

## Chapter 2

# The Language of Argumentation in Dutch

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How do Dutch people let each other know that they disagree? What do they say when they want to resolve their difference of opinion by way of an argumentative discussion? In what way do they convey that they are convinced by each other's argumentation? How do they criticize each other's argumentative moves? Which words and expressions do they use in these endeavors? By answering these questions this short essay provides a brief inventory of the language of argumentation in Dutch.

Like other languages, Dutch has a whole range of possibilities for expressing what one thinks of something, varying from 'mijn standpunt is' [it is my view that], 'volgens mij' [in my opinion], and 'ik vind dat' [I think that], to 'Dat klopt niet' [that is not correct]. Those who have doubts concerning someone else's standpoint, or even firmly disagree with it, do not need to be at a loss for words either. Their response can vary from 'Daar ben ik nog niet helemaal zeker van' [I am not yet entirely sure about that] to 'Dat ben ik totaal niet met je eens' [I do not agree with you on that at all]—with a lot of other possibilities in between. People who prefer to express themselves in a somewhat formal way may say 'Dat waag ik toch wel ernstig te betwijfelen' [I venture to express my serious doubts about that], people who profess to be relaxed might let us know that they 'er toch wel even een paar vraagtekens bij willen zetten' [would just like to add a few question marks to it], while the response of no-nonsense people like you and me could be 'Wat is dat nou weer voor onzin?' [what kind of nonsense is that again?].

People who do not agree on something 'verschillen van mening' [have a difference of opinion], which can grow into a mutually recognized 'meningsverschil' [disagreement], and may become a 'controverse' [controversy] if the disagreement can not be resolved in due course. Some controversies end up in a 'conflict' [conflict], or even a 'vete' [feud], a deep disagreement between the 'partijen' [parties] that has become solidified and seems insolvable. In a great many cases, however, the parties in the disagreement will make an effort to 'uit de wereld

helpen' [dissolve] their difference of opinion. They can do so through 'beslechting' [settlement] of their difference of opinion, if need be with the help of a 'derde' [third party], but they can also make an attempt to 'oplossen' [resolve] the difference of opinion by means of 'argumentatie' [argumentation]. In the simplest case this means that either the party who doubted the 'aanvaardbaarheid' [acceptability] of the standpoint at issue comes to accept the standpoint because he has been 'overtuigd' [convinced] by the other party's argumentation, so that he decides to 'intrekken' [withdraw] his doubt, or that the party who defended the standpoint 'zich neerlegt bij' [gives into] the other party's criticisms and withdraws his standpoint. If the parties do not succeed in resolving their difference of opinion by means of argumentation, this may result in a 'patstelling' [stalemate], with both parties maintaining their original positions.

In argumentative exchanges the parties 'brengen argumenten naar voren' [argue their case], 'beantwoorden' [respond to] each other's 'argumenten' [reasons that constitute the 'argumentatie'], 'voeren nieuwe argumenten aan' [bring in new reasons], et cetera. If it works out that way, now and then the parties may 'zichzelf tegenspreken' [contradict themselves], make use of arguments they know to be 'twijfelachtig' [questionable] or even 'ondeugdelijk' [unsound]. They may slightly 'verdraaien' [distort] the other party's standpoint, thus creating a 'stroman' [straw man], try 'onder de bewijslast uit te komen' [to wriggle out of the burden of proof] for their own statements, the other party 'onder druk te zetten' [to put pressure on them] or 'persoonlijk aan te vallen' [to make a personal attack on them], 'een beroep te doen op autoriteiten wier gezag dubieus is' [to make appeals to dubious authorities], 'verkeerde vergelijkingen te maken' [to draw wrong analogies] or perpetrate 'ongeoorloofde generalisaties' [hasty generalizations].

Usually, the parties will not accept each other's argumentation at face value but judge the argumentation for the standpoint. If a party is, for instance, of the opinion that the other party's argumentation is not 'deugdelijk' [sound] because it contains an 'argument' [reason] that has nothing to do with the standpoint it is supposed to support, this party can make this clear by saying 'Dat is totaal irrelevant' [that is completely irrelevant] or 'Dat doet niet ter zake' [that is not to the point], but also by uttering a straightforward 'Waar slaat dat nou weer op?' [what the heck is the meaning of this?]<sup>1</sup>—the title of a popularizing Dutch book about the language of argumentation I co-authored in 1996 with Rob Grootendorst (Amsterdam/Antwerp: Contact). Proverbial alternatives known by all speakers of Dutch are 'Dat raakt kant noch wal' [that is all wrong], 'Dat slaat als een tang op een varken' [there's no rhyme or reason to it] and 'Dat slaat als kut op dirk' [that's got fuck-all to do with it]. As in all other cases I am dealing with in this essay, there are many more expressions pertaining to the same phenomenon—in this case a criticism of lacking pertinence in argumentation that was advanced.

Another kind of judgment that may be given is that the reasoning used in the argumentation 'niet klopt' [is not correct]. This can mean that the reasoning is not considered 'geldig' [valid], but also that a reason put forward in the argumentation

is for another reason not regarded to offer ‘deugdelijke ondersteuning’ [sound support] to the standpoint, or that the reasons that together constitute the ‘argumentatie’ are not regarded ‘afdoende’ [sufficient]. Such judgments may make the critic ‘verwerpen’ [reject] the argumentation and eventually also the standpoint defended by it.

The words and expressions I have highlighted so far, together with an abundance of other current and less current words and expressions, make up the language of argumentation in Dutch. They do not only refer to ‘standpunten’ [views] and components of ‘argumentatie’ [joint reasons put forward in defense of a standpoint], such as the explicit and implicit ‘argumenten’ [reasons] advanced, but also to the qualities of argumentation as a defense of a standpoint, such as the ‘relevantie’ [relevance] or ‘houdbaarheid’ [sustainability] of reasons that are part of the argumentation, and the ‘redelijkheid’ [reasonableness] or ‘drogredelijkheid’ [fallaciousness] of all ‘zetten’ [moves] that are made in the discourse, irrespective of whether this discourse is a ‘betoog’ [argumentative monologue] or ‘discussie’ [argumentative discussion]. It goes without saying that aiming for completeness in this brief inventory is not feasible, if only because the Dutch language—like all other languages—is open to continual change and the users of the language are most inventive in making creative use of the infinite number of possibilities their language offers. I have just mentioned a series of prototypical words and expressions that give the readers of this journal an idea of what argumentative Dutch is like.

When it comes to comparing the language of argumentation in Dutch with the language of argumentation in English, the most striking differences concern the crucial word argumentation and the way this word is used. These differences are not just funny peculiarities, but may have significant consequences for the way in which argumentation is conceptualized. As a preliminary, it may be good to note that in Dutch the word ‘argumentatie’ [argumentation] is a very ordinary word that everyone knows and uses. More importantly, ordinary speakers of Dutch use this word in basically the same way as argumentation theorists do when it comes to the term ‘argumentation’—or at least in virtually the same way as my colleagues and I do (van Eemeren et al. 1996: 5).

The first property that makes the word ‘argumentatie’ [argumentation] different from the English word ‘argumentation’ is that ‘argumentatie’ pertains only to the constellation of reasons a speaker or writer puts forward in defense of a standpoint and does not include the standpoint itself. In the argument ‘You should not listen to Peter, because he is prejudiced,’ for instance, the ‘argumentatie’ consists only of the explicit premise that Peter is prejudiced and the implicit premise that prejudiced people are not worth listening to, while the advisory statement that you should not listen to Peter is the standpoint. Fully acknowledging that both elements are, of course, part of the reasoning process, Dutch makes a similar distinction between the ‘argumentatie’ and the standpoint of an arguer as logic does between the premises and the conclusion of an argument.

The second property pointing to a pertinent difference between the meaning of the Dutch word ‘argumentatie’ and the English word ‘argumentation’ is that the

meaning of the word ‘argumentatie’ already incorporates the so-called process-product ambiguity inherent in the theoretical term *argumentation* that is not yet so clearly present in the English word ‘argumentation’ as it is ordinarily used in English. Without stretching ordinary usage in any way, the Dutch word ‘argumentatie’ can be used to refer both to the process of argumentation, as in ‘Onderbreek me nou niet want ik ben midden in mijn argumentatie’ [don’t interrupt me just now since I am in the middle of my argumentation], and to the product resulting from the argumentative process, as in ‘Ik heb je argumentatie bekeken, maar ik vind hem niet sterk’ [I have looked at your argumentation but I do not think it is really strong].

The third property that makes a crucial difference that I would like to emphasize here is that, like its equivalents in various other languages, the ordinary word ‘argumentatie’ in Dutch shares with the theoretical term *argumentation* the vital characteristic that it is immediately connected with reasonableness—a characteristic that is not represented in the same way in the ordinary use of the English word ‘argumentation.’ ‘Argumentatie’ refers, just as the theoretical term ‘argumentation,’ to a deliberate effort of an arguer to resolve a—real or projected—difference of opinion by convincing an audience that is presumed to be a reasonable judge of the acceptability of the standpoint at issue—an audience that may, for instance, consist of only one listener, but also of all readers of a national newspaper. It is important to realize that the word ‘argumentatie’ refers in Dutch to a concept that has nothing to do with quarrelling or any other negatively charged verbal activity, such as skirmishing, squabbling, bickering, wrangling and haggling. Because the use of the word ‘argumentatie’ does not have any negative connotation, this word could be easily adopted as a technical term in the theorizing about argumentation, without compelling the theorists to introduce any completely artificial stipulations about argumentation as a process and argumentation as a product, and without suggesting when using this term as a key term in the study of argumentation any unwanted links with verbal ways of behavior in which reasonableness does not play a central role, such as quarrelling.

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