

Issa Proceedings 1998 - The History Of The Enthymeme



1. Introduction [i]

Enthymemes are on the agenda of modern rhetoric, argumentation theory, conversation and discourse analysis, formal and informal logic and critical thinking. However, in the various approaches to enthymemes there are many and sometimes large differences with respect to the definition of an enthymeme. In some cases the definitions do not even seem to refer to the same language phenomenon:

Some modern definitions of an enthymeme

An enthymeme is a truncated or abbreviated argument - (...) with either a missing premiss or an unstated conclusion (Crossley and Wilson, 1979: 106).

Enthymemes are arguments in which the support is matched to the questions and objections of the recipient (Jackson and Jacobs, 1980: 262).

The enthymeme does not require a particular linguistic frame, it is a form of thought, rather than a form of composition. (Nash 1989: 206)) This argument has all the earmarks of the enthymeme: the opening proposition, the syllogistic statement of contraries or incompatibles, the conclusion which is in effect a reformulation of the opening proposition (Nash, 1989: 210).

An enthymeme is an argument in which the speaker for pragmatic reasons left certain parts implicit, which means that at the logical level of analysis the missing part must be added in order to render the argument valid, while at the pragmatic level the particular assumption on which the argument relies has to be shown (Van Eemeren en Grootendorst, 1992).[ii]

These are just some examples. There are many other definitions that resemble one of them, but may differ in one aspect or another. This variety in definitions is puzzling. Are the differences only differences in stressing some aspect or another of essentially the same meaning, or do they reflect major theoretical differences? My main concern in this paper is to investigate and explain these differences, which I will do by giving you a historical overview. It is important to look into this, because it is often tacitly assumed that there is general consensus on what an enthymeme is, while in my view this is not the case. As a result of that, discussions on enthymemes sometimes suffer from a confusion of tongues. There

are some thorough and helpful recent studies on the history of the enthymeme (e.g. Burnyeat, 1996; Braet, 1997), but these focus on one particular historical period, whereas I think that we need an overview of all the relevant periods.

2. The sophistic and the aristotelian view

It is often claimed that the concept of the enthymeme is derived from Aristotle. It is true that he was the first (as far as we know) to develop a theory of enthymeme, in his *Rhetoric*, but there are some clear indications that, at that time, a technical enthymeme notion was already in use in rhetoric. Aristotle for example does not give a definition when he first mentions the enthymeme, and he complains that handbooks on rhetoric do not devote sufficient attention to the enthymeme.

It makes sense that Aristotle's notion of the enthymeme stems from the dominant rhetorical tradition of his time, which was that of the sophists. In several sophistic handbooks, dating from the fourth century b.C., the enthymeme is indeed mentioned. In these handbooks, it has the general meaning of the word in ancient Greek everyday language-use: the enthymeme is a thought or a consideration. But the word 'enthymeme' also has a more technical use in the sophistic handbooks (the technical meaning is sometimes ascribed to Isocates): the enthymeme belongs in the context of juridical debates, and in that of weighing the pro's and cons in cases in which the truth is unclear and something can be said for both sides. In these contexts, the enthymeme is used to point out contradictions in the suspect's story or between the suspect's statements and that which is generally believed to be acceptable in society. This definition of an enthymeme as an argument based on contradictions I call the *sophistic definition*. The *sophistic definition* has lived on, for it can be found in Roman times in Quintilian for example, and also in modern definitions, as in the definition by Nash I gave earlier. Striking is that, in the sophistic definition, logic (syllogisms) does not play a role, nor does the nowadays prominent aspect of the missing part of an enthymeme.

Aristotle, in his *Rhetoric*, actually does not mention that an enthymeme is based on contradictions. He mainly seems to adopt the general idea of an enthymeme as a thought or a consideration in a context in which the truth is uncertain and deliberation is required. In other words, Aristotle places the enthymeme in the rhetorical context. Even today there is much debate on what Aristotle understood to be an enthymeme. At the centre of this discussion is Aristotle's description of an enthymeme as a *sylogismos tis*. This can be interpreted in several ways: it can mean 'a syllogism of a kind' or 'a kind of syllogism'. *Sylogismos* itself can mean

one of two things: it is either an argument that is deductively valid, or it has the more strict meaning of a categorical syllogism, with its minor-major structure, two premises[**iii**], and with one of the four syllogistic forms Aristotle discerns in his *Analytica Priora* (written after the *Rhetoric*). It is unclear which of the two, or maybe both at the same time, Aristotle applies in the *Rhetoric*. In any case, as both Burnyeat and Braet claim, Aristotle's *syllogismos* cannot automatically be translated into the word 'syllogism' in its modern, logic-oriented meaning.

In Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, only four examples of arguments are explicitly presented as enthymemes, some of which Aristotle took from existing literary sources. Some other examples, although not presented as such, are now generally considered to be enthymemes as well. Three of these examples are:

Aristotle's examples of enthymemes

1. No man is free, for he is a slave of money or of fate. (*Rhet.* 2.12.2:94b4-6)
2. If peace should be made when it is most profitable and useful, than peace should be made when luck is still on one's side. (*Rhet.* 3.17.17:18b36-38)
3. Dorius was the winner in a contest in which a laurel wreath was the price, for Dorius won the Olympic Games (*Rhet.* 1.12.13).

According to Aristotle, enthymemes function in a rhetorical context: that is why they are rhetorical arguments. He further states that, as a result of this, the content of enthymemes is about things that are alterable, like human acts. The premises of enthymemes do not contain certainties nor generally accepted facts – in enthymemes the premises consist of probabilities (*eikota*) or signs (*semeia*). Furthermore, Aristotle says that enthymemes are supposed to be brief, since the audience is not expected to be able to handle complicated reasoning, and therefore what is known to the audience may be left implicit. Finally, Aristotle states that enthymemes contain *topoi*. All these statements together constitute what I call the *aristotelian definition* of an enthymeme.

Several aspects of the aristotelian definition are subject to debate. A relevant issue here is that it is unclear whether Aristotle regarded the aspect of unstated or implicit parts as necessary for an argument to be an enthymeme. Aristotle is not definite on this point. Some authors, for example Burnyeat (1996: 106), stress that Aristotle only mentions the possibility of a part being implicit: nowhere does he say that this has to be the case. As did Van Eemeren and Grootendorst before him, Braet proposes instead to differentiate between two levels of analysis, one being the pragmatic level, where it is decided what is to be left implicit. If

something is implicit, this requires the second level, the logical level, where a premise is supplied (1997: 103).

A second issue with respect to the aristotelian definition is how the topic structure of enthymemes relates to the syllogistic structure in its strict meaning. Are the two structures compatible, and if not, why did Aristotle call an enthymeme a *sylogismos tis*? Solmsen (1929) was of the opinion that Aristotle's *Rhetoric* contains a so-called double theory of enthymemes: one based on the topic structure, and one based on the syllogistic structure. Braet (1997: 106-107), however, points out that these structures are not incompatible. He claims that they rather reflect again two different levels, the logical and the pragmatic level. At the pragmatic level, the topical structure has to do with argumentation schemes. At the logical level, forms of argument and logical rules of inference are relevant. The references to the syllogistic structure in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* may well be later additions, a point made by Burnyeat (1996: 105).

The conclusion from this is that Aristotle's theory of the enthymeme seems to rely on two different lines of thought. One, which seems to be the earliest, is his concern with the rhetorical context, argumentations in practice and the topic of the (pragmatic) approach. The other one, which may be a later addition, seems to be the application of categorical syllogisms to rhetorical arguments, which resulted in the syllogistic (logical) approach to enthymemes. I agree with Van Eemeren and Grootendorst as well as with Braet that, for argumentation theorists, it is fruitful to distinguish between a pragmatic and a logical level, and to give attention to both in an analysis.

3. The boethian definition

In Roman times different definitions of enthymeme were in use. Some are clearly aristotelian in origin, others are clearly not. For example, Quintillian, in his *Topica*, refers to arguments based on contradiction as enthymemes. This calls to mind the sophistic definition. But in Quintillian's *Institutio Oratoria* he applies logical rules to formally represent enthymemes (he uses post-aristotelian propositional logic to do so, but this does not change the point). To formally represent enthymemes is in itself an aristotelian thought, and not a sophistic one. And Quintillian stresses that parts of an enthymeme are implicit, which is also not an element of the sophistic description, but of the aristotelian view.

According to Boethius, an enthymeme is an *imperfectus syllogismus*: *Enthymema est imperfectus syllogismus, cujus aliquae partes, vel propter brevitatem, vel propter notitiam prae termissae sunt.* (I.MPL. 64: 1050b) (An enthymeme is an

imperfect syllogism, of which some parts have been left out, either for reasons of brevity or because they are assumed to be common knowledge, S.G.)

The boethian definition of an enthymeme has become famous, and it can generally be found in handbooks up to the Middle Ages. The question, however, is what was understood by *imperfectus*: in what sense is an enthymeme considered to be imperfect? Are enthymemes imperfect because they do not deal with certainties but with probabilities only? Or does imperfectus mean that an enthymeme is incomplete because a premise is missing? Interestingly, Isidor de Seville gives both these interpretations when he describes the enthymeme. According to him, an enthymeme is an *imperfectus syllogismus* because it consists of two parts rather than three. This is a reference to the form of enthymemes, and to the logical level. Furthermore, De Seville explains that an enthymeme is imperfectus because it uses subject material that does not belong to the domain of the syllogism and is directed at convincing an audience. He gives an example about whether or not to go out to sea when the weather is bad, which is a clear case of deliberation on human acting. This part of De Seville's definition is a reference to the rhetorical context of enthymemes and to the pragmatic level.

4. The logical definition

In the Middle Ages formal logic obtained its more dominant position over rhetoric. From Aristotle's work generally only the logical aspects got attention. Handbooks on logic from the Middle Ages often have Boethius' definition: an enthymeme is a *syllogismus imperfectus*. But imperfectus at this point in time only means 'imperfect because of the form' – a premise is missing and has to be added. Descriptions of the enthymeme as a 'truncated', 'abbreviated', 'shortened' or 'hidden' syllogism also date back to this period. The idea that, in an enthymeme, a premise is implicit (and not a conclusion) stems from the Middle Ages as well. According to earlier approaches, either a premise or the conclusion was missing.

Aristotle's typology of arguments and argument standards was neglected, and rhetorical arguments were not considered to be a separate kind of arguments with their own standards. Now there were only syllogisms, and all of them were what Aristotle called apodictic syllogisms. Enthymemes were apodictic syllogisms as well, the only difference being a difference in presentation. This view of an enthymeme as a syllogism in which a premise is omitted I call the *logical definition* of enthymemes.

During the Renaissance period, the humanists again appreciated the fact that in enthymemes parts are left implicit, and some found that, for that reason, enthymemes were more appealing to the reader. But this aspect of enthymemes was not attributed to Aristotle, since he was then thought of as being 'too formal' and 'too strict', and concerned with logic only.

In our times the logical definition is still current among logicians and others. The logical definition is often considered to be the only definition of an enthymeme, as in the Oxford Concise Dictionary: *The enthymeme according to the Oxford Concise Dictionary* (1988)

Enthymeme (Logic). Syllogism in which one premiss is not explicitly stated.

Characteristic of the logical approach is that, on the one hand, the pragmatic aspect of enthymemes is recognised: the speaker or writer has left a part implicit. In fact, from a logical perspective it makes no sense at all to recognise this. On the other hand, in the reconstruction the pragmatic aspects are not taken into consideration: the reconstruction is done solely in logical terms.

5. The argumentation-theoretical and the modern rhetorical definition

Recently, some new definitions have been formulated as well. One of these is the definition in which the logical level and the pragmatic level are distinguished, as is done by modern argumentation theorists, e.g. in pragma-dialectics. This results in definitions like the one formulated by Van Eemeren and Grootendorst that I gave earlier. It is also the view that Braet adheres to. This view is characterized by attention for both logical and pragmatic aspects. I call this the *argumentation-theoretical definition*.

Another definition comes from the modern, revived interest in rhetoric. Important here is the generative rhetoric of Bitzer (1959), based on the idea that speakers should only use reasons that the audience itself would come up with if a question-answer strategy were applied. This generative aspect can be found in the definition of an enthymeme by Jackson and Jacobs, also quoted earlier. I call this the *modern rhetorical definition*. Interestingly, it is rather close to what Aristotle seems to have had in mind first when talking about enthymemes in his *Rhetoric*.

6. Conclusion

There are different views on enthymemes, and they are all partly rooted in history. All in all, six main notions of an enthymeme can be found in the literature: the sophistic definition (the enthymeme is an argument based on contradictions or contraries), the aristotelian definition (the enthymeme is a rhetorical

argument, based on probabilities or signs), the boethian definition (an enthymeme is an *imperfectus syllogismus*), the logical definition (the enthymeme is a syllogism in which one premise is omitted), the argumentation-theoretical definition (an enthymeme is an argumentation in which a premise is left implicit at the pragmatic level, which means that a premise has to be added at the logical level), and the modern rhetorical definition (the enthymeme is an argument matched to the questions and objections of the recipient).

These definitions are not in all respects mutually exclusive, they do overlap. And perhaps, underlying the definitions, there is something of a shared core meaning of the concept of enthymeme, and maybe it is worthwhile (although not easy) to try and formulate that core in one definition of enthymemes that all of us can use. However, it can be useful, and it need not necessarily be a problem, to have different definitions of the enthymeme. But it is important to be aware that, when talking about enthymemes, you may be thinking of one thing while at the same time your audience may well be thinking of something entirely different.

NOTES

- i. This paper is a summary of Chapter 2 of my doctoral dissertation *Problemen met de begrijpelijkheid van argumentatie met een verzwegen argument* (working title; translation: Problems with the understandability of argumentation with a missing premise), 1999 (forthcoming).
- ii. This is not a literal quote, but rather my representation of the view presented by Van Eemeren and Grootendorst.
- iii. I use 'premise' and not 'premiss'.

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