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RHETORICAL STYLE OF POLITICAL SPEECHES
a Linguistic Approach

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Rhetorical Style of Political Speeches: a Linguistic Approach

1 Introduction

In the Dutch political landscape, Geert Wilders has been one of the politicians who has attracted most attention. Wilders is a controversial politician. He is the leader of the Party for Freedom (PVV), and the main point at his political agenda is to stop what he calls 'the islamization of the Netherlands'. Internationally he is most known for his anti-Islam movie *Fitna*, which deals with this subject as well.

Wilders is not only well-known for *what* he says. He also draws attention with *how* he puts his message into words, and not only due to the use of words like 'completely nuts', 'bonkers', and 'insane' to characterize his opponents in parliamentary debates. Wilders is able to formulate his ideas very effectively, as is for instance indicated by the fact that he won a 'plain language award' in 2007 for his clear style. With that, Wilders is an interesting case for my PhD project, which is oriented at stylistic analyses of speeches.

In this paper, I want to sketch the type of stylistic research that I have in view for my project. To that end, I will divide my paper into two parts. Firstly, I want to discuss the question how style can be analyzed in a systematic way. Before I sketch my own objective, I will give a very brief overview of how style normally is analyzed within the traditions of Rhetorical Criticism and Critical Discourse Analysis (which is summary of van Leeuwen (2008)). In the second part of my paper, I want to argue that style is not only a matter of 'foregrounded' rhetorical figures and tropes, but that it can also be found in 'inconspicuous' linguistic means which are neglected in most stylistical studies. This will be illustrated by using an example from a speech by Geert Wilders.

2 Style in Rhetorical Criticism and Critical Discourse Analysis

In the first year of my project, I have made an inventarisation of the main traditions in which speeches are an important object of study. This inventarisation shows that the two main traditions in which speeches are an important object of study are Rhetorical Criticism and Critical Discourse Analysis. However, it is striking that within Rhetorical Criticism practically no one pays attention to style seriously: barely any attention is given to the question what the rhetorical effects of certain formulations are (cf. Leroux 2002; van Leeuwen 2008).

More attention for style can be found within Critical Discourse Analysis. Characteristic for CDA is the basic assumption that language use is ideologically driven: language use reflects and maintains, implicitly and explicitly, power relations and social inequality, and the purpose of CDA is to analyze how these inequalities are expressed in language use.

Characteristic for most of these analyses is a focus on revealing how a speaker uses certain strategies to communicate his message, and which linguistic means are used to achieve these strategies. The approach is typically 'top down': the strategies occupy centre stage, and to highlight these strategies linguistic means are analyzed which are relevant for the strategy.

A representative example is an article by Cheng (2006) in *Discourse & Society*: she analyses two inaugural addresses by the Taiwanese president Chen Shui-bian, and focusses on the question which linguistic means the president used to (i) defuse dangerously tense relations with China; (ii) to repair crucial relations with the USA, and (iii) to gain public support in the country for the policies of the government.

Cheng analyzes, among other things, what kind of words are most frequently used in both addresses, how the president skillfully exploits the vague referential function of *I* and *we*, and she discusses several eye-catching rhetorical figures, like antithesis and anaphora.

An important problem in such an approach however, is the ad hoc-basis of the analysis: from a readers' perspective, it looks as if a 'random and selective choice' is made 'which suits the

interpretation of the analyst' (van Rees 2005: 96). This problem is characteristic for many CDA-analyses: a transparent apparatus for analysis is predominantly lacking.

3 Checklist

In my project, I want to analyze style in a *more systematic* way, by using a checklist in which possible relevant linguistic means for stylistic analysis are mentioned. This checklist is based on the checklist provided by the famous literarian stylisticians Leech & Short (Leech & Short 2007[1981]; see appendix), and consists of a list with 'points of interest' for stylistic analysis. Arie Verhagen has made a Dutch version of this checklist, which will function as my starting point for my analyses.

The checklist is divided in different kinds of categories of analysis: word use, grammatical phenomena, classical rhetorical figures & tropes, cohesion & coherence.

The checklist enables the analyzer to identify *bottom up* a considerable amount of possible relevant linguistic means in a relatively short time, in a more comprehensive and systematic way than is common in most existing stylistic analyses of speeches.

4 Style in 'inconspicuous' linguistic means

In most stylistic analyses, considerable attention is paid to figures of speech (category C in the checklist) and, fairly ad hoc, to stylistic means that can be categorized under A (word use) and D (context and cohesion); barely any attention is paid to *grammatical* categories of analysis (see B in the checklist). In other words, most analyses focus on 'foregrounded' or 'eye-catching' means. However, as I will argue in the rest of my paper, 'style' is not only a matter of these 'foregrounded' means, but can also be found in 'inconspicuous' grammatical elements which are neglected in most stylistical studies. Grammatical phenomena can sort out rhetorical effects which can be worth analyzing, as I will illustrate by a part of a speech by the Dutch politician Geert Wilders.

Before I go into this fragment, it is important to sketch the theoretical framework of my project: cognitive linguistics, and more specifically the book *Constructions of Intersubjectivity* by Arie Verhagen (2005), who draws on some fundamental ideas from the French linguists Anscombre and Ducrot. First, I give an idea of the grammatical phenomena Verhagen focuses on. Then I will more specifically discuss a rhetorical effect of complementation constructions. After that I will illustrate this theory on complementation constructions with the fragment of the Wilders-speech, to show that attention on such a grammatical phenomenon can be worthwhile in stylistic analysis.

In his book, Verhagen discusses a range of grammatical phenomena a speaker can use to direct a hearer to draw a certain conclusion, when the situation itself does not necessarily have to be seen by everyone as supporting such a conclusion. To give an easy example: the utterance *a small chance* and *little chance* can very well indicate the same 'objective' situation (namely a chance of approximately 20%), but the inferences a hearer makes, are very different – as can be shown by the following examples (Verhagen 2005: 43-45):

- (1) There is a small chance that the operation will be successful.
 - a) So let's give it a try.
 - b) # So let's not take the risk.
- (2) There is little chance that the operation will be successful.
 - a) # So let's give it a try.
 - b) So let's not take the risk.

When someone says 'There is a small chance that the operation will be successful', a logical inference is 'so let's give it a try'. However, when someone says 'There is little chance that the operation will be successful, the inference will be 'let's not take the risk'. In other words, the

argumentative *orientation* of the inference made by the listener takes the opposite direction in (1) and (2): *a small chance* steers the addressee towards a positive conclusion ('there is a chance'), while *little chance* steers towards a negative one ('there is no chance'). Important to note however, is that the argumentative *strength* of *a small chance* and *little chance* is less than when the speaker would be using *a chance* or *no chance* respectively: there is more room for negotiation and discussion. These rhetorical characteristics can be summarized as follows (Verhagen 2005: 45):

Argumentative orientation and strength of α -chance		
	Orientation	Strength
<i>a chance</i>	+	high
<i>a small chance</i>	+	low
<i>no chance</i>	–	high
<i>little chance</i>	–	low

The notions *orientation* and *strength* are also of importance in the analysis of so-called 'complementation constructions', to which I will turn now. Verhagen (2005) argues that complementation constructions consist of a 'matrix-' and a 'complement-' clause, in which the complement-clause gives a description of reality, while the matrix-clause rather gives a description of the speaker's stance towards that description of reality - as is illustrated by the following example (Verhagen 2005: 96):

(3) 'MATRIX-CLAUSE'	'COMPLEMENT-CLAUSE'
The director of GenTech expects that	clones of mammalian embryos will become possible in the near future.
Others believe that but nobody doubts that	it may take somewhat longer the cloning of a full-grown sheep or horse will be a reality within ten years.
The question is whether or whether	society is mentally and morally ready for this we will once again be hopelessly overtaken by the technical developments.

In each sentence, the matrix clause is about the speaker's stance towards the description of reality, which can be found in the complement clause.

Verhagen (2005: 105-110) argues that making use of a complementation construction or not can sort out certain rhetorical effects. Compare the following sentences:

- (4) Will we be in time for the football match?
- a): It was scheduled for 4 p.m.
 - b): I think it was scheduled for 4 p.m.
 - c): Michael said that it was scheduled for 4 p.m.

As Verhagen points out, the argumentative orientation of each answer is the same: each of the three responses to the question steers the addressee to draw a positive conclusion ('yes, we will be in time'). However, the argumentative strength of the answers is different: the A-sentence presents the relevant information directly, 'as a matter of fact'. In the B-sentence, this information is explicitly related to the point of view that the speaker has of the situation. As a result, the possibility is activated that there is a

difference between that point of view and reality. In other words, by explicitly presenting his *perspective* on the issue, the speaker evokes the idea that also *other* perspectives are possible. As a consequence, the B-utterance leaves more room for negotiation and discussion than the A-sentence: the argumentative strength is less. The argumentative strength of utterance C is even weaker than the B-sentence, because here the possibility exists that the speaker and Michael have a different standpoint about the question whether they will be in time for the football match.

How can such a linguistic means be relevant for stylistic analysis? When we take a look at a representative fragment of one of Geert Wilders' speeches (his contribution to the parliamentary debate on Islamic activism in September 2007), it is striking that Wilders presents his opinions and ideas without using complementation constructions:

- (5) Madam Speaker, the Koran is a book that incites violence. The distribution of such texts is unlawful according to Article 132 of our Penal Code. In addition, the Koran incites hatred and calls for murder and mayhem; (...). The Koran is a highly dangerous book; a book which is completely against our legal order and our democratic institutions. In this light, it is absolutely necessary to ban the Koran for the defense and reinforcement of our civilization and our constitutional state. (...)

Madam Speaker, there is no such thing as "moderate Islam". Islam is in pursuit of dominance. It wishes to exact its imperialist agenda by force on a worldwide scale (8:39). This is also clear from European history. (...)

The majority of Dutch citizens have become fully aware of the danger, and regard Islam as a threat to our culture. (...) Many Dutch citizens are fed up to the back teeth and yearn for action. However, their representatives in The Hague are doing precisely nothing. They are held back by fear, political correctness or simply electoral motives.¹ (Wilders 2007)

This lack of complementation constructions becomes especially apparent when we compare Wilders' speech to Ella Vogelaar's contribution in the same debate. Ella Vogelaar was minister of Integration and Housing until she had to resign in November 2008 after increasing criticism on her performance. Wilders called her 'insane' during the debate I'm discussing now.

As can be seen, Vogelaar makes use of complementation construction more frequently than Wilders does:

- (6) *It is very important that* we prevent issues of integration being narrowed to religious matters only. (...) Looking back upon the past years, *I can say that* it was 'not done' during the first years of the multicultural society to touch on these problems. (...)

During my argument I noted that Muslims feel uncertain about this development of growing fundamentalism and extremism. *These matters are connected with the fact that* the Islam is still not accepted religion in the Dutch society. It is a fact that the acceptance of this religion is impeded by (...).

But I also say that integration must be a two-sided affair. (...) *I believe that* my role as minister of integration is to raise these matters within the communities in which they occur. (...)

But I would like to add that this means that we need realism and patience.² (Vogelaar 2007)

To put it another way, Wilders presents his ideas as *facts*, whereas Vogelaar her standpoints more describes as her *perspective* on a specific issue. As a result, Wilders leaves minimal room for negotiation and discussion, whereas Vogelaar leaves more room for discussion and alternative opinions – the *lacking* of complementation constructions in Wilders language use contributes to the certainty by which he presents his ideas.

The example discussed illustrates the usefulness of paying attention to grammatical phenomena which are ‘inconspicuous’ and not directly eye-catching. However, style is pre-eminently a phenomenon which is to be found in a *combination* of linguistic means. This means, in the case of Wilders, that the certainty by which he formulates his opinions, is not only a matter of a lack of complementation constructions, but also of other stylistic phenomena (cf. van Leeuwen 2009): for instance his use of definite articles which leave little room for nuance, and the striking use of verbs and substantives with a strong connotation - often reinforced by adjectives and adverbs which denote an endpoint on a semantic scale:

- (7) Madam Speaker, the Koran is a book that incites violence. The distribution of such texts is unlawful according Article 132 of our Penal Code. In addition, the Koran incites hatred and calls for murder and mayhem; (...). The Koran is a *highly dangerous* book; a book which is *completely against* our legal order and our democratic institutions. In this light, it is *absolutely necessary* to ban the Koran for the defense and reinforcement of our civilization and our constitutional state. (...)

Madam Speaker, there is no such thing as “moderate Islam”. Islam is in pursuit of dominance. It wishes to exact its imperialist agenda by force *on a worldwide scale* (8:39). This is also clear from European history. (...)

The majority of Dutch citizens have become *fully* aware of *the* danger, and regard Islam as a threat to our culture. (...) Many Dutch citizens are *fed up to the back teeth* and *yearn* for action. However, their representatives in The Hague are doing *precisely nothing*. They are held back by fear, political correctness or simply electoral motives.

An analysis in which attention is paid to both ‘foregrounded’ elements and not directly eye-catching linguistic means leads to a more complete picture of the factors which are responsible for a certain style, in this case the certainty by which Wilders presents his ideas.

Conclusion

In my paper, I have addressed the following points:

- More complete, less ‘ad hoc’ stylistic analyses of speeches are possible by making use of a checklist, which enables the analyzer to make stylistic observations not only ‘top down’, but also ‘bottom up’.

- The use of complementation constructions by Geert Wilders (or better said: the *lack* of these constructions) were meant to illustrate that it can be rewarding to focus on ‘inconspicuous’/ not directly eye-catching grammatical phenomena too – and not only on ‘foregrounded’ elements.

- A final point, which only implicitly passed the review but is important to stress, is that stylistic analysis especially yields results when a *comparison* is made: between speakers (for instance Wilders vs. Vogelaar), or by comparing formulations with alternative ones.

It will be clear that the paper that I have presented here today is by far not yet the complete and comprehensive stylistic analysis that I finally have in mind in my project. However, hopefully it has

given a clear picture of the direction of my research, and the kind of stylistic means in which I am especially interested.

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Endnotes

¹ Dutch, original text:

‘Voorzitter, de Koran is een opruiend boek en het verspreiden van een opruiend geschrift is op grond van artikel 132 van ons Wetboek van Strafrecht verboden. Daarnaast zet de Koran aan tot haat en roept het op tot moord en doodslag; (...). De Koran is levensgevaarlijk en volledig in strijd met onze rechtsorde en democratische rechtsstaat. Ter verdediging en versterking van onze rechtsstaat en beschaving is het dan ook bittere noodzaak, de Koran te verbieden (...).

Voorzitter, er bestaat geen gematigde islam. (...) De islam is uit op dominantie. De islam wil haar imperialistische agenda met geweld wereldwijd afdwingen (8:39). En dat blijkt ook uit de Europese geschiedenis. (...)

De meerderheid van de Nederlanders is inmiddels (...) doordrongen van het gevaar en ziet de islam als een bedreiging voor onze cultuur. Veel Nederlanders zijn het spuugzat en hunkeren naar actie. Maar de Haagse politiek doet helemaal niets, tegengehouden door angst, politieke correctheid of simpelweg electorale motieven.’

² Dutch, original text:

‘Het is erg belangrijk dat wij voorkomen dat integratievraagstukken worden versmald tot alleen geloofskwesties. (...) Terugkijkend op de afgelopen jaren, kan ik zeggen dat het tijdens de eerste jaren van de multiculturele samenleving not done was om de problemen aan te kaarten (...).

In mijn betoog gaf ik aan dat moslims zich onzeker voelen door die ontwikkeling van opkomend fundamentalisme en extremisme. Daarmee hangt samen dat de islam nog steeds geen geaccepteerde religie in de Nederlandse samenleving is. Het is een gegeven dat de acceptatie van deze religie wordt bemoeilijkt door (...).

Maar ik zeg ook dat integratie van twee kanten moet komen. (...) Ik denk dat mijn rol als minister voor integratie is om dit soort zaken aan de orde te stellen binnen de gemeenschappen waarin zij voorkomen. (...) Maar ik zeg er ook bij dat dit betekent dat wij realisme en geduld nodig hebben.’

Appendix: A checklist of linguistic and stylistic categories (Leech & Short: *Style in Fiction* (2007[1981]))

A: Lexical categories

1. GENERAL. Is the vocabulary simple or complex? Formal or colloquial? Descriptive or evaluative? General or specific? How far does the writer make use of the emotive and other associations of words, as opposed to their referential meaning? Does the text contain idiomatic phrases or notable collocations, and if so, with what kind of dialect or register are these idioms or collocations associated? Is there any use of rare or specialized vocabulary? Are any particular morphological categories noteworthy (e.g. compound words, words with particular suffixes)? To what semantic fields do words belong?
2. NOUNS. Are the nouns abstract or concrete? What kinds of abstract nouns occur (e.g. nouns referring to events, perceptions, processes, moral qualities, social qualities)? What use is made of proper names? Collective nouns?
3. ADJECTIVES. Are the adjectives frequent? To what kinds of attribute do adjectives refer? Physical? Psychological? Visual? Auditory? Colour? Referential? Emotive? Evaluative? etc. Are adjectives restrictive or non-restrictive? Gradable or non-gradable? Attributive or predicative?
4. VERBS. Do the verbs carry an important part of the meaning? Are they stative (referring to states) or dynamic (referring to actions, events, etc.)? Do they 'refer' to movements, physical acts, speech acts, psychological states or activities, perceptions, etc.? Are they transitive, intransitive, linking (intensive), etc.? Are they factive or non-factive?
5. ADVERBS. Are adverbs frequent? What semantic functions do they perform (manner, place, direction, time, degree, etc.)? Is there any significant use of sentence adverbs (conjuncts such as *so*, *therefore*, *however*; disjuncts such as *certainly*, *obviously*, *frankly*)?

B: Grammatical categories

1. SENTENCE TYPES. Does the author use only statements (declarative sentences), or do questions, commands, exclamations or minor sentence types (such as sentences with no verb) also occur in the text? If these other types appear, what is their function?
2. SENTENCE COMPLEXITY. Do sentences on the whole have a simple or complex structure? What is the average sentence length (in number of words)? What is the ratio of dependent to independent clauses? Does complexity vary strikingly from one sentence to another? Is complexity mainly due to (i) coordination, (ii) subordination, or (iii) parataxis (juxtaposition of clauses or other equivalent structures)? In what parts of a sentence does complexity tend to occur? For instance, is there any notable occurrence of anticipatory structure (e.g. of complex subjects preceding the verbs, of dependent clauses preceding the subject of a main clause)?
3. CLAUSE TYPES. What types of dependent clause are favoured: relative clauses, adverbial clauses, different types of nominal clauses (*that*-clauses, *wh*-clauses, etc.)? Are reduced or non-finite clauses commonly used and, if so, of what type are they (infinitive clauses, *-ing*-clauses, *-ed* clauses, verbless clauses)?
4. CLAUSE STRUCTURE. Is there anything significant about clause elements (e.g. frequency of objects, complements, adverbials; of transitive or intransitive verb constructions)? Are there any unusual orderings (initial adverbials, fronting of object of complement, etc.)? Do special kinds of clause construction occur (such as those with preparatory *it* or *there*)?
5. NOUN PHRASES. Are they relatively simple or complex? Where does the complexity lie (in premodification by adjectives, nouns, etc., or in postmodification by prepositional phrases, relative clauses, etc.)? Note occurrence of listings (e.g. sequences of adjectives), coordination or apposition.
6. VERB PHRASES. Are there any significant departures from the use of the simple past tense? For example, notice occurrences and functions of the present tense; of the progressive aspect (e.g. *was lying*); of the perfective aspect (e.g. *has/had appeared*); of modal auxiliaries (e.g. *can*, *must*, *would*, etc.) Look out for phrasal verbs and how they are used.
7. OTHER PHRASE TYPES. Is there anything to be said about other phrase types: prepositional phrases, adverb phrases, adjective phrases?

8. WORD CLASSES. Having already considered major or lexical word classes, we may here consider minor word classes ('function words'): prepositions, conjunctions, pronouns, determiners, auxiliaries, interjections. Are particular words of these types used for particular effect (e.g. the definite or indefinite article; first person pronouns *I*, *we*, etc.; demonstratives such as *this* and *that*; negative words such as *not*, *nothing*, *no*)?
9. GENERAL. Note here whether any general types of grammatical construction are used to special effect; e.g. comparative or superlative constructions; coordinative or listing constructions; parenthetical constructions; appended or interpolated structures such as occur in casual speech. Do lists and coordinations (e.g. lists of nouns) tend to occur with two, three or more than three members? Do the coordinations, unlike the standard construction with one conjunction (*sun, moon and stars*), tend to omit conjunctions (*sun, moon, stars*) or have more than one conjunction (*sun and moon and stars*)?

C: Figures of speech, etc.

Here we consider the incidence of features which are foregrounded by virtue of departing in some way from general norms of communication by means of the language code; for example, exploitation code. For identifying such features, the traditional figures of speech (schemes and tropes) are often useful categories.

1. GRAMMATICAL AND LEXICAL. Are there any cases of formal and structural repetition (anaphora, parallelism, etc.) or of mirror-image patterns (chiasmus)? Is the rhetorical effect of these one of antithesis, reinforcement, climax, anticlimax, etc.?
2. PHONOLOGICAL SCHEMES. Are there any phonological patterns of rhyme, alliteration, assonance, etc.? Are there any salient rhythmical patterns? Do vowel and consonant sounds pattern or cluster in particular ways? How do these phonological features interact with meaning?
3. TROPES. Are there any obvious violations of, or departures from, the linguistic code? For example, are there any neologisms (such as *Americantly*)? Deviant lexical collocations (such as *portentous infants*)? Semantic, syntactic, phonological, or graphological deviations? Such deviations (although they can occur in everyday speech and writing) will often be the clue to special interpretations associated with traditional poetic figures of speech such as metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, paradox and irony. If such tropes occur, what kind of special interpretation is involved (e.g. metaphors can be classified as personifying, animating, concretising, synaesthetic, etc.)? Because of its close connection with metaphor, simile may also be considered here. Does the text contain any similes, or similar constructions (e.g. 'as if' constructions)? What dissimilar semantic fields are related through simile?

D: Context and cohesion

- Cohesion: ways in which one part of a text is linked to another (the internal organisation of the text).
- Context: the external relations of a text or a part of a text, seeing it as a discourse presupposing a social relation between its participants (author and reader; character and character, etc.), and a sharing by participants of knowledge and assumptions.

1. COHESION. Does the text contain logical or other links between sentences (e.g. coordinating conjunctions, or linking adverbials)? Or does it tend to rely on implicit connections of meaning? What sort of use is made of cross-reference by pronouns (*she*, *it*, *they*, etc.)? By substitute forms (*do*, *so*, etc.), or ellipsis? Alternatively, is any use made of elegant variation – the avoidance of repetition by the substitution of a descriptive phrase (as, for example, 'the old lawyer' or 'her uncle' may substitute for the repetition of an earlier 'Mr Jones')? Are meaning connections reinforced by repetition of words and phrases, or by repeatedly using words from the same semantic field?
2. CONTEXT. Does the writer address the reader directly, or through the words or thoughts of some fictional character? What linguistic clues (e.g. first person pronouns *I*, *me*, *my*, *mine*) are there of the addresser-addressee subject? If a character's words or thoughts are represented, is this done by direct quotation (direct speech), or by some other method (e.g. indirect speech)? Are there significant changes of style according to who is supposedly speaking or thinking the words on the page?