

ISSA Proceedings 2002 - The Argumentative Dimension Of Discourse



The study of argumentation is often restricted to discourses clearly meant to persuade or, in Perelman's terms, to gain "the adherence of minds" to a given thesis (Perelman, 1969, 14). In this view, it mainly deals with arguments' building and refutation. According to van Eemeren and al.'s definition, "argumentation is a verbal and social activity of reason aiming at increasing (or decreasing) the acceptability of a controversial standpoint for the listener or reader, by putting forward a constellation of propositions intended to justify (or refute) the standpoint before a rational judge" (1996, 5). This delimitation of argumentation's scope allows for a clear-cut definition distinguishing argumentation from other kinds of verbal activities. However, it also narrows its field by exclusively concentrating on discourses that have an explicit argumentative *aim*, thus ignoring the argumentative *dimension* of texts that are not immediately meant to persuade, like news reports in the media, testimonial writing, novels, etc.

I adopt the stand according to which discourses focusing on non argumentative aims - providing factual information, for example, or creating a fictional world - belong to the realm of persuasion insofar they try to orient the audience's ways of seeing and judging the world. In Grize's terms: "In the common meaning, to argue is to provide arguments, thus reasons, for or against a thesis [...] But it is also possible to conceive of argumentation from a broader perspective and to understand it as a process that aims at exerting an influence on one's opinion, attitude, even behavior. It is however important to insist on the fact that the means are discursive" (Grize, 1990, 41; my translation). In this perspective, I have slightly amended Perelman's basic definition by adding that in argumentation, verbal means are used not only to make the addressee adhere to a thesis, but also to modify or reinforce his representations and beliefs, or simply to orient his reflexion on a given problem (Amossy, 2000, 29). This approach raises several questions, especially concerning:

- The limits of argumentation: what does it actually encompass? In other words,

does extending it to any kind of utterance, regardless of its declared objectives, not deprive it of any meaning?

- The strategies of argumentation: if argumentation is not necessarily built on a series of rational arguments arranged in a more or less complex structure, can it consist of any kind of verbal means; in this case, does it still offer any discursive specificity?

- The methods of analysis: what kind of tools can be used to describe and analyze the argumentative dimension of texts pertaining to a wide variety of types and genres?

My contention is that texts can have various degrees of *argumentativity*, going from the overtly polemical to the apparently informative or descriptive, and that this argumentativity is closely linked to the *genre* of discourse in which a more or less strong attempt at persuasion occurs.

This genre-focussed approach remains faithful to the spirit of classical rhetoric with its threefold partition: the deliberative, the forensic and the epideictic. Moreover, it draws on Perelman's insights concerning the argumentativity of the epideictic, sometimes supposed to be more literary than argumentative: "In my view, the epideictic genre is central to discourse because its role is to intensify adherence to values [...] The goal is always to strengthen a consensus around certain values which one wants to see prevail and which should orient action in the future" (Perelman, 1982, 20). However, argumentation in discourse (Amossy, 2000) adopts a broader view of generic categories, defining genre (in the French discourse analysis tradition) as a socio-historical discursive model, endowed not only with rules and constraints, but also with some kind of institutional recognition. The art of persuasion displays different forms and strategies according to the framework in which it appears. It is thus important to ask not only "who speaks to whom" where and when, but also what tacit communication contract is activated, what are the rules and constraints of the chosen genre and how they accommodate argumentative moves.

Such issues are thoroughly examined in the field of conversational analysis - first by the Swiss linguist Jacques Moeschler (1985), then by scholars like Christian Plantin (1996, 1998) or Ghislaine Martel (1998). They show that ordinary exchanges, daily conversations have an argumentative orientation that can be revealed through linguistic and mainly pragmatics means. I would like to extend the research to a variety of discourses, written and not only oral, looking at the

ways argumentation can be built into a discourse in accordance with its specific genre regulation.

In this perspective, argumentation analysis should be based on on discourse analysis (as defined in Charaudeau & Maingueneau, 2002, 41-45) as well as on rhetorical and argumentation studies. In other words, the tools provided by classical rhetoric (like figures and tropes) and by argumentation studies (like Perelman's techniques of argumentation, Ducrot's utterance linking, pragma-dialectics' reconstruction of arguments, etc.) should be considered in the framework of the genre that imposes on the text its peculiar logic and communication norms. An analysis of the text in all its verbal and institutional dimensions is needed in order to see how it sets out to construct a point of view and share it with the audience. I will here chose examples that do not allow for any overt exploitation of rhetorical and argumentative elements in order to show that the argumentative dimension of texts can be analyzed even in discourses that by definition do not and cannot adopt any clear persuasion aim.

Let us first address historical testimony, a kind of discourse that is not supposed to develop arguments but to present facts. Testimonial narrative is by definition uttered by an individual who declares that he has actually seen what he relates, that he has been there. The told episode, certified true, is thus closely connected to the biography of a narrator who takes responsibility on what he tells, as well as on its possible social consequences (Dulong, 1998, 56). Factuality as opposed to fiction, but as tightly connected to subjectivity (the witness truly and sincerely reports what he has personally seen and felt), is thus the main feature of testimonial discourse. Desire to prove anything but the truth of the related event cannot but look suspicious. The witness points to historical facts (in the limits of his knowledge, of course, and of the accuracy of his memory) in order to establish the truth. Any declared militant objective makes his report dubious since the witness could be accused of distorting reality to serve his own purposes.

Historical testimony expresses itself in numerous genres, such as memoirs, autobiographical narratives and confessions, published personal diaries as well as letters. The modes of testimonial discourse thus vary according to the specific rules of the generic category in which it appears: the style of historical memoirs, for example, widely differs from intimate epistolary writing. Thus the text is submitted to a double sets of constraints - the rules defining testimonial discourse, and the rules of the specific genre through which testimony is

transmitted.

Here is a quotation borrowed from a war diary (“carnet de route”) written by Paul Lintier, soldier in the French artillery, during August-September 1914, later reviewed and published by him (May 1916, Plon):

L’angoisse m’étrangle. Je raisonne pourtant. Je comprends clairement que l’heure est venue de faire le sacrifice de ma vie. Nous irons, nous irons tous, mais nous ne redescendrons pas de ces côtes. Voilà! Ce bouillonnement d’animalité et de pensée, qui est ma vie, tout à l’heure va cesser. Mon corps sanglant sera étendu sur le champ. Je le vois. Sur les perspectives de l’avenir, qui toujours sont pleines de soleil, un grand rideau tombe. C’est fini! Ce n’aura pas été très long; je n’ai que vingt et un ans” (1916 in Cru, 1993, 182).

Anguish is stifling me. Nevertheless, I’m reasoning. I clearly understand that the hour of sacrificing my life has come. We will go, we will all go, but we will never more go down these slopes. Here it is! This teeming with animality and thought, that is my life, will stop. My bleeding body will lay in the field. I see it. On the perspectives of the future, always full of sun, a big curtain is now falling down. It is over! It has not been very long; I am but twenty-one (my translation)

These notes, first taken for himself during the campaign, primarily express Lintier’s state of mind and intimate feelings before an imminent battle. They do not have any immediate argumentative aim, nor do they originally address any specific audience beyond the diarist. The text in the first person faithfully describes what the “I” thinks, feels and imagines in front of danger; it forcefully expresses the fear and regrets of a very young man about to make the sacrifice of his life. The deictics and the verb tenses stress the importance of the moment and the place in which this discourse is uttered. The alternation of the future and the present, as if the subject was contemplating his own dead body – “My bleeding body will lay on the field. I see it” – emphasizes the anguish of the living. So do the repetitions (“we will go, we will all go”), and the exclamations (“Here we are!”, “It is over!”). The text thus conforms to the norms of the intimate diary with its expressive function: an “I” writes down his most personal feelings at the very moment of their occurrence, with the authenticity and sincerity granted by the immediacy, but also by the absolute confidentiality inherent to diary writing.

Nevertheless, the text is eventually intended for an audience, even when the diarist keeps it to himself on the battlefield. This is amply proved by his rewriting and publishing his “carnets de route” two years later at Plon (a good Parisian

publishing house). As such, the faithful report constitutes not only the trace of a personal souvenir, but also the testimony of a “poilu” (an ordinary Great War French soldier) about the way he coped with the close perspective of bloodshed and death. Because he has been there, and describes only what he actually felt, his text is endowed with testimonial value. As such, it is liable to enter the public sphere and provide a valuable stand on the issue of war heroism.

In this view, Lintier’s personal evocation displays a second layer, in which argumentative tones can be detected. The expression of feelings is no more the only objective to be taken into account: far from being self-sufficient, emotion rather plays a part in the effective transmission of a specific vision of war. It increases the impact of the text on the reader by inviting him to both understand and *feel* the experience of the warrior in all its complexity. He can share Lintier’s inner conflict, displayed in the use of connectives that confer upon the text its argumentative orientation.

The first connective is “*pourtant*”, nevertheless, that substitutes reasoning to sheer anguish: “anguish is stifling me. Nevertheless, I am reasoning”. The first move is thus to show how rational thinking can subdue anxiety, and how it allows for a clear understanding of the situation: “I clearly understand that the hour of sacrificing my life has come”. The idea of sacrifice appears as part of the reasoning, and is followed by the conclusion “we will go”. This fragment is thus the representation of a self-deliberation using rationality to make a final decision on the necessity of fighting, whatever be the risks involved. It is based on premises generally agreed upon during the patriotic days of the “sacred union”. The connector “*mais*” – but – “we will go, we will all go, but we will never more go down these slopes”, reverses the orientation of the discourse. If to go and fight is important, what follows the “but” is by definition even more important (Ducrot, 1980). The horror of the fatal issue is emphasized at the expense of the duty to be performed.

It is interesting to point out that the veiled antagonism between the official discourse the soldiers were supposed to feed on, and what they truly felt in their heart, was emphasized by later readings of the twenties and the thirties. Lintier’s text was then perceived as a strong, though indirect, denunciation of war heroism as glorified by patriotic and militarist discourses. For Norton Cru, who reproduced the quoted lines of Lintier in his famous 1929 book *Witnesses* (Témoins), such a testimony showed that the 1914 soldiers, far from facing death

stoically and without any fear, suffered a terrible psychological misery, a genuine moral agony[i]. Indeed, the loss of life, the end of sensuality and thought that come as a result of performing one's duty are indirectly presented by Lintier as an injustice through his emphatic sentence on the brevity of his existence: "It has not lasted very long; I am but twenty-one".

Thus the emotional passage delivers a message insofar it depicts war less in the light of the official discourse on sacrifice and duty, than of a counter-discourse - faithfully reporting the thoughts and feelings of those who actually experience fighting. Even if Lintier uses the "I", his evocation of the pronoun "we" makes him part of a group. Even if he does not take the liberty to say it in so many words, since he is testifying only on what he knows from his own experience, we can imagine that he represents most of his companions.

It is thus interesting to see how a fragment apparently intended to give an outlet to the writer's anguish is endowed with an *argumentative dimension*. This argumentation can be analyzed through the connectives allowing for utterance linking, but also through the contrast between the doxa (Amossy and Sternberg 2002) mobilized by reasoning (the official discourse on war) and the experience of the soldier facing death. The transmitted vision of war opposes the dominant views the diarist himself was brought up to believe in. It is thus no wonder that it can be quoted by those who, in the early thirties, look for pacifist arguments.

The second example is taken from a novel by Marguerite Duras, *The Lover*, a narrative with autobiographical overtones alternatively written in the first and third person, and telling the first love affair of the very young protagonist with a rich Chinese young man. Here is a passage dealing with the "I" narrator's mother and with her views on family pictures:

De temps en temps, ma mère décrète: demain on va chez le photographe. Elle se plaint du prix mais elle fait quand même les frais des photos de famille. Les photos, on les regarde, on ne se regarde pas, mais on regarde les photographies, chacun séparément, sans un mot de commentaire, mais on les regarde, on se voit. On voit les autres membres de la famille un par un ou rassemblés. On se revoit quand on était petit sur les anciennes photos et on se regarde sur les photos récentes. La séparation a encore grandi entre nous. Une fois regardées, les photos sont rangées avec le linge dans les armoires. Ma mère nous fait photographier pour pouvoir nous voir, voir si nous grandissons normalement. Elle nous regarde longuement comme d'autres mères, d'autres enfants. Elle compare

les photos entre elles, elle parle de la croissance de chacun. Personne ne lui répond. (Duras, 1984, 115-116)

From time to time, my mother says: tomorrow we will go to the photographer. She complains about the price, but she still pays greatly for family pictures. We look at those pictures, we do not look at each other, but we look at the photographs, each of us separately, without a word of comment, but we look at them and we see ourselves. We see other members of the family one by one or gathered together. We see each other when we were little in the old pictures and we look at each other on the recent pictures. The separation between us has grown even more. Once looked at, the pictures are put away with the linen in a closet. My mother has us photographed so that she can see us, see whether we grow up normally. She looks at us at length like other mothers do at other children. She compares the pictures, she talks about everyone's growth . Nobody answers". (My translation)

This text does not have any argumentative aim: it describes an episode of the protagonist's family life in what is supposed to be a faithful report of the past. This evocation in the first person is written in a pseudo-oral style – the syntax imitates spoken French: “the pictures, we look at them”. It is a flat style full of odd repetitions (“we *look* at the pictures, we don't *look* at each other, but we *look* at the photographs...”) and of trivialities (“One can see the other members of the family one by one or gathered together. We see ourselves when we were very little on the old pictures and we look at ourselves on the recent pictures”). The narrator not only transgresses the rules of literary writing, she also deviates from the norms of autobiography by avoiding any personal judgment (there are no evaluative adjectives, no axiological terms) and by erasing any direct expression of feeling. The overall effect is surprising by its very simplicity. In its feigned orality, in its striking banality, it does not correspond to what the reader expects from a literary text.

The name of Marguerite Duras, however, and the prestigious publishing house “Minuit”, easily account for a deviation perceived as avant-garde transgression and, moreover, as the search of a woman artist for her own autobiographical voice.

Is there any argumentative dimension in a text that invents a new style to tell a woman's life story, and recall childhood scenes related to family pictures? A closer look at the paragraph clearly shows that the esthetic effect of the writing

builds a special vision both of family pictures and of family life. The stand of the writer is indirectly expressed through the manipulation of doxa and its transformation into paradoxa - that is, in the movement that turns upside down a banal situation and opinion. The avant-garde style that emphasizes triviality only to better twist and deconstruct it, constitutes a powerful rhetorical means: it unveils a hidden reality behind familiar scenes. Thus the repetition based on a trite assertion: they *look* at the pictures, they do not *look* at each other. The members of the family are like strangers who can see each other only through the mediation of the camera. The mother looks at the pictures of her children like other mothers do, but she actually sees them (and their growth) only in the photos. The ordinary social function of family pictures, ensuring group cohesion, is magnified to the point that they replace personal relations and contact. Photography only reveals alienation and the inability of all the family members to see each other in real life, to relate to each other.

The sentence: "The separation between us has grown even more", referring to the children's individual development, is deliberately ambiguous: it conveys to the reader the idea of an emotional distance keeping the children more and more apart from each other. Even the mother's comments on the pictures cannot create any feeling of community among the sister and the brothers: "She compares the pictures between them, she talks about everyone's growth. Nobody answers".

It thus appears that a peculiar vision of Duras' family life is unveiled in this text through the apt manipulation of a pseudo-oral, trivial discourse. No doubt the autobiographical narrative does not claim universal value: it describes a singular, somewhat unusual childhood. One cannot help, however, feeling that this particular scene denounces the hidden traps of family life in general. *The Lover* not only transgresses literary expectations, it also constitutes a demythification of doxic views. This does not mean, of course, that the text sets out to demonstrate anything. It does not intend to provide clear-cut answers about the nature of family life. It does, however, raise questions and re-orient our way of looking at the very stuff of our ordinary life. What is the function of family pictures beyond what we have been taught to think of? Is Duras's case a monstrous exception confirming the rule, or is it a breach that opens up questions about reassuring habits, if not about the very nature of normality? In other words, the argumentative dimension of Duras' autobiographical novel is peculiar not only because it is built through avant-garde literary means, but also because it consists of raising questions it does not set out to answer.

Although quite different, the cases of war testimony and avant-garde writing thus show that discourses that do not have any explicit argumentative aim can still have an argumentative dimension, and that this dimension is woven into the text by means that are indissociable from its generic constraints or esthetic norms. The analyzed fragments do not build or refute any rational argument, and the linking of utterances is not governed by the logic of demonstration. There is no more clear-cut thesis than explicit intention to prove anything. However, in both texts, there is an attempt at re-orienting the reader's views. Through the expression of personal feelings and puzzlement, the diarist's testimony sets out to reveal the truth about the soldier's attitude toward death, thus implicitly opposing the official discourse prevailing in 1914-1918. Through the apparently flat and neutral report of a female autobiographer, the virtues of family communion as expressed in photographs are denounced. Thus non-conformist interpretations are conveyed, that are meant to replace doxic views and destabilize common beliefs. There can be an argumentative dimension in discourses not meant to persuade, and this argumentative dimension can be built by verbal means derived from generic constraints or stylistic innovations. Discourse analysis, in its emphasis on generic frameworks and discursive strategies, provides here an adequate approach to the study of the argumentative dimension of texts.

NOTES

[i] According to Norton Cru, Lintier's *Ma pièce*, published two months before his death on the war front, clearly discredits the official patriotic discourse on the troops' moral, on the so-called bellicious drives of the soldiers, of the latter's indifference in front of danger and death. In the perspective of the violent debates that followed the Great war, Lintier's testimony acquires for Cru more than an argumentative dimension: it also endows it with a polemical value. And indeed in the pacifist historian's eyes, "no argument against war can equal in force this argument: the infernal anguish that tortures all soldiers, poor men who are again and again depicted as indifferent to the idea of risk" (Cru, 1993, 184). Lintier's text, though, does not participate in such an overt polemic. It would be quite anachronistic to see it as part of a controversy on war and peace.

REFERENCES

Amossy, R. (2000). *L'Argumentation dans le discours. Discours politique, littérature d'idées, fiction*. Paris:Nathan

- Amossy, R. , Sternberg, M. (2002). Doxa and Discourse: How Common Knowledge Works, *Poetics Today* 23:3.
- Charaudeau, P., Mainguenu, D. (Eds) 2002. *Dictionnaire d'analyse du discours*. Paris: Le Seuil.
- Cru, N. (1993; 1st ed. 1929). *Témoins* . Presses univerversitaires de Nancy.
- Dulong, R. (1998). *Le témoin oculaire. Les conditions sociales de l'attestation* (Paris: EHESS).
- Ducrot, O. et al. (1980). *Les mots du discours*. Paris: Minuit.
- Duras, M. (1984) *L'amant*. Paris: Minuit.
- Eemeren, van F.H., Grootendorst, R., Snoek Hoekemans, F. (1996). *Fundamentals of Argumentation Theory*. NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Grize, J.-B. (1990). *Logique et langage*, Paris: Ophrys.
- Martel, G. (1998). *Pour une rhétorique du quotidien*. Québec: CIRAL.
- Moeschler, J. (1985). *Argumentation et Conversation. Éléments pour une analyse pragmatique du discours*. Paris: Hatier/Didier.
- Perelman, C. & Olbrechts Tyteca, O. (1969). *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, translated by John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver. Notre Dame, IN: *Notre Dame University Press*; 1st ed. in French 1958.
- Perelman, C. (1982). *The Realm of Rhetoric*. Notre Dame, IN: *Notre Dame University Press*; 1st ed. In French 1977.
- Plantin, C. (1996). *L'Argumentation*. Paris: Le Seuil, "Mémo".
- Plantin, C. (1998). "L'interaction argumentative", in *Dialoganalyse VI. Proceedings of the 6th Conference*, Prague 1996. Tübingen: Max Verlag, (pp. 151-159).