

ISSA Proceedings 2002 - Two Ways Of Analysing A 'Light Mix' Newspaper Article



In most communication situations, the pragma - dialectic rules are violated in a more or less flagrant way. Most of the time, people do not talk or argue as reasonably and rationally as they want to or believe they do. This is a problem, not for most communication situations, but for the above mentioned rules. In a 'normative' approach, the

most common ways of talking and communicating are treated as deviations. As analysis contains more than determining the correctness of an argument, this polarization - along with the dialectical system of protagonist versus antagonist - might leave us helpless in the grey zone where arguments are more or less right or wrong.

Perelman & Olbrechts Tyteca show that the assumption of logical arguments is questionable. They distinguish so called quasilogical arguments: arguments that are based upon the status of logic. Many others have tried to describe the complex and often ambiguous ways of argumentation and persuasion, and to take into account the variety of situations in which they occur. They have developed ways of reasonable thinking adapted to different fields. Others propose to broaden the general scope and for instance to make room for 'emotional' arguments in argumentation theories, next to the 'rational' arguments of allegedly 'calm and cool' speakers (Gilbert: 1995). Roman Jakobson pointed out the six different functions in language, which are always at work at the same time in the same utterance. As a consequence, when an argument is analysed as if it were limited to the rational aspect of the message, we have to consider the fact that this kind of analysis takes place on a more or less abstract level. It is important to develop analysing methods that take full account of the complexity and variety of concrete everyday arguments. In this paper, I compare different kinds of analysis. One could argue that more methods are all for the better, as this reveals the richness and possibilities of human language and scientific research. On the other hand, the question arises what to do when different forms of analysis reveal seemingly contradictory statements or sterile conclusions.

Different ways of analysis may seem to stand apart from each other, but we should take a critical look at the supposition that any text or utterance can be submitted to any form of analysis, and that any analysis of any text is as valuable or significant as any other analysis. We could look for possibilities to detect indications in (con)texts that suggest how they should be analysed, or which analysis might be better suited for certain kinds of text. Or we could try to develop schemes that show us which links are possible between different methods and which are not. In this way, we can leave room for complex but essential phenomena like humour and irony. Before we plunge into a text, we could run through a systematic checklist in order to decide when a pragma - dialectic approach is asked for, and when rhetorical or other ways of reading are more appropriate.

All these questions and proposals can never be answered or realised. In the following paragraphs, I will show a couple of possible ways to look at one text, and reveal some connections that are not clear at first sight. The text I analyse is a media commentary upon a heated debate about the freedom of press, or more accurately: artistic freedom. An Antwerp fashion designer felt insulted by the vulgar language in which an author described her in a satirical novel, and took the matter to court. This led to a courtroom decision to forbid the sale of the novel called Guggenheim Publishers. It became a short intense hype, and the media enjoyed this storm in a teacup. The book itself is an open satire on the Flemish; one of the 'characters' in the novel felt personally insulted. So far, so good.

Looking at the enormous production of newspaper articles on the matter in only a couple of weeks, one is at first disillusioned by the absolute low quality of the argumentation. Statements and arguments turn out to be loose and poorly worked out. This might have to do with the simplicity of the juridical case: it sets two basic rights in opposition towards each other, namely insult contra the freedom of speech. But it also is part of the journalistic game to produce this light mix of information and argumentation.

When one tries to throw a rhetoric light on those texts, one can deduct underlying argumentation that doesn't present itself as such, but might for precisely that reason be all the more persuasive.

There is for example, to start with, this article with the title 'Women with an IQ take position in the Brusselmans case.' The subtitle runs as follows: 'Ex-victims read from Brusselmans oeuvre at the book fair'. A fairly large picture of two famous female Flemish tv-stars makes the confusion complete. From the very

start the article enacts two camps that supposedly split up Flanders: pro or contra B. The group of protesting women get some two paragraphs of text (which is attention), where the other 10 or 15 paragraphs consider at length the actions of the other 'camp', the ex-victims of B.'s verbal brutalities and their reading event. From a rhetorical point of view, one could consider this a way of putting the matter into a case of polarisation, or false dilemma. This means that the presentation is limited to two positions, whereas in reality, almost any situation can be considered from a number of viewpoints. The technique of false polarisation is very popular in the media, since readers are attracted to controversy (and newspaper publishers want a lot of readers). The idea that discussion and controversy is a way to sharpen one's views and argumentation, is right, of course, but at the same time it contains a possible misunderstanding. In this article, the writer first creates confusion, and then presents himself as the one with the clear, but polarized, view. As for argumentation schemes, not much argumentation of any level can be detected in this article, as it merely describes the happening. The way in which the descriptions take place, however, is less innocent, but this topic would lead us too far away from my subject (Van Belle: 2000).

I want to concentrate upon another article about the same subject that does develop some argumentation, although minimally, and that in this way gives me the opportunity to develop my statement. It is a text that was published in a Dutch paper by a Dutch reviewer. (The public should know that Flemish and Dutch indeed are one and the same language, that B. has readers in Flanders as well as in the Netherlands, and that Flemish newspapers are rarely read by the Dutch and vice versa). I will look at the text from different viewpoints. It starts with a short description of the situation, focuses within the lead upon an argument that considers the selling conditions of the book in The Netherlands.

A fairly long review of the novel follows: the plot, the genre (a satire), the main character, who endlessly attacks minorities and Flemish celebrities. Those attacks are called 'not funny' and 'boring', all the more since most Flemish celebrities are unknown in The Netherlands. Also the style apparently lacks sharpness and power. A new element in this review is the statement that the novel is more shocking for its cruelty than for its sexually coloured insults. Some examples are added: at first descriptions and citations of cruelties, then citations of the insults thrown at the above mentioned fashion designer: she has frog eyes, she's a fashion designer of rags. The following paragraphs contains two sentences which

I translate literally. 'Next, Guggenheimer says he has had sexual intercourse with her. 'Toad eyes', by the way, is a Flemish word for frog eyes.'" The text seems to drop dead here, lost in a minute and boring detail. But in the next paragraph, the reviewer briskly goes on: 'The judge of course had better kept out of the discussion', and adds some arguments to this. The article ends with a repetition of the initial statement that Guggenheimer Publishers is not a good book, and advises the reader to buy another book from the 'great oeuvre' of B. He suggests 'The come back of Bonanza', which is 'a lot funnier, less shocking, and everywhere available.'

In the course of the article, five different conclusions are drawn. I will first give them in the actual order of presentation.

One: The booksellers and publishers in the Netherlands shouldn't stop the sale of the book, because a courtroom decision in Belgium can in no way have any juridical value in The Netherlands, and even if the Dutch judges would decide to forbid the selling of the book in The Netherlands as well, they can never imply this law with retrospective effect. / Good and clear argumentation.

Two: The novel is of low quality, because the satire is boring and the style is not sharp enough. The evaluation is negative, / because of certain elements; a form of argumentation typical for book reviews.

Three: A lot more shocking than the insults, is the violence in the novel, / because of the following examples: quotes.

Four: The case shouldn't have been taken to court, because the freedom of speech is an elementary right in our western democracy.

Five: The novel is not morally wrong, because the insults are part of a satire, which is a literary genre.

Two b.: (repetition and elaboration of the second conclusion): the novel is of low quality, but other work of B. is great, / again with examples, this time with a title of a great book by B.

One could judge that these argumentations contain no real mistakes or fallacies. The rules for reasonable discussions claim for instance that the statements should have sufficient arguments, which in this text, they have. Those apparently different arguments have a more or less loose connection. But at a closer look, many underlying connections are to be discovered. For instance, the relative weight that is given to the insults in comparison to the violence that other famous Flemish people had to endure (in the novel). The reviewer first quotes the

violence and then the denounced insults, although some of them have been omitted. In this way, the reader feels a bit shocked by the quoted violent scenes indeed, and not by the insulting scenes that follow. In this way, the reviewer achieves again an anti-climax.

This technique of anti-climax is once more being used in another statement, number 4, where the reviewer formulates a statement about the juridical aspects of the matter. He says: 'the judge should have kept out of this matter'. By putting the judge in a grammatical subject position at the beginning of the first sentence of a paragraph, this person is being given a very active role in this 'play'. It suggests a judge taking decisions. This way of writing is typical of journalistic style: you give your article more human interest by giving actual persons an active role. This style is a lot more appealing than passive constructions and impersonal subjects. At a closer look, this shifting of acting subjects is also the case in the lead paragraph. After the first sentence, where the writer and this allegedly scandalous book are mentioned; the second sentence gives the judge a similar active position to occupy. It says 'The Belgian judge forbid the sale of the book, because it appears to be insulting for the fashion designer Anne Demeulemeester'.

It is striking that the whole article never mentions the fashion designer in the active position the judge gets. This way of putting things gives the reviewer the possibility to avoid Anne Demeulemeester as a person, although she's the one that took action: she took the matter to court. For some reason or another, her action gets understated, and her name only occurs in object position.

Only when the argumentation about the violence is being developed, she gets a grammatical subject position twice: once, by name but not in the beginning of the sentence, and once at the beginning, but with the referential 'she'. What is interesting here, is the fact that this more explicit naming of the fashion designer coincides with the above described anti-climax in the argumentation. Her name does appear more visibly, but only at the moment the insults are ridiculed.

Many tactics are used in this article. Under the heading 'review', it supposedly speaks about the literary value of book. It is generally accepted, though, that, given the constellation of the media hype, the reviewer formulates an opinion on the B.- case as well. At first sight, he moves from information about the book and the case (2 sentences), to adaptation to Dutch law (4 sentences), to review (4 paragraphs), to further review within argumentation about the violence in the book (3 paragraphs), to argumentation about the case (2 paragraphs), to

conclusion (opinion: it's a bad book, but B. has done better before). The second paragraph of the review part opens with the sentence 'Guggenheimer Publishers is a satire', and explains that the main character is an unreal out-of-proportion figure who's bullying everybody around him without ever being unhappy or being punished. In this way, B. plays with our moral standards, because, according to the journalist, deep down, everybody likes to see evil punished. The rest of the review part vaguely elaborates this idea of satire, along with more and more negative evaluation (see statements 3 and 4).

When the reviewer takes position for B., he can easily repeat the fact that's a satire. Here, he doesn't need much time anymore to develop this argument, because it's been there all the time. This makes the actual overt argumentation shorter and stronger.

Until now, we discovered only a few tactics in this text, namely the avoidance of Anne Demeulemeester, and the tendency to build up anticlimaxes. In this way, the reviewer reveals a certain attitude towards the case: he suggests the whole case is indeed a storm in a teacup. Moreover, he is honest enough to admit the book is bad, but uses this statement at the same time to put up an underlying defence for B. Overtly, he doesn't spend much time on the juridical aspect, but he uses his evaluation for preparing his argument that the book is a satire.

This minimal analysis of one aspect of a very short and banal newspaper review article leaves open a lot of questions and work.

The look at the argumentation was a way to start the analysis, but it could show us nothing more than statements and arguments. Other elements that show the richness of the underlying argumentation had to be captured by less defined ways of reading and searching.

In the '*inventio*', the writer or speaker decides what he will say. It is the selection process that prepares the decision upon the few things that will be said against the background of the vast amount of elements being left unsaid. An argumentation analysis claims rightly that it only takes into consideration the words or sentences that in effect are being written or spoken, considering texts as separated closed entities where statements can be made upon. A more rhetorical way of analysing gets along with the fact that not

one analysis is right or wrong, that texts as well as contexts are complex and have more than one meaning, in the same way that language is part of a larger reality. The idea that we can stand at the side and give neutral comment is only possible

from the viewpoint of a closed analytical system that doesn't wish to talk about the complex reality while we're part of it. In a pragma - dialectic approach, argument is caught into a matter of right or wrong. This leaves many matters unsaid. And here I repeat one of my initial questions: how can we develop a way of thinking with room for more variation, more layers?

Gradually, I realised that the choice of these banal media texts is not as arbitrary as I had first assumed myself. I had to take into account that this case about the value of words reveals something about my initial point in question as well. As for the study of argumentation, our business and our task is to try to keep in touch with both worlds: the ideal world where words have only one meaning, where arguments (and actions) are either right or wrong, where people in certain circumstances can think and act purely rationally, and on the other hand the real world, where words and meanings always are shifting, where arguments are part of a process, an age-old discussion, a fundamental debate. In this serious game of text and context, we are not to be put into separate little holes or disciplines, because we should always be looking for more possibilities and more meaning.

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