

ISSA Proceedings 1998 - Refuting Counter-Arguments In Written Essays



1. Introduction

Many discourse analysts and rhetoricians have noted that one valued basis for argumentation, and academic argumentation, in particular, is contrast, that is, setting out opposition (Barton 1993; 1995; Peck MacDonald 1987).

The aim of this paper is to look more closely into one specific type of contrast and describe its structures and usage. The contrast I have in mind is the refutation of counter-arguments, defined as arguments (i. e., reasons) in favor of the standpoint (the conclusion) opposite to writer's own standpoint. In order to see how writers actually refute counterarguments, I chose a book called *Debating Affirmative Action: Race Gender, Ethnicity, and the Politics of Inclusion*, edited by Nicolaus Mills 1994. The book is mostly a collection of argumentative texts by academic scholars, which debate a well defined issue, and clearly and unequivocally pronounce themselves most of the time either pro or con affirmative action. In less than 200 pages (not all the 307 pages of the book are argumentative texts), about 130 counter-argument refutations have been found. These texts are enough to give us a good idea about the most popular ways of refuting counter-arguments in written texts when debating controversial political or social issues in an academic milieu.

A counter-argument can be refuted in two possible ways:

1. by denying the truthfulness or the acceptability of the propositional content of the counter-argument, thereby denying its value as counterargument;
2. by accepting the truthfulness of the propositional content of the counter-argument, but, nevertheless, rejecting the opposite standpoint and therefore denying the relevancy or the sufficiency of the proposition to serve as counter-argument. The first type will be called *denial*, the second *concession* (see Perelman 1969: 489; Henkemans 1992: 143-153).

Two subtypes of denial have been discerned:

1. when the denied proposition is replaced by another, which serves as a pro-argument, or is argumentatively neutral;
2. when the denied proposition is not replaced by another. The first subtype will be called *antithesis* (the proposition that has been denied is the 'thesis', and the one replacing it is the 'antithesis'), the second *objection*.

Concession also has been classified into two sub-types:

1. when the rejection of the opposite standpoint is directly made and in plain words (*direct-rejection concession*);
2. when it is only implied (*indirect-rejection concession*) (see also Azar 1997).

Figure 1 summarizes this classification:

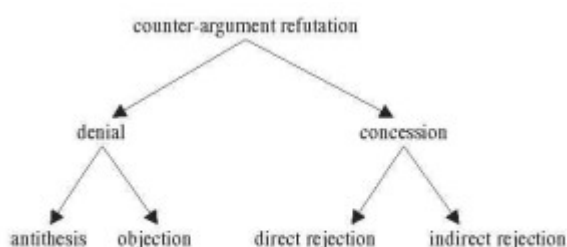


Figure 1: Types of counter-argument refutation

We will see now in further detail, together with examples, the four subtypes of Counter-argument refutation.

2. Antithesis

Antithesis is by definition a two-part structure, one expressing explicit denial of a proposition (in our case it is the denial of the counterargument) the other expressing an assertion (in our case it serves as a pro-argument) In our limited corpus, one can find that the denial part of the antithesis always precedes the other part. Only few example have been found, i. e.,

1. *Far from* preventing another Mount Pleasant (a Washington DC neighborhood where a three- day riot was sparked when a black policeman shot a Salvadoran man - M.A.), affirmative action might *actually* provoke one (p. 178).

The linguistic devices expressing antithesis consist of many forms. In our example it is *far from ... actually ...*. The more usual expression, *not ... but ...*, has not been found in our corpus as expressing antithesis; instead, we find: *not X Y; not X Rather Y; X Such is the silliness ... Y*.

3. Objection

Objections are far more frequently used in our corpus (I would write the percentage here four-five times more than antitheses).

Their linguistic expressions are: *This objection is unpersuasive; One objection centers on ...; A second objection is that ...; It simply distorts reality; I reject the proposition; This argument, however, denies the simple truth that ...; Again, this is not the case; But that simply is not true; In response, I would first note that ...*

A reason is always given for not accepting the content of the proposition serving as a counter-argument, and it is usually not syntactically formulated. Below is an example containing a syntactical reason:

2. Although many of my liberal and progressive comrades view affirmative action as a redistributive measure whose time is over or whose life is no longer worth preserving, *I question* their view *because* of the persistence of black social miser, the warranted suspicion that goodwill and fair judgment among the powerful do not loom as large toward women and people of color (p. 86).

It is worthwhile to remark the concession appearance of (2) ('Although ...'). But according to our definitions of *counter-argument refutation* and *objection* as a kind of *denial*, the fact that the utterance starts with a syntactically concession clause cannot by itself exclude it from being an objection. The concessivity in this utterance does not concern the proposition relevant to the counterargument, but only the matrix sentence 'many of my liberal and progressive comrades view ...'. This proposition is indeed accepted as true, but not the embedded one, which says that the time of affirmative action is over.

And here is an example with a conditional clause serving as a reason:

3. Proponents of the merit conception may argue that the tracks need not be separated perpetually. One can imagine a time when differences in racial perspectives will not exist, and the racial meritocracy will no longer be needed. Unfortunately, such a world will never materialize *if* one adopts the notion that race is merit (p. 287). The first part of the last sentence is a denial (an objection), and the *if*-clause gives a reason in the form of a conditional. A reason for an objection can also be found in the form of a contrastive sentence connected by *but*:

4. Race is proposed as merit based on the value of the perspective that each racial minority brings to the admitting institution. *But* perspective may not correspond with race (283).

The second sentence is in fact a reason for not accepting the preceding

proposition. This function of the *but*-sentence is perfectly understandable, since, according to Anscombe and Ducrot 1997, a *but*-sentence always orients toward the opposite orientation of its preceding adversative sentence, and in our case it serves as a reason (i. e., an argument,) for rejecting the preceding sentence.

Another example of the same kind, but without a contrastive connective, which begins with the concessive adverbial 'although' (as in example (3)), is as follows:

5. *Although* affirmative action sounds like a natural way to tackle the problems many Latinos experience in D.C. and other cities, it's a very rough stick to use on a very complex problem (p. 175).

Perelman 1969: 489 already noted that 'Generally, denial has much the same role as concession. The speaker renounces an assertion that he himself might have supported, or that has the support of third parties, but he retains just enough of it to let it be seen how well informed and perspicacious he was to have recognized the lack of value in a proposition'. One can see that this is very apparent in all of our *objection* examples, but one can find in the last page of our corpus an objection containing no concession at all, and the objection itself is built in a subtle way, thereby allowing the counter-argument to defeat itself:

6. It is against that legacy that one reads, *with overwhelming sadness*, Sheryl McCarthy's 'defense' of Moses: 'Why is it that the only time everybody talks about standards is when women or people of color are trying to advance or be heard? Mediocrity is a common characteristic of white male academics, . . . Let's hire women and people of color who are as ordinary as the white males who already dominate academia, and there will be no trouble in keeping up current standards. No trouble at all' (p. 317).

'with overwhelming sadness' is the only hint revealing the writer's personal opinion.

4. *Direct-rejection concession*

When the writer, despite his/her acceptance of the truthfulness of the propositional content of the counter-argument nevertheless asserts his/her standpoint, and implies, or says in plain words, that the counter-argument is not good enough to justify the refutation of his/her standpoint, then we have direct-rejection concession.; Only one real instance has been found; and this subtype of concession is very rare:

7. *Although* affirmative action has primarily benefited the black middle class, that is no reason to condemn preferential treatment (p. 54).

The second part of this concession sentence rejects directly a conclusion which is assumed by the opponents of affirmative action to follow from the first part.

The lack of the direct-rejection concession can be explained by the unwillingness of the writers to be too blunt in their argumentation. Writers within an academic discourse community, as well as readers, value politeness and tend to express solidarity (Barton 1995: 234). Rejection of a conclusion in an open and direct way, which other members of the community consider to be a legitimate conclusion of an accepted premise is counter to those values. On the other hand, the subtype of concession, the indirect-rejection concession, is by far the most frequent counter-argument refutation, and suits very well the request of politeness and solidarity. However, before moving to the indirect-rejection concession, let us look at a peculiar instance of direct-rejection concession:

8. Many whites and some blacks now argue that preferential racial treatment creates deep-seated feelings of deficiency and mediocrity in its beneficiaries. They warn that race-conscious practices, in hiring or education, cast suspicious on the competence of those given an advantage. But if that is so, we need the new Civil Right Act more than ever, to overcome the sense of inferiority that has afflicted American white men for year. Think of it. For decades, white men have known they've received favored, front-on-the-line positions in jobs, education, and the benefits of race-conscious society (p. 126).

The peculiarity and astuteness of this direct-rejection concession lies in the second part of the concession: the writer takes the counterargument and uses it, ironically, as a pro-argument.

5. Indirect-rejection concession

This concession is what Perelman 1969 had in mind when he wrote:

Concession is above all the antidote to lack of moderation; it expresses the fact that one gives a favorable reception to some of the opponent's real or presumed arguments. By restricting his claim, by giving up certain theses or arguments, a speaker can strengthen his position and make it easier to defend, while at the same time he exhibits his sense of fair play and his objectivity (p. 488). And he adds: Each time a speaker follows the interlocutor onto his own ground he makes a concession to him, but one which may be full of traps (p. 489).

In the indirect-rejection concession, the writer accepts the truthfulness of the proposition serving as counter-argument and recognizes its potential harm and therefore puts forward another argument: a pro-argument, implying that this second argument outweighs the counter-argument. Various connectives and

metadiscourse expressions have been found in the book, and we illustrate some of them below:

A. Concessive expressions introducing the first part of a concession relation: *Of course; In theory; certainly; Despite; So yes; Although; While; It may be that; Of course; Naturally; Admittedly; Even if; Many argue that ...; Some critics might argue that ...; The objection is that ...; It assumes that ...; It seemed that ...; I concede that ...; One objection centers on ...; They argue that ...; It may be countered that ...; The opponents of ... say ...; According to ...; The argument against is ...; Among the attractions of this theory are*

B. Contrastive expressions introducing the second part: *But; Yet; However; On the other hand; One problem with this approach is ...; In response, I would first note that.*

It is, perhaps, worth mentioning that almost all the indirect-rejection concessions are constructed in the form of two propositions which illustrate two different things about one and the same topic, for example (the topics are marked by italic letters):

9. There would be *fewer blacks* at Harvard and Yale; but *they* would all be fully competitive with the whites who were there (p. 206).

10. I will not argue that the old *racism* is dead at any level of society. I will argue, however, that in the typical corporation or in the typical admissions office, there is an abiding desire to be not-*racist* (p. 205)

11. They (the proponents of affirmative action - M.A.) know that not all of *their opponents* are racist; they also know that many of *them* are (p. 66).

Below is a rare example where the two propositions of the concession comment about different topics:

12. The critics of affirmative action piously proclaim that the goal of civil rights should be a 'color-blind society' that rewards people solely on the basis of individual merit Who can be against that?

What the critics don't like to talk about is the fundamental success of affirmative action, visible in large and small towns across the country (p. 183f).

In the second part of the concession, there is no reference to 'the goal of civil right', to 'civil rights', or to 'color-blind society', which could have served as shared topic of the two parts of the concession.

A special sort of indirect-rejection concession arises when the writer shows the double standard (or hypocrisy) of his/her opponents when they use a certain fact as a counter-argument and at the same time ignore the same fact in other

controversies, which are similar to the one in debate:

13. The opponents of affirmative action program say they are opposing the rank unfairness of preferential treatment. But there was not great hue and cry when colleges were candid about wanting to have geographic diversity, perhaps giving the kid from Montana an edge. There has been no national outcry when legacy applicants whose transcripts were supplemented by Dad's alumni status - and cash contributions to the college - were admitted over more qualified comers (p. 212f).

The writer acknowledges that rank unfairness is indeed caused by preferential treatment, but, nevertheless, he or she does not accept the opponents' conclusion. Instead, he or she puts forward a pro-argument, saying that rank unfairness caused by all sorts of preferential treatment was always a fact of life, and nobody cared. This implies an accepted double standard attitude on the part of the opponents of affirmative action, and it also implies a refutation of the opponents' standpoint.

To close this short presentation, it is important to point out that all the above counter-arguments were actual counter-arguments, which had been used by real opponents to support their standpoint and no prolepsis, i. e., anticipatory refutation in the form of a concession, was found. A *prolepsis* may be in the form of a direct-rejection concession, not an indirect-rejection concession, since this is, by definition, a reason serving as a pro-argument, and a prolepsis, as a figure of speech, gains its persuasive force not by reason, but by psychological manipulation (See Robrieu, 1993). The lack of prolepsis, which can also explain the rarity of the direct-rejection concession in our corpus, is another indication that the argumentation tools used in our collection of essays are similar to those used in regular academic-discourse community. Contrast is crucial to many aspects of academic argumentation, especially as a basis for creating knowledge via argumentation (Hunston 1993). It would seem that counter-argument refutation is necessary in establishing differences between proposed and opposed claims in research articles, as well as in debating political and social controversies.

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