidates. Those questions offer the moderator a useful tool for influencing the length, form, content and the strategy used in the sequences that follow. As Schegloff (2007) puts it, the relation between the question and the answer is of *conditional relevance*: the first half of the pair creates an expectation of specific properties that the second half will have. However, as we will see, in this the moderator appears to be not always successful.

### Speech length

One way of negotiating the contract concerns the way candidates follow time restrictions that are often made explicit at the beginning of a round of questions. The analysis reveals that in 100% percent of the times a time restriction is explicitly mentioned in the NOS - and the EO-debate, it is exceeded with at least 5 seconds (3/3). The average crossing here even takes 10,7 seconds. Only in the RTL-debate, in which there are four rounds of kickoffs for which every candidate prepared a 30-second speech, none of the restrictions was crossed with more than 5 seconds, the average length was even shorter: 28,3 seconds (N=16). This means that, except in the RTL-debate, candidates are not very impressed by the rules imposed by the moderator. Apparently, they get a considerable amount of freedom to finish their sentences and take the time they want to. In some of the cases, the moderator gives the candidate a gentle rebuke after exceeding his time, as in the following fragment. Here, Mr. Pechtold has spoken for 36 seconds instead of the permitted 20 seconds:

EO - 34.05

		<i>Original</i>	<i>Translation</i>
1	Moderator	Einde van de 20 seconden	End of the 20 seconds
2		Het waren er meer.	There were more

Expressed time limitations are not the only way to predominate the length of a response. Moderators also use specific questions or words that signal their expectation of a short response, as we will see in the next paragraph.

### Form

In some of the questions posed to the candidates, a specific description is offered of the form the answers should have. With this, the moderators try to influence the length of the upcoming sequences, and also the understandability for the audience. In the following example, a question is asked by a 'plain civilian', about politicians changing their ambitions after the elections. Subsequently, this question is translated into an explicit instruction by the moderator.

## NOS - 1.10.27

		<i>Original</i>	<i>Translation</i>
1	Moderator	En daarom (.) ga ik de vraag nog even vertalen want	And that's why (.) I'm going to translate the question because
2		wat we willen horen van u	what we wish to hear from you
3		is een concreet punt dat voor u <u>absoluut</u> overeind moet blijven de komende kabinetsperiode.	is a concrete point that for you <u>absolutely</u> has to remain intact during the upcoming term.

In this example, an explicit request is pronounced of the desired response. By saying 'what we wish to hear from you', a quite large emphasis is put on the form the candidates must use. The words 'a concrete point' express this form. However, the form of the responses that follow seem to develop through time towards longer and less concrete utterances. First, Mr. Pechtold keeps relatively strict to the description: he gives one point, wrapped in a short speech. Then Mr. Roemer follows with three reasonable concrete points. Third, Buma gives his moralistic ideal, lacking of any concrete points whatsoever. Mr. Wilders follows Mr. Roemer's example with three points. Then Mr. Samsom rejects, and gives two extensive arguments for not giving any guarantees. Sixth, Mr. Rutte gives an idealistic speech of 1.13 minutes, without any concrete points.

So, the responses develop from one concrete point to a long speech the further they are removed from the question. It is clear that the candidates are troubled choosing one point of their program, at least when they notice that their colleagues fail to do so. However, the moderator gives it another try.

NOS, 1.15.50.

		<i>Original</i>	<i>Translation</i>
1	Civilian	Ik snap de politiek niet helemaal, want ik vroeg een standpunt en ik krijg hele verhalen	I don't fully get politics, for I asked one opinion and I get whole stories
2		ik vroeg echt maar een standpunt (wijsvinger omhoog wijzend)	I really just asked one opinion (index finger moving upwards)
3	Moderator	Ja nou ik ga <u>toch</u> nog even terug naar de heer Samsom, Meneer Samsom (.)noemt u nou eens een ding dat u toch echt wel heel belangrijk vindt	Yes well I <u>just</u> want to go back to Mr. Samsom, Mr. Samsom would you now call one thing that you do find really important
4	Mr. Samsom	ja ik kan heel veel dingen noemen die [ik belangrijk vind	Yes I can call many things that I [find important
5	Moderator	[nee nu echt een ding	[No now really one thing
6		wat u echt (.) heel erg belangrijk vindt	that you (.) really find important
7	Mr. Samsom	duurzame energie, onderwijs, eerlijk delen, [een soci...	Sustainable energy, education, sharing honestly, [a soci...
8		[?een ding, een ding	[?one thing, one thing
9	Moderator	Een ding	One thing
10	Mr. Samsom	>oh dat heb ik al eerder (.) drie keer genoemd< Onderwijs, onderwijs en onderwijs.	>Oh I mentioned that before (.) three times< Education, education, and education.
11	Moderator	Ah onderwijs onderwijs en onderwijs [nou	Ah education education and education [well
12		[dan zijn we het eens	[then we agree

As we see in this fragment, the moderator doesn't give up until she hears a concrete topic of Mr. Samsom. She receives support in this from Mr. Pechtold, who was the first one to answer the initial question, and the only one who immediately gave one concrete point. However, the rest of the candidates still haven't answered according to the prescriptions. The moderator, probably because of the time pressure, leaves it at this.

## Content

RTL, 40.49.

		Original	Translation
1	Moderator	Meneer Wilders ehmm moeten mensen mee gaan reserveren voor hun oude dag.	Mr. Wilders ehmm do people have to save more money for their old days.
2		We worden allemaal ouder, het kan meer, en anders gaat het geld misschien op.	We all get older, more is possible, and otherwise we might run out of money.

In this fragment, the moderator poses a question concerning a specific societal problem. In short, because of the raising life expectancy referred to in (2), there is said to be an end to the public purse for state pensions and healthcare costs. The possible solution suggested by the moderator is that people save more money during their lives. The question Mr. Wilders receives is simply to either promote, or reject this solution.

RTL, 40.53.

		Original	Translation
1	Mr. Wilders	Het is een <u>gênante</u> discussie.	It is an embarrassing discussion.
2		Iemand heeft laatst voorgesteld (.) om dat mensen hun hypotheek maar moesten opnemen om hh zorg te kopen	Somebody recently proposed (.) that people should use their mortgage for buying healthcare
3		>in wat voor land leven we< een discussie (.) of mensen ouder dan tachtig jaar nog wel geholpen moeten worden als ze hun <u>heup breken</u> ?	>In what kind of country do we live< a discussion (.) whether people above eighty should still be helped when they <u>break a hip</u> ?
4		Een gênante discussie in zo'n land wil ik helemaal niet leven. Pak de verspilling in de zorg aan zorg dat de mensen die het echte werk doen de verplegers en de verpleegsters niet nog s een experiment waar (.) in instellingen er regelvrij wordt gewerkt	An embarrassing discussion in such a country I don't want to live at all. Tackle the wastage in healthcare, make sure that people who deal with the real work the nurses (m) and nurses (f) not again an experiment of (.) working free of rules
5		dat het management de helft (.) kan je zo op straat zetten dan de verplegers en de verpleegsters kunnen hun werk doen dat kan goedkoper het kan efficiënter, <u>dat</u> is fatsoen,	That the management half of them you can easily fire then the nurses (m) and nurses (f) can do their work that can be cheaper and more efficient, <u>that</u> is decency



6		niet zorgen dat mensen hun huis op moeten eten of waar ze niks aan kunnen doen als ze ziek zijn om zorg te krijgen daar werken wij nooit (.) aan (.) [mee.	Not letting people eat their houses when they are sick which is not their fault to get healthcare with that we will (.) never (.) [participate
7	Moderator	[oke.	[OK.

In his response, Mr. Wilders declares to simply reject the question, by calling it 'an embarrassing discussion'. Sequence (3) is an accusation of discussing what he clearly thinks to be out of question: whether people above eighty should be helped after a hip fracture. However, this is a totally different question than the one posed by the moderator. Besides, in the rest of the response, Mr. Wilders opposes to another suggestion of an unknown person: namely to use mortgages for health spending. Additionally, Mr. Wilders decides to limit his response to the topic of healthcare. The only link to the question is that healthcare is a major expense when it comes to the elderly (CBS table, see digital sources). This choice of talking only about healthcare, shows his ability to use any rhetorical strategy he wants, regardless of the way the moderator tries to push him.

In short, the response has little to do with the question asked by the moderator. However, the moderator accepts it and before he goes on, he summarizes it as follows:

RTL, 41.42

		Original	Translation
1	Moderator	Meneer Wilders, uw antwoord is dus nee (ondertussen applaus)	Mr. Wilders, so your answer is no (meanwhile applause)

### Strategy

Another way of negotiation the contract concerns the strategy which the candidates use in their reaction to the questions asked by the moderator. Morris and Johnson composed a useful categorization of strategies used by the candidates of the American 2008 election debates. According to them, every utterance is (I) an *analysis of position-self*, (II) an *analysis of position-opponent*, (III) a *comparison of position*, (IV) a *comparison of position-co-optive*, (V) a *statement to*

*opponent*, (VI) a *policy statement* or (VII) a *ritualistic statement*. A vast majority of the moderator's questions demand an answer consisting of an analysis of position-self, or even just a policy statement. This means that the anticipated response includes only a description of the candidate's own opinion of the subject brought about. However, the actual answers include all kinds of strategies, depending on the preferences of the candidates.

The questions of the moderator sometimes seem to be effectively guiding the answering candidate to use a specific strategy.

RTL, 50.28.

		Original	Translation
1	Moderator	<De economie>.	<The economy>.
2		Meneer Wilders, wie gaat de prijs voor de crisis betalen.	Mr. Wilders, who is going to pay the price for the crisis.
3	Mr. Wilders	hh	Hh
4	Moderator	>welke inkomens<	>which income group<

In this fragment a who-question is formulated, consisting of a topic (the economy), a problem (the crisis), an assumption (that the crisis must be paid by some people) and a specification of the requested answer (an income group). 'To pay the price for the crisis' is a popular saying in Dutch when budget cuts are concerned. The question seems to aim for (I) an analysis of the position self by Mr. Wilders. Because of the words 'who' and 'which income group', one would grammatically expect the answer to be a specific group, in only a few words. However, considering the common use of extensive comments within the political domain of communication, the moderator probably aims for a longer response. Therefore, the anticipated response is likely to include a justification of the chosen answer. The actual reaction to the question starts as follows:

## RTL, 50.30

		Original	Translation
1	Mr. Wilders	Nou wat mij betreft (.) de <u>o</u> verheid.	Well if you ask me (.) the <u>g</u> overnment.

As expected, this statement is followed by an extensive justification. The strategy used by Mr. Wilders is in this part of the response indeed a (I): he outlines the position that he takes considering spending cuts. The question-answer pair seems to fit, as the question aims for a specific subject to cut back on, and the response corresponds to this. However, it doesn't fulfill the specification of the question, 'which income group', as the government is not an income group but an institution. On top of that, when Mr. Wilders continues, he changes his strategy to (III): a comparison of his own position with the position of the opponents:

## RTL, 51.01

		Original	Translation
1	Mr. Wilders	En dat gaat vanaf volgend jaar al,	And that goes from next year,
2		in tegenstelling tot Kunduz (wijst naar rechts)	Unlike Kunduz (pointing to the right)
3		gaat dat <u>volgend</u> jaar al naar de burger toe.	it is going to the citizens <u>next</u> year
4		En <u>dat</u> is belangrijk, koopkracht voor burgers	And <u>that's</u> important, spending power for citizens

There is no sign of discontent with the other actors in the program, when Mr. Wilders shifts his strategy like this. From this, we can conclude that it is common and accepted. The same is proved by a fragment from a different part of the same debate, where it is also seen as quite normal to use a different strategy than initiated by the moderator's question.

EO, 59.30.

		Original	Translation
1	Moderator	Meneer Rutte stel nou (.) onverhoopt (.) meneer Samsom wordt toch de grootste	Mr. Rutte what if (.) Unexpectedly (.) Mr. Samson gets the largest
2		>gaat u dan weer de kamer in eigenlijk?<	> will you go back into the Lower Chamber? <
3		(2.1)	(2.1)
4	Mr. Rutte	Hh Nee laat ik zo zeggen als ik geen ehheh minister president ben	Hh No let me just say if I'm not ehheh Prime Minister
5		Dan (.) word ik weer fractie hh voorzitter. [ja.	Then (.) I become hh fraction leader again. [ja
6	Moderator	[en dan gaat u vier jaar >in de tweede kamer<	[and then you go >into the second chamber< for four years
7	Mr. Rutte	Zeker als dat oppositievoeren zou zijn tegenover meneer Samsom zal het op zichzelf zeer [uitdagend zijn	Absolutely if that would mean taking opposition against Mr. Samsom it would in itself be very [challenging
8	Moderator	[ik had het over meneer Roemer [Meneer Samsom...	[I talked about Mr. Roemer [Mr. Samsom ...
9	Mr. Rutte	[mijn excuus ...	[my excuse ...
10	Moderator	ne:e mag allebei	n:o both are possible
11	Mr. Rutte	maar ik bedoelde tegenover	but I meant against
12		(gelach overige politici)	(laughter of the other politicians)
13	Mr. Rutte	ik bedoelde tegenover de heer Roemer (wijst naar Roemer)	I meant against Mr Roemer (points to Roemer)
14	Mr. Roemer	Ja (onverstaanbaar)	Yes (inaudible)
15	Mr. Rutte	Dan is dat heel spannend, maar ik ga daar alles aan doen (.) [om dat te voorkomen	Then that would be very exciting, but I will do anything (.) [to prevent it
16	Moderator	[oke	[okay
17	Mr. Rutte	want dan is dat h:eel slecht nieuws >voor Nederland<	because that would be v:ery bad news >for the Netherlands<

The question in sequence 2 can't really be grouped in any of the tactic categories, as it seems to be a part of the closing phase of the debate. The kind of response the moderator is most likely to aim for, is a yes or no, supplemented with an explanation. Similar to what we saw in the previous fragment, the answer starts off congruently with the question: in this case with a 'no'. However, Mr. Rutte continues rather messy, and transforms the answer to a positive one. This is only evident, though, when one knows that a fraction leader is part of the Lower House. As a result, the moderator repeats his question in 6, using slightly different words. Again, it is a yes or no-question, and again Mr. Rutte starts his response with a corresponding 'absolutely'. When he continues, however, he ends up using strategy (V), a statement to opponent.

### ***Direct debate***

Apart from question rounds directed by the moderator, the debates naturally also consist of direct debating between two or more candidates. In those direct debates, the moderator often tries to keep the conversation to one specific subject, or he tries to limit the length of the discussion. In this chapter, we will see how much freedom the candidates get to bring to practice those specific strategies they had chosen to use.

### **Limiting speech length**

During the direct debate, speech length limitations are slightly different, since moderators generally try to encourage a smooth discussion. However, there are situations in which the moderator wants to cut off the discussion, due to time considerations. In this example the moderator tries to give the floor to Mr. Wilders, whilst Mr. Rutte just started assaulting Mr. Samsom.

EO, 38.00

		Original	Translation
1	Mr. Rutte	Meneer Samsom ik ben het eens, altijd met doorpakken maar als we hadden gedaan (.)	Mr. Samsom I agree with you, allways with persevering but if we had done (.)
2	Moderator	Een zin! [Een zin	One sentence! [One sentence
3	Mr. Rutte	[wat u aanvankelijk wilde	[What you originally wanted

4		dan hadden we een permanente geldstroom aangelegd tussen noord en zuid europa, en waren we nu (.) op weg, niet alleen naar een bankenunie (.) maar ook naar (.) het volledig garant staan voor de spaargelden in Zuid-Europa en dan waren we op weg naar een eurobond en dat betekent dat Nederland garant staat voor leningen in landen als Spanje en Italië die totaal niet op orde zijn	Then we had applied a permanent cash flow between the North and South of Europe, and we were now (.) heading, not only for a bank union (.) but also towards (.) fully guaranteeing money savings in the South of Europe and then we were heading for a Euro-federation and that means that the Netherlands guarantee savings in countries like Spain and Italy who are not in good order at all
5	Moderator:	[Punt! Het woord is aan Geert Wilders	[Point! The floor is for Geert Wilders
6	Mr. Samsom:	[(onverstaanbaar)	[(Unintelligable)

As we see in (2), the moderator tries to end the single combat by allowing Mr. Rutte only one other sentence. Mr. Rutte, in (4), uses several strategies to clam as much information in this sentence as possible. First, he uses the construction 'not only – but also' for putting two separate points into one grammatically correct sentence. Second, the sentence comprises a chain of cause and effect relations. Each chain segment is insufficient on its own. This way Mr. Rutte forces the moderator to let him speak, and meanwhile makes a strong and clear assault to Mr. Samsom, who doesn't get the chance to defend himself.

There is another, more implicit way of limiting speech length in direct debates. In one section of the NOS debate, a traditional debating format is used, consisting of a proposition that is projected on screens. The design specifically aims for a direct debate about this proposition, although it is advanced by a short-reaction round along all the candidates on the floor. This is formulated as follows:

#### NOS 57.50

		Original	Translation
1	Moderator 1	En nu een debat met Mark Rutte, Alexander Pechtold en Kees van der Staaij.	And now a debate with Mark Rutte, Alexander Pechtold and Kees van der Staaij.
2		(Kandidaten lopen naar hun plek)	(Candidates walk to their positions)
2		En de stelling luidt: <In deze crisistijd zijn belastingverhogingen onvermijdelijk	And the proposition says: <In these times of crisis, taks raising is inevitable>.

3		Ferry	Ferry
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After a non-relevant joke, the second moderator (Ferry) takes over. He gives two options for answering.

NOS, 57.57

		Original	Translation
1	Moderator 2	De stelling dus! <In onze crisistijd is belastingverhoging onvermijdelijk>	So the proposition! <In our times of crisis eh tax raising is inevitable
2		>Eens oneens< (wijst naar Rutte)	>Agree disagree< (points to Rutte)
3	Mr. Rutte	Voor volgend jaar is het onvermijdelijk, omdat de crisis zo diep is als ie gaat, maar daarna zo <u>sne</u> mogelijk belasting verlagen	For next year, it is inevitable, because the crisis goes as far as it goes, but after that as <u>soon</u> as possible decreasing taxes
4	Moderator 2	Dus eigenlijk eens	So basically agree

The multiple-choice question is at first not answered with the corresponding 'agree' or 'disagree', as we see in the reaction of Mr. Rutte. Therefore, the moderator corrects him with a summary that would correspond to the question. This appears to be effective, as the following answers do include one of the given options. Also, except for a short addition of Sap, the speech length is effectively limited.

NOS, 58.15

		Original	Translation
1	Ms. Sap	Eens	Agree
2		Maar het ligt er maar aan welke belastingen je verhoogt	But it depends on which taxes you raise
3	Moderator	>Meneer van der Staaij<	>Mr. Van der Staaij<
4	Mr. Van der Staaij	Oneens	Disagree
5	Mr. Pechtold	Eens	Agree

### Using the format

In the start-up phase of the EO-debate, an interesting example of negotiation took place between the moderators and the candidates. Resulting from several movements in the media<sup>2</sup> about the untruthfulness of politicians during the election period, the program makers have decided to focus on 'jokken', which is a childish word in Dutch for lying.

#### EO, 6.29

		Original	Translation
1	Moderator 1	Een ding afspreken, er wordt vanavond (.) <u>niet</u> gejoint.	Let's agree on one thing, there will be (.) <u>no</u> fibbing tonight.
2		[Heren?	[Gentlemen?
3	Unknown	[hihihi	[hihihi
4	Moderator 1	Eens?	Agree?
5		(0.4)	(0.4)
6	Moderator 2	Meneer Sybrant van Hearsma Buma, er wordt niet gejoint!	Mr. Sybrant van Hearsma Buma, there will be no fibbing!
7	Mr. Buma	Ik zeg, wij gaan niet jokken vanavond.	I say, we are not going to fib tonight.
8	Moderator 1	Oke	OK.
9	Moderator 2	Nee, het kwam er wat minnetjes uit	No, it sounded a bit tatty.

In this fragment it already becomes clear that the attitude of the candidates towards this subject is rather giggly. Sequence 3 is literally a noise of laughter, but also the smiling face of Buma during his declaration in 7 confirms this attitude.

#### EO 14.00

		Original	Translation
1	Samsom	U vertelt, dat wij de staatschuld laten oplopen, bij ons is de staatschuld (.) in 2017, l:ager dan bij u	You tell that we let the national debt increase, the debt is with us (.) in 2017, l:ower than with you
2	Moderator	>Zegt u dat ie jukt<	> Are you saying that he lies <

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2 [www.factcheck.nl](http://www.factcheck.nl)



3	Samsom	Nogmaals het is een klein dingetje	Again it is a small thing
4	Moderator	Zegt u dat ie jukt? (wijst naar Rutte)	Are you saying that he lies? (points to Rutte)
5	Samsom	Maar omdat u afgelopen zondag ook al mijn collega op deze manier klemree, maak ik er wel een punt van	But because last Sunday you overruled my colleague this way, I will make a point of it
6	Rutte	Meneer Roemer, [eh Samsom	Mr. Roemer, [eh Samsom
7	Samsom	[In een democratie mogen mensen van mening verschillen, en mensen mogen uw mening ondersteunen en de mijne,	[In a democracy, people may have different opinions, and people may support your opinion and mine,
8	Rutte	Maar u gaat... Ik zal ook de feiten zijn dat u de belasting op energie u u gaat de energiebelasting op bedrijven verhogen	But you are ... I will also the facts are that the tax on energy you you are raising the taxes for companies
9	Samsom	Meneer Rutte, mensen moeten op een ding kunnen vertrouwen. Uw mening, mijn mening, we moeten allebei in ieder geval de waarheid spreken, bij ons is de staatsschuld in 2017, 478 miljard en bij u is ie 9 miljard hoger	Mr. Rutte, people must be able to rely on one thing. Your opinion, my opinion, we should both at least speak the truth, with us the debt in 2017, is 478 billion and with you is 9 billion higher

In this fragment, it becomes clear how politicians can use aspects of the communication contract, in this case the accent on truthfulness, for their own strategic maneuvering. As we saw in fragment 6.29, the moderators previously planned to pay close attention to fibbing. Mr. Samsom could therefore rightfully assume that an accusation of lying against Mr. Rutte would not be overshadowed by the moderator. In sequence 1 of fragment 14.00, he thus confronts Mr. Rutte with his own statement, and immediately the moderator intervenes by verifying whether this is really an accusation of lying. As the politicians don't seem to notice his question, he repeats it with emphasis and a pointing finger to Mr. Rutte. The situation now created consists of the moderator and Mr. Samsom acting together against Mr. Rutte. Indeed Mr. Rutte seems to have trouble defending himself. As a result, he makes a mistake in sequence 6. Sequence 8 even comes out as a stutter. The situation of two against one is confirmed when later, after some moments of talking through each other, the moderator gives the floor to Mr. Samsom.

EO, 14.25.

		Original	Translation
1	Mr. Samsom + Mr. Rutte	(Onverstaanbaar)	(Unintelligable)
2	Moderator	een ding te gelijk, een tegelijk	One thing at a time, one at a time
3		Meneer Samsom heeft het woord	Mr. Samsom is speaking
4	Mr. Samsom	Meneer Rutte, mensen moeten op een ding kunnen vertrouwen	Mr. Rutte, people have to be able to trust one thing

We have now seen how Mr. Samsom makes clever use of a feature of the communication contract in his own strategical maneuvering. It is not possible to determine whether Mr. Samsom's party had a hand in constituting this feature, or if the program makers initiated the accent on truthfulness themselves. Being restricted to the textual content of the debate, it is however possible to demonstrate what happens inside the conversation.

### Shifting the topic

Naturally, in the direct debates between two or more politicians, the moderator plays an important role. Apart from restricting speech length, moderators try their best to move the conversation towards specific topics. One typical fragment in which this happens is the following. The moderator wants a debate about the scoot-mobile. Mr. Pechtold and Mr. Roemer were discussing whether there should be free market forces within healthcare. The moderator interrupts them as follows:

EO, 30.30

		Original	Translation
1	Moderator	Ik haal u even uit uw systeemdissussie, hoe interessant ook	I will now take you out of your system discussion, although interesting,
2		en ik vraag bijvoorbeeld aan de heer Pechtold,	and I ask for instance
3		Hh heel veel mensen hebben een scootmobiel, krijgen ze voor het overgrote deel vergoed, moet dat zo blijven?	Hh many people have a scoot mobile, of which the vast majority is refunded, does it have to remain like that?

4	Mr. Pechtold	Nee natuurlijk niet	No of course not
5	Moderator	Pardon?	Excuse me?

Here you can see that, although it is not a question round, the moderator tries to move the discussion in the preferred direction by asking a yes/no question to one of the candidates. Indeed, Mr. Pechtold reacts by completing the adjacency pair with a negative reply in 4. Following the rules of Conversation Analysis (Mazeland 2008), meaning is constructed throughout the interplay of utterances. According to the answer given in 4, Mr. Pechtold interprets the question as a request for a short yes or no-answer. However, from 5 we can conclude this was not the intention of the moderator. As it was still taking place inside a free debating phase of the program, the moderator clearly wanted the discussion to continue. Apparently he only wanted to move them to the issue of the scoot-mobile. This interpretation is finally also made by Mr. Pechtold who, after this interruption, gives a more extensive answer. When he notices the moderator doesn't interrupt him for a supplementary question, he explicitly decides to take Mr. Roemer as a recipient again:

EO, 30.48.

		Translation	Original
1	Mr. Pechtold	En ik zeg tegen meneer Roemer	And I say to Mr. Roemer
2		daar is maar een aanbieder: De staat. En wat heb je daar? Budgetten, die sterker stijgen. Alleen al in de ouderenzorg geven wij drie keer meer uit als in Duitsland.	There is only one provider: The state. And what happens there? Budgets, rising stronger. Only just in the elderly care, we spend three times more than in Germany.

### Contemning the topic

In the paragraph about content shifts within moderator questioning parts, we saw Mr. Wilders implicitly denying the question and suggesting another discussion subject. A similar action can be performed more explicit during a debate, as Ms. proves in the following. Here, a proposition is projected on screens, and several candidates are asked to give their opinion. The proposition reads: “the young generations pay too much for the healthcare of the elderly”.

NOS, 38.00

	Original	Translation
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1	Moderator	Mevrouw Thieme	Ms. Thieme
2	Ms. Thieme	Nou als eh	Well if eh
3		Eerlijk gezegd vind ik het een onfatsoenlijke stelling.	Honestly I find it an undecent proposition.
4		De ouderen hebben ons eh welvaart gebracht en nu stellen we ons de vraag of wij wel geld over hebben om de ouderen zorg te verlenen.	The elderly have brought us wealth and now we ask whether we have money left for the caring of the elderly.
5		Ik eh vind dat als we de zorgkosten omlaag willen brengen moeten we zeker ook wat doen aan preventieve gezondheidszorg en daar hoor ik in het debat te weinig over.	I eh think that if we want to lower the costs for healthcare, we sure must do something with preventative healthcare and I hear too little about that.
6	Moderator	Ja	Yes
7	Ms. Thieme	Met name juist de preventie zorgt in het debat voor kosten, met name van welvaartsziekten die bij jongere generaties met name voorkomen.	Especially the prevention in the debate induces costs, especially of prosperity diseases that exist especially among younger generations.

In (3), Ms. Thieme classifies the discussion as 'indecent', just as Mr. Wilders did in the RTL version of this topic, and continues about the topic that, according to her, needs to be addressed. This topic she proposes is the costs that should be lowered by preventing illnesses, instead of the burdens that need to be allocated. It is not only the moderator who she is correcting, but also her fellow candidates, as we see in (5): '*and I hear too little about that*'. In this way Ms. Thieme manages to make the point with which she wants to stand out, even though it didn't fit the question. Nevertheless, the moderator tries to move the discussion back to the proposed topic:

## NOS. 38.27

		Translation	Original
1	Moderator	Mag ik toch even uw antwoord op de vraag moeten de ouderen meer gaan betalen of moet de zorgpremie inkomensafhankelijk,	Can I just have your answer to the question do the elderly have to pay more or must the care premium become income dependent,
2		Dus naarmate je meer verdient meer betalen aan de zorg,	So as you earn more pay more for healthcare

3	Ms. Thieme	Het moet inkomensafhankelijk maar mijn <u>punt was</u> , dat wij iets belangrijks over het hoofd zien, namelijk dat we tientallen miljarden euro's kunnen besparen als we veel meer gaan inzetten op preventie	It must become income dependent but my <u>point was</u> , that we overlook something important, namely that we can save dozens of euros if we put much more effort into prevention
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In this fragment, Ms. Thieme's strategy becomes even clearer. The moderator attempts to move the discussion back to the allocation of the raising costs, by offering two possible solutions. Those solutions are similar to the options in the previous discussion, and doing so he seems to force Ms. Thieme in this discussion. Ms. Thieme now sees no room for rejecting the question, and chooses a side with a significant faster voice, and in only a few words. Immediately after this, her voice slows down and she points out what they are 'overlooking'. Concluding, Ms. Thieme manages to make the point of her preference twice, and removes the attention from the subject that she clearly doesn't like talking about.

## Conclusions

In the introduction to this research we asked ourselves how much freedom the participants of Dutch election debates acquired. Many critical reactions after the debate seemed to be based upon an assumption that the format and program makers are the only one with influence on the content. However, in the preceding result section, we saw many examples proving the opposite. First, although not as dominant as in the United States, there happens to be a tradition of negotiating with the parties about the topics dealt with during the debates. In the 'polder model', characterizing Dutch politics, it is common that all the (small) parties have their say in the state of affairs.

Second, in both the moderator questioning and the direct debating, moderators often don't succeed in having a hold upon the conversation. Although they try to affect the length, form, subjects talked about and strategies used in the responses, politicians appear to be free to do whatever they prefer, however suits them. In many cases, the moderator omits enforcing his request after receiving an undesired answer and leaves it at this. In some cases the moderator however does repeat the request for a specific form or discussion topic, as in the example of the NOS, where the moderator asks for a concrete point. After four times asking, and in addition supported by Mr. Pechtold, she finally receives one of the responses in the desired form. In many of the other examples of moderators repeatedly enforcing a form or discussion subject, it is simply ignored by the candidates.

No matter what strategy the moderator uses to keep a hold of the conversation, the candidates almost always strategically maneuver through the format. For instance, they change topics (page 25-26), emphasize certain messages (page 27), and even use the format for their own purposes and create a situation of two against one (page 24-25). Consequently, there needs to be a greater emphasis on the role of politicians in both critical texts and content analyses of election debates.

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