

ISSA Proceedings 1998 - Do Advertisers Argue In Their Campains?



Advertisers are often creating a certain kind of argument called sales argument. Sales arguments are published in numerous media. Some are directly addressed to customers, others to sales persons, who can use them to motivate their customers to buy. In common these arguments are 'good arguments' if they are persuasive.

But if one asks whether they are valide, this question turns back to the theory of argumentative valitiy one is using. In pragmatic theories of argumentation, sales arguments can be reconstructed as argumentative moves with at least some charity by means of adding premises, reformulating theses and giving usage declarations. Arguments put forward as speech acts do also deserve some charity. But the question is in general: Are we right in reconstructing sales arguments as related to validity?

Before returning to this question I want to sketch out the positions of a virtual theorist and an advertiser who is willing to use argumentative rules. It is a narrative fiction about possible interactions of positions. The concept of position will then link up to a validity-related 'dynamic' approach to Argumentation Theory. The central issue of this paper will be a case-based discussion of the validity of sales arguments as analogies. Before I will mention briefly how sales arguments are missing the requirements of some other approaches to Argumentation Theory.

1. The positions of the advertiser and the argumentation-scholar

Do Advertisers Argue in their Campains?

It depends. This is the answer of a scholar. It depends on the concept of argumentation which is preferred and on the corresponding analysis of advertising.

Of course. This is the answer of an advertiser. Argumentation is one of the strongest instruments to force rational addressees to accept an opinion and to act accordingly.

Each position includes aspects of the other: From the scholar's vievpoint the

advertiser will be successful in applying a practical theory of argumentation that stresses the rational aspect of Argumentation. Argumentation is perceived as a rule-guided practice.**[i]**

From the advertiser's perspective the scholar's efforts maybe regarded as support in advance of the advertiser. The scholar seems to be engaged in strenthening the rational believes of the adresees so that they will understand themselves more and more as being committed to accept any thesis that can be arrived at by correctly applying the scholar's rational rules of argumentation.

This position may be regarded as a rethorical or even sophisticated**[ii]** standpoint that describes rationality as a means of persuasion.**[iii]** It is an "enlightend" position as far as it delegates any ethical questions to the Individual. Relativistic consequences seem to be inevitable.

Nevertheless it provides the impression of usefulness towards the scholar who is not reflecting the values his work may be serving. The outcomes of his work are designed as unbiased scientific results.

Both viewpoints are strengthening each other, the one in applying the other's results, the other in being esteemed by the first. None of them is independent. None is disinterested.

2. Relativism and Positivism of Positions

Both positions are roughly scetched out, so that nobody is forced to identify himself with any of them. But nevertheless everybody is free to take up the position he wants.

What is of interest in this place is the concept of position which belongs to comprehensive concept of argumentation. Therefore we can take this reflexion as a starting point for further considerations. 'Position' means the circumstance, that an opinion is always stated somewhere and very often powered in favour or against something.

That means, that a position is situated in a virtual area of tension. Where do positions get their power from? Many strong positions are composed of arguments. At least there is only one demand to a position: It must hold. Good arguments do. Their steps are constructive in a way that each is posed on it's predecessor. Gaps and circles must be evaded.

This is not a mere methaphor. It is the easiest way to demonstrate how argumentative positions are 'positive'. Every position depends on being *posed* and internally being built up by someone. It needs a platform it can stand on. And it needs an architecture. Every demonstration, that it has no reliable 'static' creates

an objection. The 'bricks', argumentative positions are built of, are oral platforms. Their 'way of speaking' is reliable. Objects can be identified, predications and intentions can be understood and propositions can be checked. To use another metaphor: The ways towards their positive theses can be followed up, if the construction is methodologically consistent.**[iv]** To demonstrate the reliability the addressee must be willing to go this ways towards the theses. Literally spoken this means that without ongoing dialogic inquiry the positions cannot be hold, because the only way to find out the reliability of a manner ('way') of speaking is the addressee's critique.

Therefore argumentative positions are relative. They are relative to objections, to disputes and to the lifes they are embedded in.**[v]** They are also relative to concurring positions.

3. Case one

The DSDS bulb campagne 1997 used a surprising similarity between a pregnant woman's and a bulb's silhouette. (Lürzer's Archive '98 I, 82)

As all ads do, the campagne aims at the observer's attention. At first glance a process of perception, deception and reflexion is initiated. The very familiar and emotional impression of a pregnant woman's stomach is supported by the Headline: "We will call her Narcis." Pregnancy is indeed a good reason to decide about the name of a newcomer. This impression will be falsified by reading the pay-off Line: "Bulbs. Again it's time to plant."

To better understand the interrelations the observer then will take a closer look. She will recognise the pictured bulb and the following new interpretation of the headline may amuse her: 'Narcis' is called the flower one can receive some month after planting the bulb.

The ad's strategy is successful if the observer has transferred her positive emotion from the first glance to the second. The deep structure might be the following syllogism:

Every matter of fertility is lovely. Planting (and buying) bulbs is a matter of fertility. Therefore planting bulbs is lovely. The conclusion is true if the premises are true. Obviously it is a syllogism, but it can't serve as a good argumentation because of the weakness of at least one premis. It is a structure of belief. The whole structure can be the result of an argumentative process as well as the outcome of an aesthetic perception of advertisements. Surprisingly it has a logical structure**[vi]** although it cannot be justified: Sentences like 'every matter of

fertility is lovely' can be shown to be wrong by numerous ugly couterexamples, nearly everybody will agree to. Of course argumentation is not impossible in this case. The problem is with the pros: There is seemingly no way of approving a general premis that attributes 'lovelyness' to a set of objects, situations or even people. Seemingly it is a matter of taste.

Some say: Taste cannot be argued. I'm not so shure about that. Obviously the opposite can also be hold: Taste can be argued excellently. Both sentences are commonplaces used in aesthetic discourses. The differenciation needed to resolve the paradox does not regard the usage of the term 'taste'. The paradox depends on the aequivocal usage of 'argumentation':

Argumentation (1) has to meet the requirement of directing to truth. It ends up with truth. It's paradigm is proof: deriving truth from premisses to conclusions using valide logical structures and meaningful expressions, some kind of logical syntax and semantics. Theses, that are worth to be argued, must be formulated in clearly defined terms. Otherwise "... one must remain silent." (Wittgenstein 1988: 85)

From this view, discussing the question wether something is lovely or not - or even causing pain - is not a way of talking about the world. It is a more or less civilised way of replacing expressive shouts and gestures. (cf: Wittgenstein 1984) Ethics and Aesthetics remain inexpressible.

Argumentation (2) is a social pracise, guided by the ideal of providing the participants with reliable orientations. Orientations are complex schemes of conduct. They are containing situation schemes, action schemes, ends and means-end structures. Feelings, sensations and impressions are part of situation schemes. Situations are 'by definition' not exactly definable. Each one is an original. Therefore situation schemes are focussing on some relevant aspects of them. This way they become managable. The more distance that can be established, the more individual differences can be ignored. Following this tendency (Wohlrapp 1990), the ability of controlling situations increases and validity of orientations can be established.

From this point of view, discussions about taste are not to be excluded from Argumentation. What kind of taste will be agreeable, and which one will be found ideosyncratic is a decision that depends on the corresponding argumentation. The decision on what can be attributed to be 'lovely' e.g. would be embedded into a range of paradigmatic cases (Govier 1985: 55ff) instead of stipulating a generalisation.

While Argumentation (1) postulates definite meanings and extensions of the used expressions, Argumentation (2) includes the development of concepts as well as dynamic moves of the whole structure: A starting-thesis T1 will be attacked by objections stating contradictions or gaps in the supposed chain of reasoning. In consequence the proponent of T1 has at least 3 options: He can

1. add some reasons, explicitising more backgrounds,
2. make some semantic shifts, that are also affecting the theses, so that he reaches T1'
3. or make the shift explicit ending up with the follower-thesis T2

Again this is a very rough sketch of theoretical approaches towards non-theoretical argumentation. But I think the problem of aesthetical and practical reasoning is well-known. It is recognized in many other approaches:

Discourse Theory e.g. has developed different kinds of claims to validity: Truth, rightness, adequacy of evaluative standards and veracity. Each of them is related to a selfstanding realm of discourse marked as: theoretical, ethical or aesthetical. (Habermas 1981: 65ff) In this context Discourse Theory has realized the pragmatic turn: The paradigm of argumentative validity in Discourse Theory isn't any more a theoretical model of structure but a practical normative ideal taken from forensic debate.

The pragmadialectic approach also realizes this kantian primate of practise. It's rule guided code of conduct (Eemeren, Grootendorst 1984: 151ff) delegates different claims to different argumentative stages. Explication of terminological usages e.g. has it's place in the preparatory stage.

I don't want to mention these approaches here. As far as I can see they don't give enough attention to the peculiar argumentation related character of aesthetics as they appear especially in advertisings. Nevertheless they give an answer to whether ads are argumentative or not. To be acknowledged as argumentations fitting into one of these approaches advertisements are missing several necessary conditions:

From the viewpoint of Discourse Theory one will find a lack of equality in the participant's chances. Pragmadialecticians will find a lack of intersubjectivity and sincerity. And they also won't be prepared to reconstruct advertisements as sequences of illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. Even a dispute in a tv spot won't be acknowledged being more but a fictional argumentation consisting of fictitious speech acts.

Other approaches to Argumentation Theory don't see the case much better. Wohlrapp's dynamic and reflexive approach (Wohlrapp 1995) e.g. doesn't provide the analyst with normative tools. The analyst's evaluation is at the same time to be regarded as a move of a participant. It is situated inside of a complex transsubjective activity called 'argumentative tendency'. Therein argumentation tends to evaluate itself. The tendency depends on the participants growing ability of 'distanciating' personally hold opinions and to transform them into 'theses' that are relative to given reasons.

In opposition to this, advertisements, placed in public media, are tending in the opposite direction: Reasons are put forward, objections sometimes mentioned, but the moves are always directed towards individual feelings, and personally held opinions of the form: For me as an individual it is worth to prefer A in case of B. Such opinions are to be distinguished from argumentative theses. They are not at anybody's disposal. They are seldom explicitly expressed, and they are - ideally - beyond question because they are designed as implantations to the addressee's selfunderstanding and orientation system.

So advertisements are not argumentative? Here I can't state a conclusion like this, because this would presuppose a justification from an external standpoint which has no place in this approach. As we can describe a tendency as a more or less dense sequence of moves, motivated by different or even opposing forces, we can speak now of a 'discursive' and an 'antidiscursive tendency'.

Indeed this description does not leave advertisement as a disinterested object which does not effect argumentative validity. But I don't think, that this is the place to start a normative oriented criticism of antidiscursive activities. Before taking a closer look to the example I only want to mention here that there are two opposed possible operations in the tendency: Wohlrapp's 'distanciation' is paired by an opposite move I will call: 'approximation'.

4. A dynamic approach to the argumentative force of advertisements

Analogies in general are not well reputed as arguments relating to validity. As Mengel shows they nevertheless are doing their job in cases of insufficient theoretical bases. (Mengel 1995: 191) As already mentioned theses are validated by forwarding reasons against objections. Their ability to support a thesis in question depends on their supposed theoretical basis. An insufficient basis can be (re)constructed methodically step by step. But this may be a long and sometimes impassable way, e.g. in questions of taste.

In this case analogies can be useful. They can generate new viewpoints establishing new and surprising similarities between cases of different fields. Although they are not controllable like methodical procedures, they can be reconstructed by explicitising an underlying abstraction that makes their viewpoint plausible. For this purpose Mengel introduces the concept of an abstractor. The abstractor's function is to designate an equivalence between the cases of the analogy. But the equivalence is not expressible before the analogy has created the new shared viewpoint. There cannot be a term before because there is no theoretical basis until this moment. Only the analogy itself is bridging the gap.

With this analytical tool I will return to the initial example:

The virtual abstractor may be the following: 'equally sacrifice/benefit related'. The relation between pregnancy's hardships and the luck of having children is the same as the relation of the costs of buying and planting bulbs in expectation of getting beautiful flowers. After establishing this analogy in advance of the discursive tendency one may discuss the relation in detail: Isn't the sacrifice/benefit relation in the case of planting bulbs more advantageous? Are we right to compare the fertility of our own families with the fertility of some other species, however beautiful? Aren't we confusing symbolic reality with social reality? Aren't flowers only substitutes?

In this direction one may proceed in developing absurd theories e.g. of how to evaluate aesthetic epiphenomena of fertility. The discursive tendency is leading and the motivation of buying bulbs is diminished.

The advertisement is aiming at the other extreme: For the sake of commercial advantages the analogy is not worked out. The sacrifice/benefit relation remains unspoken. Instead the advertising strategy tries to transfer the strong emotional associations of human reproduction into the contexts of buying behaviour. Instead of 'distancing' motivations to create discursive values, the motivations are 'approximated' for effecting an inclination to buy. As stated in the beginning this shopping motivation may also be caused by argumentative means. The form is the following:

P1: You have the problem N.

P2: Everybody who has the problem N, will get the best solution of N in respect of price and performance by taking the Q we are offering.

C: Therefore you are best advised to buy our Q.

If the members of the target group T(N) believe that P2 is true, this is a very strong sales argument. P2 expresses the so called unique selling proposition (USP) which is one of the essentials of every marketing plan and a central issue of advertising campaigns. Nevertheless in many cases the product benefit is not that clear. In this case the problems of customers and USPs have to be designed by the advertisers. Analogies are helpful in this situation.

The equivalence that is used by Mengel as an abstractor for analysing common viewpoints in regard of analysing seemingly different cases is not restricted to the analytical usage. It can also be used as a creative tool in finding analogies. An essential role plays the sacrifice/benefit equivalence:

In contradiction to other analogies this abstractor isn't that artificial. It has a very common synonym: It is called 'value'. The value transfer from paradigmatic cases with intensive sacrifice/benefit relation to others with less sacrifice/benefit relation but commercial interest is a central means of advertisements.

Mengel mentions the surprising effect as a central feature of analogies. Cases, where equal properties are listed and inductive inferences are drawn from the paradigmatic case to the case in question are fallacious and do not fulfil the peculiar task of analogies: improving insufficient theoretical bases. This kind of analogies are typically used in advertisements. The abstractor 'value' does not establish new viewpoints. The same commercial viewpoints are always iterated and the impression of originality is not due to innovation but to the enigmatic structure of many ads. Value transfer, openly handled, can easily be criticised and would be too obvious to be fascinating. Nevertheless advertisements are cultivating the 'field' of values, so that one can make up her decisions in respect of what is hold to be valuable. And value related argumentations can take it up.

5. Case two

The second example seems to form an objection against the analysis of advertising analogies as being plainly value related. Obviously it is also surprising:

The american sports wear brand IN EXCESS portays victims of violence with a bloody nose or a shiner next to a neatly drapped trikot in the same color. (Lürzer's Archive '98, III 162) The copy is: "color coordinate."

At first glance a new and surprising viewpoint is offered to the reader. The abstractor of the analogy may be reconstructed as "has the same color". The reader is invited to look at violations by leaving out the common contexts of harm,

fear and humiliation. The relevant aspect is 'color'. But the relation of phoros and theme of the analogy is inverted. The property of the product serves as phoros. Paradigmatic is the color of the tricot. The case of violence, which represents the theme is seen from the aspect of the phoros. Violence is reduced to color.

In effect attention to the Brand is certain. But is attention enough for a product to become a seller? The suggested abstraction is obviously inhuman and cynical. The image of the brand is in danger to get damaged like the images of the victims. Therefore the reader is invoked to try another interpretation.

Supposed that the IN EXCESS campaign is designed to increase the sales of the tricots, it is useful to present them as valueable as possible. The sacrifice/benefit relation can lead the interpretation to other paradigmatic valuable cases. Sportswear as IN EXCESS is addressed to people with certain values: They want to exceed their limits. Enormous sacrifices are tolerated in prospect of becoming the best in contest. Especially in team sports there are high risks of being injured. They are tolerated in favour of the team. The color of the trikots is a symbol of the team. The trikots are uniforms that fit into the world of team sports. The ultimate motivation of the members of the team is transferred to the customer, who can buy a symbol. This way they are becoming members of a community that shares certain values. The sacrifices, in this case the expenses are justified by the benefit: being a member of a highly motivated team.

Apparently the two cases are not so far from each other. And the usage of the abstractor does not produce a surprising new viewpoint. The interrelation of the violations and the colored sport dress is much too conventional to be able to serve as an analogy. It isn't more but a common metaphor.

6. Conclusion

These interpretations don't prove anything because this is not an empirical inquiry. It is an attempt to come to grips with the apparently strong opinion-forming features of advertisement from the perspective of argumentation theory. At least I think there are good reasons to insist on the difference of Argumentation and Advertisement. The ends are too different. But these ends are extremes on the same scale. Both are competing for the addressee's orientations. In some cases the distinction is difficult to make. Value-oriented discussions can be very persuasive. And benefit-oriented advertisings do indeed present arguments. I hope that we can at least discern two polar tendencies in many cases: The production of insight stands in opposition to production of emotion.

NOTES

- i.** The epistemological theory of Cristoph Lumer is a good example of such a perspective.
- ii.** Can't Sophists be understood as early advertisers?
- iii.** The pragmadialectical position sometimes looks like.
- iv.** Logical consistency is not presupposed in this place. Methodological consistency is a practical ideal guiding practical activities toward practical ends. Nevertheless the reflection on methodological consistency can be used to reconstruct the meaning of logical consistency. Cf. 'Konstruktive Logik, Praxis und Wissenschaftstheorie' and many other publications of the 'Erlangen School'.
- v.** Can't they also be relative towards the concepts of rationality?
- vi.** There may be psychological reasons to prefer a logical structured self. Always being prepared to give reasons for motivations, feelings etc. seems to be advantageous.

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