Strategic manoeuvring with the construction "We (all) know that X" in parliamentary debates

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The construction [we] – [perspective-indicating verb] – [that] – [argument] can be used by discussants to strategically introduce an argument. Through the combination of inclusive "we", serving as an identity cue, and a perspective-indicating verb that expresses certainty, the argument is empathically presented as a common starting point. In this paper, we formulate three soundness conditions for strategic manoeuvring with this construction.

1. INTRODUCTION

On 14 February 2019, the Spanish website The Corner published an interview with Ramón Jáuregui, Member of European Parliament. Asked if 'unanimity is a structural disfunction in the Union', Jáuregui answered that it can needlessly delay adequate policymaking in a time of quick developments. 'Unanimity is the thorn in the side [of the European Union]', he said. This quote was used as the header of the article on The Corner (see Figure 1). Interestingly, the editor added the formula "We all know that" at the beginning of the quote: '"*We all know that* unanimity is the thorn in the side of the European Union"' (our italics). By inserting "We all know that", the editor suggests that Jáuregui presented his position is unanimously supported.

The above example shows that the grammatical construction "We (all) know that" can be added to an argument. In this paper we assess how the construction can be used by politicians as a rhetorical device.

"We All Know That Unanimity Is The Thorn In The Side Of The European Union"

TOPICS: Brexit EU Venezuela Euroesceptics European Commission European Elections European Parliament Meseberg

The Spanish MEP Ramón Jáuregui.

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Ana Fuentes (Strasbourg) | Where should the EU look in the future? What are the priorities? At a time of rapid change, protectionism and nationalist populism, the European Parliament has approved a document of minimums called **The Future of Europe**. As inevitably happens in such plural institutions, it is neither binding nor completely satisfies anyone, but sets out the challenges the still 28 members have to confront together if the European project is not to diluted. We discuss it with Ramón Jáuregui, socialist MEP and rapporteur of the text.

Figure 1. Fragment of the article on TheCorner.eu (see Fuentes 2019).

According to the literature, the pronoun "we" creates group identity (Chilton & Schäffner 1997: 217, 2002: 30; Bazzanella 2002: 249). Perspective-indicating verbs such as "know" imply a high degree of certainty (Haeseryn et al. 1997: 1156-1158; Verhagen 2005: 100; van Leeuwen 2015: 155-157). In combination, the pronoun "we" and perspective-indicating verbs such as "know" are used to emphatically present an argument as a common starting point. Especially in politics, this might be strategic, since politicians are expected to represent a bigger whole: parties, coalitions, 'the people'.

As far as we know, the strategic potential of the construction "We (all) know that X" in politics has not yet been discussed in the literature. From the perspective of rhetorical theory, a lot of research has been done

into the use of the pronoun "we" in the political domain, but research from an argumentation-theoretical perspective is lacking. Research into the use of what we here call "perspective-indicating verbs" (e.g. "know", "believe", "suppose") is rather scarce, let alone the even more specific use of these verbs in combination with the pronoun "we". Therefore, we carried out exploratory research into the strategic use of the grammatical construction "We (all) know that X".

The central question of this paper is: *How can politicians manoeuvre strategically with the grammatical construction "We (all) know that X" in parliamentary debates?* To answer this question, we use the extended pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation, in which argumentation is analysed from both a rhetorical and a dialectical perspective, as a theoretical framework. It is assumed that discussants primarily have a rhetorical aim: they are out to win the discussion. On the other hand, they try to reach the dialectical aim of resolving the difference of opinion on the merits. Discussants will manoeuvre strategically between these two goals and, ideally, they try to be both reasonable and effective. In strategic manoeuvring three aspects are involved: (1) discussants make a selection from the topical potential, (2) they adapt their moves to the audience's preferences, and (3) they exploit presentational devices. Strategic manoeuvring with grammatical constructions is an instance of exploitation of presentational devices (in classical rhetorical terms: *lexis* or *elocutio*).

The paper is organised as follows: first we will provide an argumentative characterisation of parliamentary debates (section 2). Then, we will turn to the strategic potential of the grammatical construction "We (all) know that X" to introduce an argument. It will be shown under which conditions strategic manoeuvring with the construction derails (section 3). The next section provides a demonstration of reasonable and derailed strategic manoeuvres in parliamentary debates (section 4). The final section provides a discussion and conclusion of the research as well as recommendations for future research (section 5).

2. STRATEGIC MANOEUVRING IN PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

According to pragma-dialectics, argumentative discourse should be analysed in its institutional context. To this end, van Eemeren (2010) introduced the concept of argumentative activity types: culturally established communicative practices that have become more or less conventionalised and that are to a certain degree institutionalised. Activity types can be characterised argumentatively by describing the empirical counterparts of the four stages of a critical discussion: (1) the activity type's initial situation, (2) its starting points, (3) the

argumentative means available in the activity type, and (4) its possible outcomes (van Eemeren 2010: 146, 152-158).

In the first discussion stage, the confrontation stage, it becomes clear what the difference of opinion is about and what type of difference it is (van Eemeren 2018: 36). In parliamentary debates, the initial situation is a disagreement on a policy issue, that is put on the table by either a Member of Parliament (MP) or the cabinet (van Eemeren & Garssen 2010: 31). Usually, the difference of opinion is mixed (different parties take opposite standpoints), but it could occur that a dispute is non-mixed (only one party has put forward a standpoint, which is questioned by another party).

Politicians speaking in parliament have a complex audience: the political opponent, who is the official antagonist, and the listening, reading or watching audience: the voting public (Tonnard 2011: 22; van Haaften 2017:181). The primary addressee of parliamentary debates are the voters: a non-interactive and heterogeneous audience, which may consist of (a mix of) supporters, opponents and neutral bystanders (van Eemeren & Garssen 2010: 24; Tonnard 2011: 23).

In the opening stage, the procedural and material starting points for the discussion are established (van Eemeren 2018: 36). Procedural starting points pertain to the procedure of the discussion (i.e. the discussion rules), while material starting points consist of propositions that the discussants can later in the discussion use in their argumentation. Usually, a parliament's Rules of Procedure, for instance the *Reglement van Orde voor de Tweede Kamer* for the Dutch parliament, contain most procedural starting points (Tonnard 2011: 25). The debate is organised as follows: participants deliver a speech with a fixed speaking time; other participants can interrupt the speaker to ask questions. Because of the heterogeneous character of the parliament, the agreement on material starting points will in many occasions only be partial and cannot be presumed without further verification. Speakers can interrupt each other to criticise the false presentation of a premise as a common starting point.

The aim of the argumentation stage is to test the acceptability of a standpoint by an exchange of arguments and criticisms (van Eemeren 2018: 37). There are no special constraints as to the argumentative means that can be employed in the argumentation stage (van Eemeren & Garssen 2010: 31). In general, politicians will put forward argumentation for or against the proposal or policy at issue, in response to expressed or anticipated criticism. The arguments should be based on material starting points that are, explicitly or implicitly, agreed upon in the opening stage.

The aim of the concluding stage is to determine the outcome of the discussion (van Eemeren 2018: 37). Although plenary debates are

always officially and explicitly closed by the President of the House, there is no real concluding stage: differences of opinion are not concluded by way of an intersubjective agreement on the outcome of the debate (van Eemeren & Garssen 2010: 31). Instead, the dispute is settled by a majority of votes.

The construction we discuss in this paper is a presentational device to strategically introduce an argument. The focus will therefore be on strategic manoeuvring in the argumentation stage of parliamentary debates.

3. THE STRATEGIC POTENTIAL OF "WE (ALL) KNOW THAT X"

According to van Eemeren (2010: 45), the dialectical aim of the argumentation stage regarding protagonists is "to achieve clarity concerning the protagonist's argumentation in defence of the standpoints at issue". On the other hand, the rhetorical aim for protagonists in the argumentation stage is "to establish argumentation that constitutes an optimal defence of the standpoints at issue". In other words, in the argumentation stage of a parliamentary debate politicians have to formulate their arguments in such a way that they are maximally convincing to both their colleagues and the public, without becoming unreasonable.

The addition of "We (all) know that" to an argument can be used as a strategic manoeuvre in the argumentation stage. Since politicians are expected to represent a bigger whole, it might be effective to emphasise the fact that an argument is recognised by others. The construction should be regarded as a matter of wording (*lexis* or *elocutio*): it calls the addressee's attention to the fact that a particular starting point is agreed upon in the opening stage; it does not affect the propositional content of the argument itself and it could, in principle, be left out without consequences for the reconstruction of the argumentation.

The construction "We (all) know that X" consists of two parts: the first part, "we (all)" expresses the shared character of an argument. Apart from "we (all)", other formulations could be used as well, such as "all of us", or other appeals to a bigger whole, such as "everyone", "the whole world", and "every reasonable person".

The second part of the construction consists of a perspective-indicating verb and expresses certainty ("know", "observe"). We will discuss the rhetorical potential of the separate parts of the construction in section 3.1 and 3.2. Then, we will turn to the combination of the two parts.

3.1 The strategic potential of the pronoun "we"

By using the personal pronoun "we", a speaker creates a mental space in which he positions himself and his audience (Chilton & Schäffner 1997: 217). The pronoun "we" functions as an identity cue: it conceptualises group identity (Bazzanella 2002: 249; Chilton & Schäffner 2002: 30). By using "we", a speaker distinguishes insiders and outsiders: people that belong to the group and people that do not belong to that group (Pennycook 1994: 175; Wilson 1990: 71). Therefore, the use of "we" is considered effective: it creates a bond between the speaker and the people he includes (Moberg & Eriksson 2013: 320). Because of the creation of this bond, the personal pronoun "we" can be used as a strategic means to emphatically present something as a common starting point.

It is not always clear who is included and who is not: the meaning of the personal pronoun "we" is often vague (Proctor & I-Wen Su 2011: 3253; Moberg & Eriksson 2013: 320). To solve vagueness, contextual information about the situation in which it is used is required (de Fina 1995: 400; Bull & Fetzer 2006: 11). Moberg & Eriksson (2013: 331) point out that the vagueness can be used strategically, for instance to disguise differences between parties within a coalition.

Following from the fact that politicians address a complex of audiences in parliamentary debates (as described in section 2), "we" can refer to many different groups. When a politician is faced with an opponent's criticism regarding the false presentation of a premise as a common starting point, he can strategically make use of the vagueness of "we", for instance by stating that he just meant to include his own party instead of the parliament as a whole.

3.2 The strategic potential of perspective-indicating verbs

The second part of the construction consists of a perspective-indicating verb. As a whole, the construction "We (all) [verb] that" forms a so-called matrix clause that provides a perspective on the so-called complement clause (i.e. "X"). According to van Leeuwen (2015: 155-157), depending on the nature of the matrix clause different degrees of certainty can be ascribed to the content of the complement clause. Compare the following matrix clauses:

(1) *I think that* there will be a heatwave next week.
(2) *I am sure that* there will be a heatwave next week.
(3) *It is a fact that* there will be a heatwave next week.
      (van Leeuwen 2015: 156, our translation)

The first sentence, van Leeuwen argues, leaves much more room for discussion than the second and the third sentence, since it expresses more uncertainty. Thus, discussants can manoeuvre strategically by choosing a keen formulation of the matrix clause.

The construction "We (all) [verb] that X" leaves a discussant room to opt for different verbs that express different degrees of certainty (Haeseryn et al. 1997: 1156-1158; Verhagen 2005: 100). Compare for instance the following sentences:

(4) We (all) *know* that there will be a heatwave next week.
(5) We (all) *expect* that there will be a heatwave next week.
(6) We (all) *are certain* that there will be a heatwave next week.

In the above sentences different degrees of certainty are ascribed to the propositional content of the complement clause. Compared to (4), the assertion in (5) is weaker: expecting something to happen is less sure than knowing something will happen. The formulation in (6) however might appear even stronger than (4): to be certain is stronger than to know.

3.3 Soundness conditions

The construction "We (all) know that X" works through a combination of inclusion, expressed by the pronoun "we" and certainty, expressed by a verb such as "know". Together they form a powerful rhetorical device that gives strength to an argument. However, in some cases strategic manoeuvring with the construction derails. In this paragraph we formulate the soundness conditions for the use of the construction "We (all) know that X".

First, the inclusion that has been enabled by using the pronoun "we" should be correct, that is: what is ascribed to a particular group should apply to this group. Indeed, politicians may speak personally, but often they represent others. If they speak in the name of others, they should always stick to what they have in common with the group they represent. If the group that is included does not agree upon the starting point that is presented as mutually shared, the politician violates the Starting Point Rule by falsely presenting a premise as a common starting point (van Eemeren 2018: 60).

Second, it should be clear who is meant by "we". Due to the inherent vagueness of "we", a politician might escape from his responsibility (e.g. "I did not mean to include the whole coalition, only my own party"). According to the Language Use Rule, a discussant's contributions should be clear; if not, he commits the fallacy of misusing unclearness (van Eemeren 2018: 61).

Third, the certainty that is expressed by the verb should be in accordance with the actual amount of certainty among those who are included. A politician may falsely ascribe certainty to an utterance by using the wrong verb (e.g. "know" instead of "expect").

4. STRATEGICALLY INTRODUCING ARGUMENTS WITH "WE (ALL) KNOW THAT" IN PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

In this section, we will analyse examples of strategic manoeuvring with "We (all) know that X" that are either sound or derailed, based on the soundness conditions formulated in section 3. All examples are taken from the official transcripts of the so-called "General Debates" (*Algemene politieke beschouwingen*), an annual debate in the Dutch parliament to discuss the government's plans for the next year.[1] These debates gain a lot of attention from the media. Therefore, it could be expected that politicians will do whatever they can to persuade their primary addressee: the voters.

We will start by analysing two examples of sound strategic manoeuvres; then we will discuss a couple of examples of derailed strategic manoeuvres, due to a violation of one of the soundness conditions.

4.1 Sound strategic manoeuvres

A strategic manoeuvre with the construction "We (all) know that X" is sound if it meets the criteria formulated in section 3: the use of "we" should be correct and clear, and the perspective-indicating verb should not be too strong. This is the case in example (7):

(7) Mr. **Segers** (*ChristianUnion*): I want to continue about the point Mr. Wilders referred to, namely attacks, national security and the fight against terror. The Prime Minister started rightly referring to what happened in New York yesterday. *We know that* an attack can also take place in the Netherlands. That's a danger, a harm we need to get ourselves armed against. We need to use all means necessary to make a stand against this. (General Debate 2017)

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[1] The transcripts are retrieved from zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl. For all examples holds: our translation (from Dutch to English) and our italics/underlining.

Segers' argumentation can be reconstructed as follows:

1 We need to use all means necessary to make a stand against terrorism, *because*
1.1 *We know that* an attack can also take place in the Netherlands.

In principle, Segers could just have said that "an attack can also take place in the Netherlands". Instead, he manoeuvres strategically by adding "we know that" to introduce his argument. He presents the possibility of an attack taking place in the Netherlands as factual knowledge by using the verb "know" (*weten*). By using the personal pronoun "we", he presents it as a fact that is common knowledge among the audience (i.e. as a material starting point). Since it is indeed a common starting point that, in principle, an attack could take place in the Netherlands, Segers is both reasonable and effective: his strategic manoeuvre is sound.

Excerpt (8) shows an example of a sound strategic manoeuvre with another variant of the construction:

(8) Mr. **Asscher** (*Labour Party*): I have a short question in response to Mr. Dijkhoff's contribution about healthcare. [...] There are serious concerns among community nurses about the 100 million of budget cuts due to the Outline Accord, as shown by the Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis. *We all know that* the total costs for healthcare are rising. Something needs to be done about that. (General Debate 2017)

Instead of "We know that", Asscher adds "We *all* know that" to his argument to make an even stronger claim. His argumentation can be reconstructed as follows:

1 Something needs to be done about the healthcare costs, *because*
1.1 *We all know that* the total costs for healthcare are rising.

As in example (7), "We all know that" could have been left out, without changing the propositional content of the argument. Asscher manoeuvres strategically by presenting the rise of total healthcare costs as a fact that is generally known. "We all" most likely refers to everyone among the audience (voters as well as other MPs). Since the costs for healthcare have been an issue in several debates, it can be assumed that this is indeed a common (material) starting point. Thus, Asscher is both effective and reasonable.

4.2 Derailed strategic manoeuvres

4.2.1 False inclusion
The first soundness condition concerns the correct use of "we": a speaker should not include others that do not share his starting point(s). This condition is violated in example (9):

> (9) Mr. **Wilders** (*Freedom Party*): It also seems that SP-voters do not want more asylum seekers to come to The Netherlands. *We all know that* they aren't sad people without food and water. Even if there were such people, then indeed, they could better get this in the region than here. (General Debate 2015)

Wilders' standpoint is left implicit in this fragment, but it could be reconstructed as follows:

> (1) (We should not allow more asylum seekers to come to The Netherlands), *because*
> 1.1 *We all know that* they aren't sad people without food and water.

Instead of just claiming that "they aren't sad people without food and water", Wilders introduces his argument with the construction "We all know that" to manoeuvre strategically. He presents the propositional content of his argument as a fact (due to the verb "know") that is shared among the public (due to the pronoun "we" combined with the word "all"). By being as persuasive as possible (Wilders' rhetorical aim), Wilders loses sight of his dialectical aim: the starting point he uses as a premise in his argumentation is not shared by many other MPs and a large part of the public. By falsely presenting this premise as an accepted starting point, Wilders violates the pragma-dialectical Starting Point Rule.[2]

Another instance of a violation of the first soundness condition can be found in example (10):

> (10) Prime Minister **Rutte**: *We know of course that* the policy concerning the Wmo (Social Support Act) is transferred from the national government to the local authorities, since local authorities are better able to deliver tailored work via the Wmo and Special Assistance. (General Debate 2015)

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[2] It could be argued that the use of the verb "know" is also wrong here (and that Wilders, thus, violates the third soundness condition as well). However, Wilders claims that he really *knows* that these people are not sad. Therefore, we analysed it as a violation of the first soundness condition, rather than the third.

At first sight, the construction "We know of course that" seems to introduce the factual starting point that the policy concerning the Wmo is transferred from the national government to the local authorities. Since this is indeed the case and it can be expected to be known by the MPs, the use of "We know of course that" is perfectly sound for this part. However, the construction also relates to the second part of Rutte's statement, in which he presents his opinion (i.e. local authorities are better able to deliver tailored work) as a common starting point. Apart from the pronoun "we" and the verb "know", the adjunct "of course" contributes to effectivity: by introducing his argument with this construction, Rutte makes it seem that it is an accepted starting point.[3] Moreover, the combination this construction with both a known fact and Rutte's opinion makes it very strategic. Nevertheless, Rutte violates the Starting Point Rule by falsely presenting something as an accepted starting point.

4.2.2 The inherent vagueness of "we"

The second soundness condition relates to a clear use of "we": a speaker should not misuse its inherent vagueness. A violation of the condition is shown in example (11):

> (11) Mr. **Roemer** (*Socialist Party*): It is a pity that the Prime Minister rejects this plan [a national bank for investments in small and medium sized enterprises, ML&BvdS] in advance. We know the system from the past. *We know that* it works. We know that currently the banks cannot do this.
>
> Prime Minister **Rutte**: I have discussed it with the Minister for Economic Affairs and in the first place I assure Mr. Roemer that we will comment on his suggestion when we will send the evaluation about the BMKB to the House. Being very honest, <u>I repeat that our basic attitude is not positive</u>. (General Debate 2014)

Roemer's argumentation can be reconstructed as follows:

1   The Prime Minister should reconsider this plan [a national bank for investments in small and medium sized enterprises], *because*
1.1a   We know the system from the past, *and*
1.1b   *We know that* it works, *and*
1.1c   We know that currently the banks cannot do this.

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[3] Rutte's standpoint is left out of this excerpt.

Roemer uses the construction "We know that" to introduce all three of his coordinative arguments.[4] The use of this construction in argument 1.1b is particularly interesting, since Roemer uses the construction to present his opinion about the plan as an accepted starting point: the verb "know" expresses certainty, while the pronoun "we" expresses inclusion. As becomes clear from Prime Minister Rutte's response (underlined), Roemer's premise 1.1b is not a common starting point: Rutte disagrees with Roemer about the effectiveness of his plan. Nevertheless, since he does not specify who he wants to include, Roemer could, in principle, say that Rutte might disagree, but that his party still knows that the plan works. In other words, there are several interpretations of the group that "we" is referring to; in some interpretations the inclusion is correct, while in others it is not. Thus, Roemer strategically uses the inherent vagueness of "we" to present his argument as persuasive as possible. Nevertheless, because of this vagueness, this could count as a violation of the Language Use Rule.

4.2.3 Different degrees of certainty

Strategic manoeuvres can also derail because the perspective-indicating verb expresses too much certainty (soundness condition 3). The following excerpt is taken from the General Debate of 2017. In that year, one topic that was severely criticised by the opposition was the coalition's proposal to abolish dividend tax, good for 1.4 billion euros of the government's incomes:

> (12) Mr. **Klaver** (*Green Party*): The entire coalition agreement and all measures are always checked on effectiveness. [...] *We know* about this measure pertaining to the dividend tax *that* it does not contribute to the increase of employment opportunities. [...] I cannot understand such a choice, especially not in the light of the other desires we have for our society, for instance better salaries in education or in healthcare.
>
> **President of the House**: You made your point.
>
> Mr. **Dijkhoff** (*People's Party for Freedom and Democracy*): Mr. Klaver turns the fact that one organisation says it is not possible to predict or calculate the effect, into the fact that the measure has no effect. Those are two different things. (General Debate 2017)

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[4] For 1.1a, he uses "we know" instead of "we know that", but the rhetorical function is the same.

According to Klaver, the abolishment of the dividend tax cannot be justified: it is not effective, yet it concerns a lot of money. His standpoint and argumentation can be reconstructed as follows:

1   The dividend tax should not be abolished, *because*
1.1 *We know that* the abolishment of the tax is not effective.

In policymaking, considerations about the effectivity can be a strong argument against a policy proposal. In the presentation of his argument, Klaver suggests that it is evident that the abolishment of the dividend tax is not effective: it is something "we know". According to Dijkhoff this is not in accordance with the by then available insights. It is rather unsure what the effects of the measure will be. However, given the possible negative effects of non-action, he states, the measure is worth a gamble.

In the above example, Klaver's use of the verb "know" suggests too much certainty about the (in)effectiveness of the abolishment of the dividend tax, which is pointed at by Mr. Dijkhoff (underlined). The strategic manoeuvre derailed: based on the available insights, the inclusion of the House in his point of view is not justified. Klaver falsely presents his argument as a common starting point, thereby violating the Starting Point Rule.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this paper we assessed how politicians can manoeuvre strategically with the construction "We (all) know that X" in parliamentary debates. The construction can be a powerful rhetorical device to emphasise the fact that the content of their argument is recognised by others. Especially in politics this might be strategic, since politicians are expected to represent a bigger whole.

The rhetorical potential of the construction is due to the combination of inclusion by using "we" (all) and certainty by using perspective-indicating verbs such as "know".

Strategic manoeuvring with the construction "We (all) know that X" derails when a discussant violates the soundness conditions related to this construction. First, the inclusion should be justified, that is: if a speaker tends to represent others, he should stick to what he has in common with this group. Second, it has to be clear who is included by the use of "we". Third, the amount of certainty expressed by the verb (e.g. "know") should be in accordance with the view of those who are included.

In this research we focused on the political domain. In future research other domains of communication could be explored. Experimental research could indicate if, and if yes, how the addition of (different variants of) the construction "We (all) know that X" affects

ordinary language user's perception of an argument. Lastly, we focused on verbs that express certainty. Future research could also focus on the strategic use of verbs that express uncertainty, e.g. to avoid responsibility, such as "do not exclude" in "We do not exclude (the possibility) that X".

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