This item is the archived peer-reviewed author-version of:

A piece of trash of the worst cabinet ever: the rhetorical use of exaggeration by the Dutch populist party for freedom'

Reference:
Kalkhoven Lieuwe.- A piece of trash of the worst cabinet ever: the rhetorical use of exaggeration by the Dutch populist party for freedom'
Politics, culture & socialization - ISSN 1866-3427 - 6:1/2(2015), p. 51-70
“A Piece of Trash of the Worst Cabinet Ever”. The Rhetorical Use of Exaggeration by the Dutch Populist ‘Party for Freedom’ (PVV)

Lieuwe Kalkhoven (University of Antwerp, Faculty of Political and Social Science, Department of Communication Studies. Political Communication Research Unit).

(Politics, Culture & Socialization, Vol. 6 2015, No. ½ No. 1 Special Issue “Over the Top: Appeal of Embarrassment and Exaggeration in Political Speech” 51-70).

Abstract:

It is assumable that rhetorical exaggeration, also known as hyperbole, is one of these important rhetorical features that suites the deviant populist style. In order to test this hypothesis, we use the political context of the Dutch House of Parliaments and focus again on the populist politician Geert Wilders, but we include also other politicians of his party PVV. The degree of hyperbolic language is compared to other parties in the parliament in the Netherlands. We use methods based in earlier research of hyperbole (McCarthy and Carter, 2004; Cano Mora, 2009) that enables to identify and to analyse this rhetorical device. The analysis is based on a representative research sample (N > 160,000 words) of political language in Dutch parliamentary debates, between 2006 to 2013. Results show an extraordinary high use of hyperbole by members of the Dutch populist party PVV, which is nearly twice as high as the average, and noticeably are the recurring intense and exclusively hyperbolic interventions in the political debates. The findings confirm the hypothesis that hyperbole fits the typical figurative, exaggerated and aggressive populist discourse style. Geert Wilders and his party PVV clearly deviates from other politicians with a distinctive hyperbolic rhetoric: his metaphorical exaggeration, the lack of nuance, the hyperbolic references to populist principles and the anti-political discourse, resemble the prototypical style of populists.

Keywords: hyperbole – rhetorical exaggeration – Geert Wilders – parliamentary debates – Dutch politics - populism

Introduction

The rhetoric of populist radical right parties is an interesting subject for research in general, yet certainly in the Netherlands. The Dutch political landscape experienced a metamorphosis in the past decades. It was once (seen as) the paragon of stability and tolerance, in which the tone of debate was predominantly formal and (on complex social issues such as immigration) mainly conflict avoiding. But as a result of major political issues, such as the assassinations of the politician Pim Fortuyn and filmmaker Theo Van Gogh, and the rise of populist political movements, the political discourse endured a radical change. According to Schuyt (2006) a general emergence of ‘advertising language’ occurred: “harsh, loud, extremely exaggerated, unreal, with every minute a repetition of what just has been told” (Schuyt, 2006, p. 34). There are a number of studies that indicate the deviant use of language and discourse by Dutch extremist and populist politicians, which in recent years is almost exclusively focused on the person of Geert Wilders and his party PVV (see e.g. Vossen, 2010, 2011; Kuitenbrouwer, 2010; Van der Pas, De Vries and Van der Brug, 2011; Bos, Van der Brug and De Vreese, 2013).
This study aims at a systematic analysis of the rhetoric of the populist radical right party PVV (Partij voor de Vrijheid; i.e. Party for Freedom) in the Netherlands. We focus on one of the most prominent rhetorical tools that characterize radical and challenging populist political language: the rhetorical use of exaggeration, which is known as hyperbole. Hyperbole can be defined as an exaggerated form of phrasing in which words or a clustered group of words express an exceptional or even extreme representation of reality (e.g. McCarthy and Carter, 2004; Brdar-Szabó and Brdar, 2010; Ritter, 2010). Although academic literature surprisingly lacks a practice of research into hyperbolic utterances in political discourse, many scholars recognized that hyperbole actually is an important rhetorical figure in the realm of political persuasive language (e.g. Van Dijk, 1993; Roberts and Kreuz, 1994; McCarthy and Carter, 2004) and hypothetically a key-element in a populist radical political discourse that is assumed to be highly rhetorical, ‘unparliamentary’, offensive and negative (Bull and Simon-Vandenbergen, 2014).

Theoretical insights

The rhetoric of the populist radical right

The rise (and considerable popularity) of so-called populist radical right parties (Mudde, 2013, 2014) in the past decades have led to an increase of academic studies in which factors of the (varying) success of these movements have been dissected in great detail. A large amount of attention is given to the attractiveness of the ideological values, as we have seen in the previous chapters, which is based on “nativism” (i.e. ideology based on ‘native’ elements in which the nation is seen as an exclusive and homogeneous state), to the importance of leadership and authoritarianism, and to the fact that these parties share aspects of populism (Canovan, 2002; Mudde, 2013). Although populism can be defined ideologically, as an ideal of “the virtues people against the corrupt elite” (e.g. Taggart, 2000), the most recurring key elements are the specific use of stylistic features, language, discourse and rhetoric that unite most parties of the populist radical right and seem to be to most effective in all of these ‘success factors’ (Kalkhoven, 2013). As many (mostly West) European countries experienced populist radical right parties as a relatively new phenomenon, numerous case studies analysed the discourse and rhetoric of these party leaders in recent years.

---

1 Geert Wilders (PVV) is leader of the biggest opposition party (since 2010 the PVV has been subsequently the third largest party of the country) and has been parliamentary supporter of the Rutte I government. Between October 14 2010, and April 23, 2012 (when the cabinet collapsed) the PM Mark Rutte’s party VVD (liberals) and the Christian Democratic party CDA formed a minority government (less than half of the electoral seats) and therefore depended on the support of the biggest winner of the 2010 elections: Geert Wilders’ party PVV (Party for Freedom).

2 As Bull and Wells (2014) argue, members of the parliament are (conventionally) expected to behave (and also speak) in a certain appropriate and polite sense (as they have an exemplary role in society). Therefore, politicians should not be perpetrate (to) ‘unparliamentary language’: “they should not be abusive or insulting, call another member a liar, suggest another MP has false motives, or misrepresent another MP” (2014, p. 32).

Although political language in general is full of rhetorical strategy and rhetorical devices, it is argued that the discourse of populist radical right politicians surpasses, and distances itself from, the rhetoric of ‘mainstream’ politics (e.g. Taggart, 2000; Abts, 2004; Canovan, 2004). Moreover, the numerous case studies often present very similar results with regards to the rhetorical strategies of radical right party leaders. Recurrently mentioned are particular argumentation techniques, in which uncertain matters are presented as plain facts (as objectively true), whereas arguments of the opponent are being depicted as dubious or even invalid opinions (Van Dijk, 1993; Potter, 1997). The actual argumentation is, according to several scholars, often rather allusive, insinuating, irregular, demagogic and offensive (e.g. Bonnafous, 1998; Wodak, 2002; Van der Valk, 2003). An attempt to turn the tables through answer avoidance, denial (of accusation) and personal (counter) attacks, frequently results in a role-play of blaming and victimization (Bonnafous, 1998; Wodak, 2002; Simon-Vandenbergen, 2008; Bull and Simon-Vandenbergen, 2014).

Characteristic of populist rhetoric is the reference to (the principles of sovereignty of) the people and (criticism of) the (intellectual, political) elite (Bos et al., 2013). This manifests itself in clear, direct and simplistic language, as it is supposed to fit the everyday language and common sense-thinking of the (ordinary) people (e.g. Müller, 2002; Wodak, 2003; Abts, 2004; Curran, 2004). The style that is fit to accompany the populist rhetoric is therefore persuasive, emotive and (regularly) offensive (Kalkhoven, 2013). As we have argued in previous chapters in this dissertation, well-known rhetorical devices are frequently used, such as strong and vivid metaphors (e.g. Bonnafous, 1998; Porro and Russo, 2001; Wodak, 2002; Van der Valk, 2003), repetition (Van der Valk, 2003; Kuitenbrouwer, 2010), short and (over-) simplified ‘main clause’-language (e.g. Bonnafous, 1998; Wodak, 2003; Simon-Vandenbergen, 2008; Van Leeuwen, 2012), and hyperbolic language (Van Dijk, 1993; Abts, 2004).

How does this relate to Geert Wilders and his party PVV? The language of this Dutch politician propagates a distinctive radical right populist ideology, focused on classic right-extreme themes such as security, (anti) immigration, nationalism and anti-politics (De Landtsheer and Kalkhoven, 2012). Wilders is above all famous for his style and rhetoric: he is praised for his outspoken standpoints, clear and plain phrases, and decisive leadership, to which he (at least) partially owns his electoral success, but at the same time condemned for being highly aggressive and offensive, hyperbolic and hysterical, and evasive for argumentation and (real administrative) responsibilities (e.g. Van Leeuwen, 2012; Bos et al., 2013). As argued in De Landtsheer, Kalkhoven and Broen (2011), his metaphorical language, the lack of nuance, the exaggeration, and the anti-political discourse, resemble the prototypical style of populists. Especially powerful war imagery and rhetorical

---

4 There is, conversely, among scholars a growing support for the theory that the rhetoric of Western European mainstream parties has become more populist over the years (e.g. Mair, 2002; Mudde, 2007). However, an analysis of party programmes by Rooduijn, De Lange and Van der Brug (2014) shows no evidence for this hypothesis (yet) (see also: Bos and Brants, 2014).

5 The mentioned authors refer to this ‘short-and-sweet’ language in different ways, such as talking in main clauses without subordination, in vague slogans and one-liners, simplification as the result of low integrative complexity, etc., but it refers to more or less the same idea.

6 Wilders has on many occasions openly clashed with other politicians in parliament. For instance, he urged the Dutch Prime Minister to “behave normal” and called him “loony”, as well as that he called a former Minister “insane” and “completely nuts” (see e.g. Van Leeuwen, 2012; Bos and Brants, 2014).
exaggeration (among other stylistic figures), as common “weapon in the (political) conflict between different groups” (Schuyt, 2006, p. 34), are characteristics of Wilders’ discourse (De Landtsheer et al., 2011; Van Leeuwen, 2012). Van Leeuwen (2012) analysed lexical categories of Wilders’ language and concluded that when the adverbs and adjectives that he uses are remarkably often located at an endpoint of a semantic scale such as the scale on quantity (e.g. “nothing-everything”), intensity (e.g. “extremely-to a small extent”), and time (e.g. “always-never”). Whereas this phenomenon is also addressed to as ‘promotional language technique’ (Van Leeuwen, 2012, p. 91), it is also very similar to the intentional use of the rhetorical figure of hyperbole.

Hypotheses

Whereas exaggeration in daily-life language is a very popular and common – often even unnoticed – rhetorical habit, in political language it is not granted as such (McCarthy and Carter, 2004). In a political context, using hyperbole can be a well-considered rhetorical action, as hyperboles rather easily catch the eye and are possibly risky style elements. Strategically speaking, on the one hand, politicians can choose for non-rhetorical, non-hyperbolic language following the conventions of parliament. On the other hand, much is allowed in order to challenge the opponents, to empower the argument and (an attempt) to persuade the public. Additionally, as we argued, populist language is highly rhetorical in nature, and many everyday linguistic devices appear to occur in a more frequent or enlarged form than in mainstream politics. Populist language is therefore often perceived as an extreme, often exaggerated form of public language, in which the intentional use of hyperbole can and often is a rhetorical strategy in political persuasion (e.g. Wilson, 1990; Van Dijk, 1993; Formisano, 2008). Whereas mainstream political language is undoubtedly hyperbolic to some degree, strategically speaking, it can however be expected that the degree of hyperbolic language differs between different political parties, with the populist party at the utter end of the hyperbolic scale.

Consequently it is presumable that different parties – committed to different political ideologies and to different ‘roles’ within the parliament – contain their own characteristic form of rhetoric (e.g. De Landtsheer and Vertessen, 2010). Therefore we might expect different hyperbole use per different party. First of all, it is expected that the strategic use of exaggerated language is more beneficial in circumstances in which opposing views are expressed in discourse – as a form of criticizing the current policies – whereas in circumstances in which policy is ought to be defended, mitigated and reassuring language is more advantageous. We thus expect significantly higher degrees of hyperbole use among politicians in opposition than in the governmental parties.

Secondly, we do expect significant differentiation between political parties, not only in the frequency, but also in the content of hyperbole use. It is argued that an exaggerated discourse, which fits models of verbal aggression and polarization, seems particularly applicable to populist and extreme political discourse (e.g. Van Dijk 1993; Abts, 2004). As we have seen, a populist style of discourse is seen as persuasive, emotive and rhetorical in nature and the particular occurrence of ‘hysterical’ discourse in politics is often attributed to right and left extremism and populism. In a study by Colston and O’Brien (2000b) it was suggested that use of hyperbole correlates to a negative value of the exaggerated, which means that most hyperboles are more likely to be negative evaluations, instead of positive overstatement. Moreover, differences in frequency and qualification of language and rhetoric between different political parties leads to the expectation that especially
parties that are ‘opposed’ to the incumbent political elite (such as opposition parties) significantly use more rhetorical exaggeration (Kalkhoven and De Landtsheer, 2016). This seems above all applicable for the so-called radical parties at the right of the political spectrum, whom are expected to express a more ‘populist’ form of exaggeration, by regularly referring to the general or common sense of the mass (e.g. “we all know that...”) and a strong oppositional standpoint against the political elite (e.g. “again nothing was accomplished”). This gives ground to the expectation that hyperbole – as are several other rhetorical figures – particularly fit the exaggerated style of populist and extremist political language, as is often theorized, but seldom empirically validated. As a following, this study hypothesizes that:

H1: Opposition parties use significantly higher degrees of hyperbolic language in the political debate than government parties.

H2: Political parties at the endings of the political spectrum show significantly higher degrees of hyperbole use than political parties of the centre.

H3: The political party to be classified as populist party (PVV) shows hyperbole use that significantly differs from that by the mainstream parties, in concrete they use higher frequency and more negative hyperboles.

Methodology

A rhetorical exaggeration, or hyperbole, is an exaggerated form of phrasing in which words or clusters of words express a figurative, and/or an exceptional, extreme and often a false representation of reality, in which it is up to the receiver to distinguish between what is real and what is exaggerated or overstated (e.g. McCarthy and Carter, 2004; Brdar-Szabó and Brdar, 2010). Based on a checklist of criteria by McCarthy and Carter (2004), a methodology was developed in order to apply the label ‘hyperbolic’ to a singular expression or extract in text or talk. In general, these conditions emphasize or indicate the (degree of) deviation in respect to the standards that define the literal in its linguistic (surrounding words/sentences) or social (real world) contexts.

The systematic and objective identification of hyperbole on a large-scale, which is applicable for all sort of (political) communication, as pursued in this study, follows three basic steps. First of all, as by definition a phrase or sentence is hyperbolic if we witness a rhetorical figure of speech (often metaphorical) and/or an extreme expression of reality, often supported with certain syntactical clues (more on this in McCarthy and Carter, 2004). Second of all, the utterance can only be considered a hyperbole when there is an enlargement (auxesis), in which something is depicted in larger terms than reality is. Following the criteria of McCarthy and Carter (2004) this can either mean a disjunction with the context (when it seems ‘odd’ within reference to the real world) and/or when the assertion is simply counterfactual (impossible or very unlikely). However, step three tests for ‘realistic sense’ of the utterance, as purposely lying, absurdity or plain rubbish statements it will give an could be considered exaggeration, but is not rhetorical in nature). If we take the following phrase from the political debate (and also from the title of this article) as an example, it will illustrate how detection is determined:
“Today we discuss the Budget [...], (a) a piece of trash of (b) the worst cabinet ever.”
(Wilders, PVV, 26/09/2008 in Dutch Parliament).

Table 1 shows the three steps that are processed in order to detect the hyperboles in this sentence.
First of all, the phrase contains two extreme case formulations (ECF’s) ‘ever’ and ‘worst’ that indicate an extremity or enlargement. The second hyperbole, ‘A piece of trash’, is rather a metaphorical exaggeration. Notice the fact that we count two separate hyperboles in one singular phrase: (a) ‘a piece of trash’, referring to the budget, and (b) ‘the worst cabinet ever’. Cano Mora (2009) explains the identification of separate hyperboles by referring to hyperbolic items, rather than a hyperbolic utterance: “[b]y hyperbolic item I mean the minimal unit of sense or meaning, whether a word, phrase or expression, which per se, given the appropriate context, conveys an idea of excess or extremity. In turn, different hyperbolic items may co-occur within a single utterance and form hyperbolic clusters (e.g. lots of people have got nothing to do)” (2009, p. 28). Thus, although they coexist in only one sentence, different hyperbolic utterances (as well as repetition of the same hyperbole) should always be counted as individual (or separated) cases, as they express two different ideas that are overstated. This is, subsequently, a matter of context: exaggeration (b) contains two ECF’s (‘worst’ and ‘ever’) but the phrase only obtains its rhetorical exaggeration due to the sequence (and combination) of the words, and is therefore counted as one hyperbolic utterance.

Secondly, speaking about the Budget in terms of ‘a piece of trash’ and the cabinet as ‘the worst ever’ are both enlargements and extremities of the reference, odd in the context of the political debate, factually very unlikely and could (or should) they be perceived as figuratively (although it could be possible that the phrase by politician Geert Wilders is proclaimed as being factual, neither of the statements are probably literally true). It is however probably perfectly clear what is meant by the politician, as the statement can make sense to the observer. Hence, when a coding of a (randomly) selected text is made, one segregates the text into segments (phrases or sentences) and distillates the different (clustered) hyperboles, asking oneself the question whether there is presence of an exaggeration (extremity, enlargement) either by the extreme formulation or through a figurative overstatement. In the example that is given, we count therefore two hyperboles (hyperbolic utterances) in a context of fourteen words (which gives a certain hyperbole ratio or density).

Table 1: Example of detecting hyperbole in text or speech based on the three major criteria (source: own design).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Present?</th>
<th>Why?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1a</td>
<td>Extreme formulation</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>‘Worst’ and ‘ever’ are keywords of extreme case formulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Syntactic support</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>This often emerges in repetition or sequence of extreme formulations (e.g. ‘millions and</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Translated from Dutch. Original citation: “Wij spreken vandaag over de begroting [en de Miljoenennota 2009], een flutstuk van het slechtste kabinet ooit.”
People are, through convention and experience, mostly well capable of sensing what is meant hyperbolic and what is not, but it is rather challenging (and novel) to systematically identify hyperbole in a (social) scientific way. The difficulty lies above in the fact that hyperbole can exist in many different forms and, as we argued, is strongly dependent of its context. Although hyperbole is often compared to – and in fact often intertwined with – other rhetorical devices such as extreme case formulation (ECF), metaphor, verbal irony and understatement (e.g. Gibbs, 1994; Roberts and Kreuz, 1994; Colston and Keller, 1998; Haiman, 1998), it should be considered as a distinctive figure of speech. Hyperbole is not equal to ECF alone, as it sometimes surpasses the extremeness of the reality (the ‘enlargement’ or auxesis\(^8\) in classical rhetorical terms) and can (and often does) occur as a non-extreme, figurative (metaphorical) overstated representation of reality (Norrick, 2004).

A substantial observation is that a lot of hyperboles actually occur in the form of metaphorical expressions, rather than ECF. That is why the coding’s first step asks for differentiation in both ECF enlargement and figurative overstatement. Consider, for example, the differences in hyperbole use in examples [2.1] and [2.2]. Whereas the first example shows clear extreme case formulations in the semantic sense of universalities (see e.g. Cano Mora, 2009), the second example illustrates the frequent use of ‘popular’ metaphorical exaggerations and figurative magnifying expressions:

---

\(^8\) In classical literature two kinds of hyperbole are distinguished: Auxesis (or exaggerated intensification/enlargement) and Meiosis (or exaggerated reduction/attenuation) (see e.g. Smith (1675) in McCarthy and Carter, 2004, p. 151).
[2.1] “In the meantime, everybody can peek inside” (…), “as quick as it has never happened before” (Pechtold, D66, 22/09/11); “whereas every number, except for the page numbers perhaps, is unclear” (…), “everything is possible”, “(…) soon we will have all room in society” (Pechtold, D66, 26/03/09).

[2.2] “(…) whereas the Netherlands breaks every Olympic record in the discipline of national waste of talent. […]. And at the same time that’s my biggest fear, […]. Because the ink of this report was still wet and the coalition already choose (…)” (Dezentje Hamming-Bluemink, VVD, 15/04/08)

Finally, hyperboles can occur either as (extreme) negative or positive evaluations of a respectively negative or positive situation⁹ (Colston and O’Brien, 2000b), although it also happens regularly that the exaggeration is neutral (when no evaluation is made). The hyperbole value, which is included as an extra qualitative variable, depends on the situation (the reference) to which the exaggeration is being set. Example [1.1], for instance, clearly marks two (very) negative evaluations of two negative (in the eyes of the politician) realities: evaluating the Budget (as not only bad or worthless) but as ‘a piece of trash’, and the cabinet as ‘the worst ever’ (as in it could not be more negative).

Data and procedure

This study of rhetorical use of exaggeration in political language is performed through content analysis of Parliamentary debates in the political case of the Netherlands. First of all, we use the criteria as described above in order to perform a quantitative study of hyperbole occurrence (frequency) and evaluation (value). The frequency is calculated by the hyperbole ratio, i.e. the number of singular hyperboles per 100 words. The value is measured by the relative share of either positive or negative hyperboles to the total number of hyperboles in a text sample. The evaluation can be translated into a scale between 0 and 2, in which the value ‘0’ expresses only positive and ‘2’ entirely negative hyperboles in a text sample.

We are not only interested in the quantification of exaggeration in the parliamentary debates, because the substance (or content) of the used hyperboles is also of considerable importance. This would allow us to answer not only the question whether the hyperbole use between parties differs, but also to what extent. Especially, with the focus on the distinctive characteristics of hyperbole use of the populist party PVV, this will be a valuable contribution. Therefore, it is useful to make a qualitative discourse analysis of the exaggeration that has been used by the politicians, in order to identify certain recurring patterns in the hyperbole content.

For the quantitative study we used a random sample of political debates in the Dutch Parliament, (more or less equally) divided over the years (2006-2013) and seven major political parties¹⁰ that are most prominent in governments and debates (the permanent smaller parties are excluded from the sample, because of the absence of different politicians in parliament, and the lack of participation of these parties in general in the political debates). The text samples have been randomly selected from documented reports at the database of the official website of the government (at

⁹ A positive evaluation of a negative situation (or vice versa) also exists in the shape of (verbal) irony, which shows that hyperbole and irony are closely related to each other (Colston and O’Brien, 2000a, 2000b)

¹⁰ See Appendix A for an overview of the political parties included.
This all resulted in a research sample of 196 text samples, with a total sum of over 160,000 words, which is used for analysis. The initial database of samples has been analysed a first time according to the coding scheme by the authors, after a series of pre-tests in order to test the internal validity and usefulness of the instrument regarding the quantitative identification and value scoring of hyperboles. After the first coding round, a new comparison session took place, which resulted in a Cohen’s inter-coder reliability of $\kappa = .60$ (which is considered a moderate agreement according to Landis and Koch, 1977). Minor changes to the coding scheme have been made after the post-tests. Finally, based on the evaluation of agreements and disagreements between the coders, the total sample has been analysed a second time, in order to settle the inclusion of missed or wrongfully coded hyperboles. The interpretation of hyperbolic categorization and content (the qualitative part) has been executed by the author, using in-depth content analysis. Further categorical trends and substantive particularities are also noted, regarding the content of the selected hyperbolic language. It is by no means intended to make all-embracing or generalizable conclusions on the content analysis part, but it does provide a useful overview of differences in hyperbole use.

Results

General quantitative analysis

The ratio of hyperbole use in the analysed data of political language is HB-ratio = 1.44, which means that politicians in the Netherlands use an average of 1.44 hyperboles per 100 words (i.e. approximately 3 hyperboles in every 200 words) in their political speech in parliament (see Table 2). With an average value of 1.26, the hyperboles that are used appear, as expected, to be more negative than positive (given that the HB-value-scale goes from 0 to 2, in which a HB-value of 2 is entirely negative). In line with the expectations, a moderate positive correlation is found between the frequency of hyperboles and the value ($r = .387$, $p < .01$). Although this correlation is not as strong as expected, it again implies that in general the more hyperboles are being used in politics, the more negative they appear.

### Table 2: Mean hyperbole ratio and value per political party in the Dutch parliament

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party name (and position)</th>
<th>Hyperbole-ratio***</th>
<th>Hyperbole-value**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CDA (centre-right)</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D66 (centre)</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>1.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GL (centre-left)</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>1.26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A random selection of text samples is generally based on every first usable contribution of a party in the debate in four time periods per year (e.g. January, April, August, November).

A singular text sample consists of a consecutive contribution of a member of parliament (or government) during a political debate in the Dutch Parliament.
Differences on party-level

Clear significant differences in hyperbole use are found within different parties and the political role they pursue (see Figure 1). Opposition parties use about twice as much hyperboles as government parties: HB-ratio\textsubscript{government} = .83 versus HB-ratio\textsubscript{opposition} = 1.69 (SD = 1.00, p < .001) and tend to be significantly more negative in their exaggeration as well: HB-value\textsubscript{government} = 1.13 vs. HB-value\textsubscript{opposition} = 1.31 (SD = .24, p = .001). Hypothesis 1 is therefore confirmed. However, if additional independent variable are taken into account, we see that this also applies for the difference between the individual politicians ‘role’ either being the party leader or a non-leader both in frequency (resp. HB-ratio\textsubscript{leader} = 2.03 vs. HB-ratio\textsubscript{non-leader} = 1.14, p < .001) and value (HB-value\textsubscript{leader} = 1.31 vs. HB-value\textsubscript{non-leader} = 1.23, p < .05). It is also suggested that male politicians use more hyperbole in their communication in parliament than female politicians (HB-ratio\textsubscript{male} = 1.53 vs. HB-ratio\textsubscript{female} = 1.23, p < .06). On party-level we see that only one party significantly differs in HB-ratio from all other parties: the populist PVV. All other parties have similar (i.e. non-significant differences) hyperbole ratio and value scores.

However, when we focus on individual differences on party-level we do find some significant results. Figure 1 below not only shows the average hyperbole ratio and value (as expressed in Table 1), but also reveals the distinction of the average hyperbole frequencies for parties that have had a role in both government and opposition during the selected time period (all other parties have been only opposition parties). These three parties (PVDA, CDA and VVD) significantly make approximately twice as much use of hyperbole in their oppositional role than in their period in government. The liberal party VVD, partly in government and partly in opposition during the analysed period, is a clear example of how this difference can be expressed. Especially party leader Mark Rutte, current PM of the Netherlands, but also other politicians who have governmental functions have below average hyperbole ratios. Their frequency of hyperbole use all barely exceeds HB-ratio = .0, which means that they hardly use any single hyperbole, whereas Mark Rutte and the VVD average during opposition is second-highest of all the political parties, even above the average of the socialist opposition party SP. See for instance example (3.1) for Mark Rutte’s hyperbolic rhetoric as opposition leader:

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{lcc}
\hline
Party & Average Hyperbole Ratio & Average Hyperbole Value \\
\hline
PvdA (centre-left) & 1.12 & 1.16 \\
PVV\textsuperscript{13} (right) & 2.43*** & 1.35 \\
SP (left) & 1.60 & 1.34 \\
VVD (centre-right) & 1.18 & 1.15 \\
Average & 1.44 & 1.26 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}

\textsuperscript{13} Note that the party PVV (Party for Freedom) significantly differs from all other parties at a level p < .01 (using a Tukey HSD Post-Hoc test) at least, in hyperbole ratio whereas all other parties do not differ significantly from each other.
\end{table}
“This part of the debate can (a) only lead to one conclusion”, (...) “there’s (b) no rhyme or reason to it and it is (c) really (d) absolutely nonsense”, (...) “In that case we (e) just cannot conclude anything different than (...)” (Rutte, VVD, 26/03/09)

Although the parties at the ending are mostly opposition parties, and whereas particular parties like the populist radical right party PVV significantly differ from the other parties, we cannot conclude that the political parties at the endings of the political spectrum show significantly higher degrees of hyperbole use than political parties of the centre. Hypothesis 2 is therefore unconfirmed.

**Figure 1:** Average hyperbole ratio (frequency), with the distinction between parties’ role as government versus opposition, and value (negative/positive evaluation) per party in the political debate in Dutch parliament\(^{14}\) (own design)

It is interesting to evaluate the evolution (or fluctuations) of the HB-ratio regarding the parties that have been in both government and opposition (see Figure 2). Between February 2007 and October 2010, when CDA and PVDA were part of the government, their average HB-ratios remain more or less stable (rather low), whereas VVD reaches very high scores. This suddenly changes afterwards, when the new government of VVD and CDA is formed: the hyperbole use of VVD drops significantly, while the average of PVDA slowly increases. From the latest period, the current government of VVD and PVDA, the sudden rise of CDA’s average HB-ratio is noticed. Additionally interesting, is the evolution of PVV, although not officially part of any government. After the first success of the elections in 2006, the party’s language in debates can be characterized as highly hyperbolic. Nevertheless, we can see a firm drop of the hyperbole frequency in the years 2010 and 2011: the years in which PVV gave authorized parliamentary support to the minority coalition of CDA and VVD.

\(^{14}\) Note: the political parties are roughly categorized on an ideologically left-right scale, with the Socialist Party (SP) being the most left, and Party for Freedom (PVV) being the utter right party. It is, however, arguably a too simplistic representation of the ideological differences (and distances) between the parties (see also Chapter 6).
The fact that the role of party leader seems utterly important is supported by the significant difference between the two variables in hyperbole frequency. The clearest example of the deviant party leader in comparison to other MP’s of the same party can be found at the democratic-liberal party D66. Whereas the average hyperbole frequency of the MP’s is rather low (HB-ratio$ _{D66\text{-MPs}} $.75), party leader Alexander Pechtold uses metaphorical rhetoric and eloquence combined with clear overstatement and hyperbole use (HB-ratio$ _{D66\text{-Pechtold}} = 2.35, p < .001$). The same particular distinction between party leader and non-leaders also applies for the populist party PVV, where party leader Geert Wilders really exceeds all other politicians with an average hyperbole use of HB-ratio$ _{PVV\text{-Wilders}} = 3.69$. Although the other MP’s of the PVV party also achieve a fairly above average ratio (HB-ratio$ _{PVV\text{-MPs}} = 1.83$), it is still only half of the frequency of their leader.

As it appears, hyperbole especially suits a negative rhetorical style in politics, considering the higher share of negative use of hyperbole over positive use, and the positive correlation between hyperbole ratio and value. It may not come to a surprise that hyperboles are being used in a negative way, or in other words: to express (heavy) negative feelings about a subject or person in the Dutch parliament. Whereas some parties, like the Christian democratic CDA, also use exaggeration in a mild or
euphemistic way, most parties, however, use hyperbole to express a kind of negative feeling, in increasing degree from indignation, to irony and even cynicism. This also differs between parties, in which the degree of negativity almost proportionally inclines to the position of the political parties in the parliament. Whereas the centre (and regularly governmental) Labour party PVDA (Partij van de Arbeid) expresses a selective indignation as an often intentionally use of hyperbolic frames (words of expressions and metaphors), to empower argumentation and in reaction to other politicians or events (example [4.1]), the green party Groenlinks (GL) and the socialist party SP are more cynical and personal in their exaggeration (resp. [4.2] and [4.3]):

[4.1] “The Partij van de Arbeid expressed its total dismay yesterday about the deafening silence (…)” (Albayrak, PVDA, 03/02/11)

[4.2] “(...) because that allows you, like no one else, to repair the mistakes that you have made in the past 30 years”, (...) “I ask that question as it seems that your students, youth and their future do not play any significant role in this [coalition] agreement”, (...) “it strikes that people are actually totally absent” (Halsema, GL, 26/10/10)

[4.3] “(...) than the Prime minister really has a blind spot”, “[people] are being left alone by this cabinet (...). People get to hear: we’re sorry, you cost too much” (Roemer, SP, 22/09/11)

The exaggeration of the populist radical right

The quantitative analysis shows that the populist radical right party PVV excels in hyperbole frequency: the party achieves a significantly higher number of hyperbole use (HB-ratio\textsubscript{PVV} = 2.43, p < .001) in comparison to all other parties (average: HB-ratio = 1.44). There are multiple findings that deserve attention here once we look at the hyperbole use in more (qualitative) detail.

First of all, whereas most hyperboles used in the parliamentary debates are situated in the semantic subfields (Cano Mora, 2009) of completeness and absoluteness (e.g. ‘completely’, ‘totally’, ‘absolutely’, ‘entirely’) and universality (e.g. ‘all-or-nothing’, ‘everyone-no one’) politicians of the PVV use numerical expressions and other quantitative hyperboles much more frequently as a form of exaggeration in comparison to other parties (a similar results that we found with the extreme right party VB in Chapter 4):

[5.1] “Billions of Euros have been wasted” (De Mos, PVV, 14/10/09)

[5.2] “(...) the juggling with money starts again. The money vanishes with buckets out of the Treasury“(...), “the Minister has had oceans of time to (…)” (Brinkman, PVV, 10/10/07)

As theorized earlier, PVV-politicians and their party leader Geert Wilders in particular, are known for their creative, figurative and a-political discourse. This is confirmed and illustrated by the hyperbolic language used in parliamentary debates. Not only does this party achieve the highest degree of hyperbole ratio, but rhetorical exaggeration seems often to be intertwined in the populist discourse of the party: several contributions to the parliamentary debate are almost completely – i.e. line for
line – hyperbolic. The following example\(^\text{15}\) gives an impression of the unusually high hyperbolic density in the discourse by the PVV:

[5.3] “What a mess. What a huge mess. What a travesty. What a farce. What a disgrace, an embarrassment to this government, a disgrace for the Netherlands, a disgrace for our ‘sorry Prime Minister.’ What an incredible amateurism. What a beginner’s work. What a monstrosity.” (Wilders, PVV, 13/11/12)

Furthermore, the exaggeration is generally sincerely aggressive, harsh, offensive and personal, but at the same time often also very original and creative in choice of words. An offensive and polarizing style can be found in often personal attacks against political opponents, especially at the left side of the political spectrum, as the first examples [5.4] and [5.5] shows, but towards any party if necessary [5.6]:

[5.4] “The Hague’s ruling clique [politically elitists] and the leftist (...) elitists are being sort of ‘weepy weepy’ in the hallway. We see that also today. And hear her whining! Little girl Halsema [party leader of Groenlinks] with her wet eyes, her cuddle cloth pent-up in her mouth, throwing dolls” (Wilders, PVV, 26/10/10)

[5.5] “At that time his Maoist fists appeared to be stuck deeply in his ears” [about SP leader Marijnissen]. (...) “Mister Cohen [leader PVDA] completely trembles with rage”, “We wave from the ship to sourly left, that impotently tries to make a fist. At the beach, Miss Sap [leader GL] still bungles and practices somewhat with her plug” (Wilders, PVV, 22/09/11)

[5.6] “In particular, the VVD should be totally ashamed. The mess this party makes of our country is unprecedented: first [they] promise the voter everything - tax cuts - and then they do exactly the opposite, namely tax increase. All promises are being sacrificed on the altar of Brussels.” (Wilders, PVV, 05/03/13)

Finally, PVV politicians express a certain ‘populist’ reference in their exaggeration regularly, in the understanding of populism as being ‘from and to the people’ and as referring to common sense. There are multiple references to the general will (or attitude) of the people (as a cohesive mass) (e.g. “the people demand...” or “everybody knows that...”), but also by using very simplistic (almost childlike) and/or typically common Dutch expressions, as will be illustrated by the last example [5.9]:

[5.7] “[They] bargain the interests of the hardworking Dutchman [citizen] with a horribly bad, left Budget. That is deeply sad. The citizens in our country deserve so much better” (Wilders, PVV, 19/09/07)

[5.8] Thirty years policy of tolerance has been thirty years of misery. My fraction does not need any scientific research about this tolerance policy to draw this conclusion. This conclusion is evident; facts of common knowledge don’t require proof.” (De Roon, PVV, 06/03/08)

[5.9] “I’m not only angry, I’m furious. I’m furious about the answer that colleague Van Geel [CDA] just gave [...]. Mister Van Geel then said that there was little space to change not even one millimetre

\(^{15}\) For the sake of readability the hyperboles in this example have not been underlined. We count, however, no less than twelve hyperboles in this phrase (each sentences contains at least one hyperbole).
to this government document. To put it in common Dutch: we are sitting here like Simple Simon [voor Piet Snot in Dutch]. The Chamber looks like a fool [staat in haar hemd]. [...] We will not participate in this fake debate. [...] After that statement of mister Van Geel I’ll predict you, (...), that at the end of this day not a single, but really not one single motion by you or by anyone else will be passed. He is not taking us seriously. [...]. Mister Van Geel, it’s my turn now. The point is that finally someone needs to stand up and say: we won’t swallow this. We won’t take it from you (...) that you put the Chamber offside [buitenspel zetten]. I’d say: have a lot of fun; we’re taking off now. Good bye.” {The attendant members of the PVV-fraction leave the assembling room} (Wilders, PVV, 26/03/09).

Conclusion

Arguably, political language is not merely used as an extension piece of the ideology that is expressed (the ‘words’ that plea the ‘virtues’ message); it is also the most prominent means to realize politically strategic goals, such as to gain electoral support. This is why it is particularly important to study specific political discourses and (systematic) language differences between politicians and parties. Moreover, phenomena such as the uprising of radical right populism and extremism in politics bring (research of) political discourse to a new level. In this study we aimed at performing a systematic analysis of one of the most prominent, but rarely studied, rhetorical tools that characterizes political language: the use of rhetorical exaggeration or hyperbole. In the context of the Dutch parliamentary debates, this chapter focused specifically on the rhetorical exaggeration of the populist party PVV and its party leader Geert Wilders.

In order to gain insight in the use of hyperbole in political discourse three hypotheses have been tested. Clear results are the distinctive and significant differences between parties’ and politicians’ role in parliament: opposition parties, as well as party leaders, show much higher degrees of hyperbolic language. Politicians seem to be bound to the role and (related) task that they have in the political realm. Considering the premise that (intentionally) using rhetorical figures in political language can serve a strategic, persuasive purpose, it was expected that how, when and to what extent hyperbole occurs in the political discourse depend on certain ‘conditions’. The power of many rhetorical figures lies in the fact that figurative language appeals rather easily to emotions, and it can either reassure or rather do the opposite, such as provoking strong negative feelings (e.g. anxiety, anger or panic) (De Landtsheer, 2006, 2009). Depending on the (perceived) level of social instability, political parties can benefit from the use of hyperbolic language as part of their political communication. Logically, ruling parties (government) will benefit from stability compared to insecurity or chaos, and they would therefore aim at reassurance rather than triggering feelings such as anxiety or anger. Oppositional parties in contrast, could benefit from emphasizing (perceived) dis-or malfunctioned governing, unhandled problems in society, and (personal) failures of the rulers (the Prime-Minister and the cabinet members). In order to emphasize this kind of behaviour and attitudes, exaggeration (i.e. overstatement) of these ‘shortcomings’ assumedly helps.

Additionally, the specific role of individual politicians also turns out to be a predicting variable for the differences in degrees of hyperbole use. Politicians in official administrative functions tend to be more careful about what they say and how they express themselves. This could make them more cautious about perceived untruths or gaps in their statements (e.g. factual errors). Party leaders,
especially members of parliament (and above all at opposition parties) are central figures, of who it is expected to express themselves rather severe and eloquent.

We expected that political parties at the endings of the political spectrum show significantly higher degrees of hyperbole use than political parties situated in the centre, and additionally, that the one political party that can be classified as ‘populist party’ (PVV), shows significantly deviant hyperbole use compared to the ‘mainstream’ parties, which will be revealed in a higher degree of hyperbole use and in more negative values. Although centre parties achieve lower degrees of hyperbole frequency in their discourse, there is no real quantitatively significant difference between most political parties when it comes to hyperbole frequency and negative or positive evaluation. The only significant deviant results, however, can indeed be found in the populist right-wing party PVV. The language of the PVV, and their party leader Geert Wilders in particular, in the Dutch parliament debates, seems almost hyperbolic in nature and its style can be described as highly aggressive, original and populist. Although it was theorized and therefore expected, the deviance of this party compared to all other parties in the use of exaggeration as a rhetorical tool, is remarkable and encourages further research of populist language in general.

References


