

# ISSA Proceedings 2010 - Strategically Manoeuvring With Reporting In The Argumentation Stage Of A Critical Discussion



## 1. Introduction

This analysis is part of a larger research project[i] which investigates the argumentative potential of reports within the theoretical background of pragma-dialectics enlarged with rhetorical insights, as it has been developed by van Eemeren & Houtlosser (1999, 2000, 2002). We are more specifically interested in exploring the possibilities for strategic manoeuvring with anonymous reports, i. e. reports that provide no specific reference to the information source, but vaguely place it under the responsibility of the community as it is the case with utterances such as *People say that*, *The word goes that*, *Rumour has it that*, etc. This analysis is confined to the investigation of the dialectical and rhetorical goals that might be served in using the specific presentational device of anonymous reports in the argumentation stage. In doing it, we shall first provide a pragmatic description of this type of assertives in order to point to the effects of their use in discourse. In general terms, in using anonymous reports, the speaker has the possibility to advance information for whose truthfulness he cannot be apparently held responsible. Given this peculiarity of presentation in adducing arguments, we shall examine how the dialectical aim of the argumentation stage is fulfilled, while, in point of rhetorical goal, we shall describe to what extent the use of this presentational device makes the speaker's arguments stronger and more efficient.

## 2. Anonymous reports: pragmatic description

Anonymous reports such as *People say that*, *The word goes that*, *Rumour has it that*, etc. may be defined as an instance of indirect reported speech characterized by the occultation of the identity of the information source. They belong to the large category of hearsay evidentiality which opposes, according to Gâță (2009, p. 490), two main subcategories, quotative vs. non-quotative and reporting one's assertions vs. reporting the other's words. According to this classification,

anonymous reports are non-quotative and they are used to report the other's words.

Reporting amounts to the accomplishment of a polyphonic communicative act where boundaries may be set between the constitutive voices, i. e. the original speaker and the reporting one. Given the existence of the two instances, the question of commitment to content rises: Who commits to which content? Since reporting represents the linguistic process meant to entirely or only partially display or render an original utterance, in terms of commitment and responsibility taken, in the indirect reported speech, the speaker is generally supposed to vouch for the previous performance of a speech act where he was either the addressee or a witness. In reporting it, he makes himself responsible for the interpretation of this initial speech act and engages upon rendering both its content and the form under which the content was initially uttered. Coulmas (1986, p. 2) speaks about a change in perspective when referring to indirect reported speech: unlike the direct style where the reporter quotes the reportee's speech and reports it from the latter's perspective, in the indirect reported speech, the reporter interprets the reportee's discourse and reports it with his own words. An accurate reporting depends on several conditions: the reporting speaker's access to the context where the initial speech act was performed, his capacity to correctly decode the communicative effect aimed at by the original speaker and, not in the least, his real intention to provide a faithful report. Since the insertion of reports in the host discourse is meant to achieve certain purposes, speakers may resort to deliberate omissions, emphases, adaptations or alterations of the original speech act in a way that best suits their interests. Moreover, Bakhtin (1981, p. 340) states that "the speech of another, once enclosed in a context, is – no matter how accurately transmitted – always subject to certain semantic changes".

In reporting another's speech, speakers signal the degree of correspondence between the reported content and the original one through the type of reportive prefix used. In English, there is a wide range of phrases that can be used in making anonymous reports, their selection depending on what the reporting speaker can or is willing to disclose about the author's identity of the original speech act or, more generally, about the context of performance of the initial speech act. The type of reportive prefixes we focus this analysis on puts forward the community as the author of the original speech act. This doxa voice may be directly designated by the hyperonym *people* or the indefinite *they* combined with

a speech verb (*say, tell, rumour, report, etc.*) or metonymically by speech nouns such as *word, rumour, report, story, etc.* In the latter case, the nouns may be combined with a movement verb lexicalizing the indefinite trajectory in spreading the report and may optionally take a locative, resulting into utterances such as *The word / story / report goes that, There is some talk that, There is a rumour abroad / afloat / in the air that, There is a report going, Some gossip is flying round, etc.* We also include in this category of reportive prefixes the idiomatic phrases *Rumour / Report has it* which feature speech nouns as well as the passivised structures *It is said / reported / rumoured that, etc.*

In using this type of reportive phrases, the reporting speaker holds himself responsible for reporting information which circulates within a community, without being able to specify the identity of the original speaker and to certify whether the reported content is the exact representation of the original one. In spite of this information implicitly communicated to the hearer, when using anonymous reports in an argumentative context, the speaker is expected to have a certain position to the content. Therefore, be it less overtly, the speaker commits himself to the truth of the propositional content reported, and, moreover, as anonymous reports represent a subclass of assertives, he is expected to be able to present evidence to account for it if requested (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1992, p. 38).

In point of discourse effects, the speaker benefits from the apparent attitude of reserve implied by the use of anonymous reportive prefixes which put forward the community as lying behind the creation and circulation of the report. Resembling at this point the popular opinion type of utterances by seemingly invoking commonly accepted presumptions and opinions, anonymous reports enable the speaker to bring some information to the hearer's attention. This form may be favoured against the plain assertion because the opacity of an anonymous report allows him to do more than he claims to be doing: while only pretending to ensure the further transmission of the content, he hides behind the public voice with a view to getting across some information and to using it in the argumentation.

### *3. Arguing with anonymous reports*

As an instance of assertives, anonymous reports may be used in a critical discussion at the confrontation stage where they can express the standpoint at issue; at the argumentation stage, as arguments adduced in defence of that standpoint or in the concluding stage to express the outcome of the discussion

(van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1992, p. 38). According to the model of critical discussion, "the argumentation stage corresponds with the phase in which one party adduces arguments in order to overcome the other party's doubts about the standpoint, and the other party reacts to those arguments" (van Eemeren, Grootendorst & Snoeck Henkemans 1996, p. 282).

In the argumentation stage, the arguers proceed to justify or refute the standpoint at issue, resorting to argumentation schemes which enable them to create specific relationships between the arguments adduced and the standpoint in case. According to the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation, there are three main types of justifying relationships argumentation is based on, i.e. argumentation by comparison, instrumental argumentation, and symptomatic argumentation (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992, pp. 96-102). When making use of a particular argumentation scheme, the speaker takes the first step in a dialectical testing procedure that verifies whether the argumentation is resistant to specific forms of criticism. As a protective measure in ensuring the success of the justification process, the speaker may respond in advance to the anticipated criticism raised by the opposition by providing responses to possible objections.

Dialectically, anonymous reports are vulnerable because of the speaker's impossibility to produce evidence for the truthfulness or correctness of the content reported since he acknowledges having had access to the information via hearsay. That is why advancing anonymous reports as arguments is excluded in argumentation in institutionalized contexts such as legal, political, academic discourse since practicing argumentation in these contexts is necessarily evidence-based. Nevertheless, in less constraining types of discourse, resorting to anonymous reports to support a standpoint is current when disclosing unconfirmed information, as it is the case with journalistic discourse where there is a protection policy of information sources. However, even in this context, choosing anonymous reports as arguments does not comply with the dialectical standards of reasonableness. This particular way of presenting an argument implies the speaker's impossibility to have access to the context where the initial speech act was performed, therefore to the initial assertive act, and to prove the truth of the propositional content. But this is exactly what the speaker wants to elude: he deliberately prefers to build his plea based on arguments whose accuracy is difficult to check and thus more difficult to refute.

For instance, when arguing that

(1) During recession some rich people become richer. People say that the billionaire Bill Jones has seen his fortune doubled since last November.

the speaker uses an anonymous report as an argument from example, a subtype of symptomatic argument, to support the standpoint that *during recession some rich people become richer*. The dialectical profile established by van Eemeren, Houtlosser and Snoeck Henkemans (2007, pp. 154-155) for the symptomatic argumentation describes the type of relationship the speaker creates between the argument and the standpoint at issue as “a property, class membership, distinctive characteristic, or essence of a particular thing, person, or situation” that is mentioned, implying “that this thing, person or situation also has the characteristic property that is ascribed to it in the standpoint”. In advancing this argument from example, the speaker builds his argumentation by pointing out to the existence of a relation of concomitance between what is stated in the argument and what is stated in the standpoint. In (1), the billionaire Bill Jones’s financial growth since last November counts, in the arguer’s point of view, as an illustration of the generalising statement claimed in the standpoint which is typical for the argumentation of example where “separate facts are represented as special cases of something general” (Garssen in van Eemeren, Houtlosser & Snoeck Henkemans 2007, p. 155). There are several elements of concomitance that the speaker bases his argumentation from example on: the lapse of time referred to (*since last November*) coincides with the recession period, *the billionaire* Bill Jones’s present financial state accounts for his belonging to the class of the rich, and, not in the least, what counts in (1) as the unexpressed premise the arguer can be held responsible for, having one’s fortune doubled is a sign of getting richer. In the case of argumentation from example, the weight of the example ensures the transfer of acceptability from the argument to the standpoint and, in advancing one, the arguer is bound to wonder whether the particular case invoked is really representative for what is claimed in the standpoint. However, unless the speaker can produce evidence to account for the truth of the reported news concerning Bill Jones’s financial growth, the argumentation scheme he uses cannot resist the exam of dialectical reasonableness. This is also proved in (2) where the speaker uses coordinative argumentation in order to supplement the potency of the example expressed through an anonymous report with an additional argument from example:

(2) Much daunting stories and myths about the beige spider often give people the creeps: the word goes that this species can eat out flesh portions after injecting a form of anesthetic in the victim’s body, not to reveal that its dimensions are justly

impressive.**[ii]** ([http://www.articlealley.com/article\\_784314\\_54.html](http://www.articlealley.com/article_784314_54.html))

The characteristic of devouring victims is reinforced by the impressive dimensions of the arachnid, which results into picturing a savage description of the beige spider. These features are thought to be relevant for considering the spider a fearful species that makes daunting stories circulate on its account. In this case, the argument from example appears as more resistant to attacks since it provides factual data that can be verified with respect to their accuracy. The fact that this content is presented as the object of an anonymous report, a common opinion that is widely spread around, is meant to substantiate its truth value. Nevertheless, this strategic choice is bound to fail provided that evidence cannot be produced to prove the information right.

In the following excerpt, the anonymous report functions as a causal argument:

(3) I am considering buying a house on the outskirts. The word goes their price will rocket in the following years.

Argumentation based on a causal relationship is defined by van Eemeren, Houtlosser, Snoeck Henkemans (2007, p. 164) as representing the cause of the standpoint, or, the other way round, the standpoint as the cause of the argument. In (3), the argument features the cause of the result presented in the standpoint, namely that the predicted boom in the price of outskirts houses is the cause for considering buying one. In using this argumentation scheme, the speaker holds himself responsible for considering that prognosticated rising prices of houses leads to wanting to buy one at a lower price. The speaker presents the content of the anonymous report as sufficient cause leading to making the decision referred to in the standpoint. The causal relationship proposed by the speaker is supported by the fact that the realization of the state of affairs described in the causal argument is very likely to happen and matches people's beliefs and representations of life: continuous rise in prices is not excluded in the context of unstable financial market. Nonetheless, as it was the case with (1) and (2), (3) may be reasonably accepted as long as proofs can be adduced to support the truth of the propositional content.

Irrespective of the type of argumentation scheme where anonymous report arguments may be included, in using them, the speaker advances contents whose truthfulness he commits to, even though he presents them as belonging to and emanating from the community. Being unable to vouch for the truth of the

content, the speaker presents this information as widely circulating around with a view to conferring it argumentative tenability. In fact, the arguer is well aware of the fact that, psychologically, people are bound to accept as true what many others have accepted as such since one condition in ensuring the survival and perpetuation of rumours – to which anonymous reports are similar – is that they should match people's beliefs or representations of life. Anonymous reports appear therefore as making part of a strategic schema used by the speaker in order to make a standpoint seem valid based on what people say and which should consequently be granted credibility.

#### *4. Strategic manoeuvring with anonymous reports*

Van Eemeren and Houtlosser (1999, 2000, 2002) enlarged the pragma-dialectical approach to argumentation by incorporating a rhetorical component in the framework, starting from the prerequisite that, in argumentative discourse, arguers conduct the discussion based on reasonable standards in a way that is most favourable to them. Along the resolution process deployed within a critical discussion, arguers strategically manoeuvre with a view to reduce “the potential tension between pursuing at the same time a ‘dialectical’ as well as a ‘rhetorical’ aim” (Van Eemeren & Houtlosser 2002, p. 135). For each of the stages of a critical discussion, there is a dialectical aim corresponding to the allowable moves specified in the dialectical profile balanced by a rhetorical aim consisting in making the moves in the most efficient and convenient manner that serves the arguers' interests. According to Van Eemeren and Houtlosser, “strategic manoeuvring can take place in making an expedient choice from the options constituting the ‘topical potential’ associated with a particular discussion stage, in selecting a responsive adaptation to ‘audience demand’, and in exploiting the appropriate ‘presentational devices’ ” (2002, p. 139). Our approach focuses on the analysis of anonymous reports as presentational device in an attempt to describe them as achieving the dialectical and rhetorical aims in the argumentation stage.

The dialectical objective in the argumentation stage is to test the tenability of the standpoints that have shaped the difference of opinion in the confrontation stage, starting from the point of departure established in the opening stage (van Eemeren & Houtlosser 2002, p. 139). The rhetorical aim is for the arguers to make the strongest case and to launch the most effective attack. In order to achieve it, they will adduce arguments in favour or against the standpoint in the most efficient way possible. In using anonymous reports as arguments, the

speaker takes benefits from the credibility of *Everybody thinks so* type of utterance on whose pattern *People say / The word goes that / Rumour has it that*, etc. utterances are shaped. Practically, in building their case, speakers act as if the contents prefixed by these reportive phrases were widely acknowledged truths on which basis acceptability is transferred to the standpoint they are meant to support. In point of strategic manoeuvring, awarding a content a wider scope of circulation than it might be the case reveals the arguers' attempt to present the argument in a way that makes them stronger. It is more difficult to attack the voice of the community and besides, within a cause - effect reading (*there is no smoke without fire*), people are bound to grant credibility to rumours or assumptions presented as commonly shared within a community. When considering the anonymous report argument, one cannot refrain from wondering whether the content reported might not be the speaker's opinion which he presents as emanating from the community. In choosing this presentational device, the speaker counts on stirring the hearer's attention and curiosity since, according to psychologists (DiFonzo & Bordia 2007), rumours, to which anonymous reports are similar, feed on emotions, incite people and may result into changing their attitudes and behaviour. Consequently, people do not remain impassible to rumours, but in judging them, they are more likely to consider first the consequences or implications of what is rumoured and secondly consider their accuracy.

In the following excerpt, by employing anonymous reports in his argumentation, the speaker presents his argument in a way that makes it more prominent and grasps the hearer's attention.

(4) From the middle ages onwards (and probably even earlier) Belgium also has been a prime source for marble, actually it's not a genuine marble but a dense and hard limestone that shows very appealing ornamental patterns. Especially the red "marble" found around Rochefort and the black "marble" encountered around Yvoir where in high demand and got exported throughout Europe (the word goes that there's Belgian marble in St Peter's church in Rome).

(<http://www.mindat.org/article.php/563/Belgium,+Calcite+paradise>)

In this case, the example is suspended between brackets as an additional and supplementary extra-argument, apparently unnecessary in the economy of the discourse, yet mentioned just to replenish the argumentation process. Despite this facultative appearance of the example, the speaker is well aware of the role it



has, namely bringing the particular on the stage in order to exemplify the validity of the claim, i.e. *Belgium has been a prime source of marble from the Middle Ages onwards*. Another gain is that the hearer will examine the argument from the perspective of the source, the community, which facilitates belief and contributes to lending credibility to the standpoint. However, this might not be the case when the hearer is knowledgeable about the truthfulness of the propositional content put forward in the anonymous report (namely the source of the marble used in building St Peter's church in Rome) and proceeds to attack the argument and point to its invalidity. Proving the argument wrong is one of the ways to refute anonymous reports. A more rhetorically-oriented means to do it is to undermine the authority of the source used to grant credibility to the anonymously reported information. This can be done by advancing counterarguments emanating from an authority which is superior to the community. In this case, the anonymous report finds itself counterattacked with the same rhetorical device – the use of an authoritative source to prove the content true. This is reflected in the following excerpt where the speaker rejects the truth of what is anonymously reported around by introducing information originating in the Granth Sahib, the Holy Scripture of the Sikhs, a supreme authority in the speaker's point of view:

(5) But many misconcepts have taken place. For example, people say that sikhs cannot eat beef. This is utterly nonsense. It is not said in the granth sahib that beef cannot be eaten. And either is it said that people cannot eat meat.

The force of anonymous reports when used to put forward argumentation lies in the authority of the information source. In spite of the vague reference to the identity of the source, the speaker counts on the rhetoric use of anonymous reports which are based on popular-opinion like reading and are therefore readily granted credibility. The use of anonymous reports in argumentation appears therefore as an instance when the speaker reveals himself as being prone to persuading the opponent at the expense of remaining within the boundaries of dialectical reasonableness.

## 5. Conclusion

Anonymous reports represent a particular type of reported speech characterised by the occultation of the information source. In uttering them, the speaker transfers the responsibility for the creation and circulation of the information to the community. In spite of this denial of authorship, when used in an argumentative context, the speaker commits to the truthfulness of the content

reported and may use the utterance as an argument, taking benefit from this particular way of putting forward information. Being dialectically vulnerable because of the speaker's impossibility to account for the truthfulness of the content, anonymous reports represent rhetorical tools strategically manoeuvred by arguers in order to construct the most efficient claim and to attain their persuasive goal. While only pretending to restate what the others rumour round, arguers advance an argument in a way that best suits their interest, namely under the cover of the community voice, an authoritative instance, which makes any attack directed against the validity of the argument more difficult to pursue.

## NOTES

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**[ii]** All the examples in this paper are provided with their original spelling.

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