

# ISSA Proceedings 2006 - Argument Refutation Through Definitions And Re-Definitions



*If you are not well equipped with an argument against the assertion, look among the definitions, real or apparent, of the thing before you, and if one is not enough, draw upon several. For it will be easier to attack people when committed to a definition: for an attack is always more easily made on definitions. (Aristotle's Topics, Book II)*

## 1. Introduction

Goal-oriented communication has long been the trademark of human interaction in a wide range of private and public settings. During the past three decades a renewed awareness has emerged in both academic and extra-academic circles about the growing role and extensive effects of rhetorically powerful discourse in all areas of human activity. This is particularly noticeable in political discourse, which is driven by the challenge and wish to argue in order to influence people's minds, to motivate people to act and even to manipulate people. That is why speakers do not only advance their own arguments in favour of their positions, but they also provide arguments denying the other side's arguments. In controversies, definitions are often used to legitimate and refute arguments. Refuting an argument presupposes understanding that argument at every level of its definitional meaning and practical implications. In political disputes the act of defining contributes to further polarisation between adversarial positions and can therefore become rhetorically persuasive or dissuasive.

This paper examines the role played by refutation in the persuasion and dissuasion processes that rely on the use of definitions. The very prospect of refuting an argument entails understanding that argument at every level of its definitional meaning and logical implications. In arguing, a speaker often appeals to definitions that reinforce the power of his/her arguments and/or to definitions that help to refute the opponent's arguments. Particularly persuasive are those definitions that are meant to stir up prejudices and stereotypes and thus to undermine the justifiability of the opponent's arguments and explicit/implicit definitions.

In order to illustrate the argumentative uses of definition in refutations, I have chosen to examine the various uses of definition-based refutations in Emmeline Pankhurst's speech on women's right to vote entitled *Militant suffragists*. This is a particularly significant speech, since apart from highlighting a very controversial issue in England and other countries at that time, it was delivered not in her home country, but in Hartford, Connecticut, which involved extra rhetorical processing and a special selection and presentation of the right arguments for the right audience.

## 2. *Refutation: an interactive process, a performative act and a rhetorical device*

In institutional discourses and in public speeches refutation (Lat. *refutatio*) involves the use of rhetorical and argumentative devices with the purpose of countering an opponent's argument or rejecting the counterarguments of one's opponent. The complex uses and implications of refutation have raised great interest in both linguistics and rhetoric, which may account for the fact that there are several definitions of refutation (Rieke and Sillars 1975, Moeschler 1982, Eemeren et al. 1996, Verlinden 2005). According to Rieke and Sillars, refutation designates both attacking others' arguments and defending one's own. Moeschler characterises the speech act of refutation typologically, describing the conditions that govern its use, the linguistic markers of refutation, and the role of refutation in conversation. In van Eemeren et al. an important distinction is made between strong and weak refutations. In a strong refutation "one is to attack the standpoint by showing that the proposition is unacceptable whereas the opposite, or contradictory, proposition is acceptable", whereas "in 'weak refutation' it is sufficient to cast doubt upon the attacked standpoint, without a defense of the opposite standpoint". (1996: 4).

Dictionary definitions of refutations are useful in that they often implicitly contribute to highlighting various semantic perspectives on the occurrence and functions of different kinds of refutations. A comprehensive lexical definition of the notion of refutation is provided in *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary*, which highlights their communicative functions:

Refutation n. [L. *refutatio*: cf. F. *r[e]futation*.]

The act or process of refuting or disproving, or the state of being refuted; proof of falsehood or error; the overthrowing of an argument, opinion, testimony, doctrine, or theory, by argument or countervailing proof. (*Online Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary*)

Linguistically, refutation is the part of a coherent piece of discourse in which the speaker reminds or anticipates opposing arguments and responds to them. A pragma-linguistic definition of refutation is provided by Online *Wordwebonline*:

### *Refutation*

1. The speech act of answering an attack on your assertions; e.g. “his refutation of the *charges* was *short* and *persuasive*” - defense [US], defence [Brit, Cdn]
2. Any evidence that helps to establish the falsity of something - disproof, falsification
3. The act of determining that something is false - falsification, falsifying, disproof, refutation

As a rhetorical device, refutation has been formalised within the arrangement of the classical oration, following the ‘*confirmatio*’, i.e. the section of a speech devoted to proof. Refutation also applies to a general mode of argumentation within certain topics of invention, such the contradiction, by means of which the speaker answers the counterarguments of his/her opponent. Refutation can be achieved in a variety of ways, including logical appeal, emotional appeal, ethical appeal and wit (joke, humour, sarcasm, puns). In particular situations, speakers find it appropriate to present a refutation before the confirmation. For example, if an adversary’s speech is well received, it is usually helpful to refute his/her arguments before offering one’s own. Refutations apply to a variety of confrontational settings in which arguments are being attacked, denied, contradicted and/or rejected as being false, absurd, impertinent, wicked or unjust.

### *3. Argumentative strategies of refutation*

By means of refutations, speakers position themselves in relation to their opponents by reinforcing their own standpoints and challenging or rejecting those of their opponents, thus marking the distance that separates them. Arguing against someone else’s standpoint can be used to refute all those who oppose one’s position. Objections to particular arguments can be raised in at least three ways: by directly attacking the opponent’s statements or claims, by putting forward counter-statements or counter-claims, and by highlighting and contrasting the arguments in the two sets of statements or claims.

Claims can be refuted when they are contradicted by experience, testimony, authority, or common knowledge. Apart from considerable background and specialised knowledge, refuting an argument requires critical thinking skills, strong purposefulness and genuine personal commitment. According to Aristotle

(1984), refutation by logical analogy was the ultimate level of human intelligence. Indeed, refuting an argument entails understanding that argument at every level of its definitional meaning, contextual grounding and logical implications. In practice, successful argument refutation requires an understanding of the boundaries of both intellect and intuition that can only be achieved in the awareness that neither intellect nor intuition can be relied upon completely alone to produce sound reasoning.

Refutations may take different forms depending on several factors, such as the specific situational constraints, the kind of discourse, the debated issue, the speakers' personality and goals, etc. More often than not, speakers resort to refutation in order not only to criticise their opponents and to attack their arguments, but also to defend their own arguments from the opponents' attacks.

Some of the main functions of refutations are the following:

- to establish the audience's understanding and acceptance of the righteousness of the speaker's position/cause
- to demonstrate why the speaker feels his/her side of the argument is the better one, even when s/he doesn't necessarily think that the other side is entirely wrong
- to involve the audience by appealing to their shared community doxa, recent experiences and basic feelings so as to bring about a change of mind
- to strike the right rhetorical chords in order to invite positive reactions and further support from the audience and the public at large

#### *4. Refutations by definition and re-definition*

In highly controversial debates the strength of a speaker's arguments is upheld not only by defending one's own standpoints and by attacking the adversary's standpoints, but also by supporting or rejecting particular definitions of key words as indisputable facts. In the process of argumentation, skilful speakers do not necessarily use commonly more or less acknowledged definitions, but they generate instead new context-related and ideologically based definitions. This has been extensively discussed by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969), who claimed that a definition should always be regarded as an argument and should be evaluated as an argument. In the same vein, Walton considers that "a persuasive definition should be treated as a particular kind of argument" (2001: 118).

Definitions play a crucial role in every field of human reasoning and interpersonal interaction. One way to argue appropriately is to be precise about the explicit and

implicit meanings of the key terms of an argument. In this respect, the Socratic question 'What does X mean?' is a natural starting point for any argumentative discourse. A basic definition may highlight a less known aspect of a notion, idea or issue, or it may re-evaluate a well-known and debated aspect of the issue under discussion. In political discourse, definitions are not necessarily conceived as universal axioms, but they are often clarifications or explanations of contextualised terms.

Three main aspects are significant when examining the use of definitions. In the first place, the act of defining involves processes of identification, categorisation and particularisation of the entity or phenomenon to be defined. In the second place, the act of defining implies the communicative act of making something clear and tangible. In the third place, the act of defining entails determining the outline and boundaries of the entity or phenomenon to be defined. There are, accordingly, several types of argumentatively used definitions that display these features, as will be shown later in this paper.

Definitions are used to categorise things, people or ideas by either making generalisations or particularisations about them. Frequently, how one defines a term or concept can lead logically (through syllogistic reasoning) to a given conclusion, while other definitions might lead to different conclusions. Defining key notions allows a speaker to interpret the people or opinions involved in the argument in a way that makes logical sense to the listeners. To argue, as well as to refute, from definition, is a way to convince the audience that a particular ideological belief or commitment is reasonable because it can be supported by evidence. Consequently, the conclusions devolving from this definition stand a good chance of being seen as appropriate, logical and acceptable.

In the context of political discourse, definitions function as speech acts and are used to signpost the central debate issues and thus to facilitate the audience's comprehension. Discursively and rhetorically, definitions are instrumental in the process of social construction of identities and ideological polarisation, by contributing to establish, or, on the contrary, challenge, a case of partial or total consensus.

At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that the use of definitions with unexamined assumptions often results in arguments that either 'over-simplify' the issue under debate or 'over-generalise' the issue under debate. This means that either too much or too little is claimed by these arguments, which makes them

easily refuted by pointing out a simple distinction.

##### 5. *Refutations in public speeches - Emmeline Pankhurst's suffrage speech*

On crucial issues such as the debate concerning women's right to vote, female speakers have been fully aware of the scepticism and/or opposition they faced and often tried to address it directly in their speeches. They often make creative use of their opponents' attacks by uttering refutations, which are normally stronger persuasion devices than the corresponding assertive statements. Women can be seen to deliberately start their speeches by admitting that there are those who disagree with their position, then continue by clarifying the two opposing positions for their audiences, and finally conclude by directly addressing the audience and facing their reactions. Their refutations are particularly targeted at the opponents' behaviour and communicative patterns, coherence, consistency and supporting evidence.

For the purposes of the present paper I have chosen to examine the definition-based refutations used in a speech entitled *Militant suffragists* and delivered by Emmeline Pankhurst in Hartford, Connecticut, on November 13, 1913, during a lecture tour in the U.S.A. (Copeland et al. 1999). Emmeline Pankhurst (1858-1928) was one of the most eloquent and energetic leaders of the woman suffrage movement during the early part of the 19th century (Roberts 1995). She was head of the so-called "militants" of England and often faced arrest and prosecution as a result of furthering the right of women to vote. She worked her entire life for the cause of women's suffrage, and was certainly not afraid to back up her words with action. According to Warner (1998) "Mrs. Pankhurst was born a Victorian Englishwoman, but she shaped an idea of women for our time; she shook society into a new pattern from which there could be no going back." In her tireless public speaking, suffrage meant more than equality with men. Her plea to the court in 1912 concluded, "We are here, not because we are lawbreakers; we are here in our efforts to become lawmakers."

In 1903 Emmeline Pankhurst founded, together with other champions of women's suffrage, the Women's Social and Political Union. The motto of the Women's Social and Political Union was 'deeds not words'. It is a motto that could also serve well to sum up Pankhurst's life, both as a woman and as a suffragette. The opposition the Liberal government of the time provoked, among all classes and conditions of women, furious and passionate protests. The W.S.P.U. adopted a French Revolutionary sense of crowd management, public spectacle and symbolic

ceremony. Women's suffrage was granted at different times in different countries. For example Finland granted women the vote in 1906, Norway in 1913 and Sweden in 1921. After a prolonged struggle women were finally given the right to vote on equal terms with men in 1920 in the USA and in 1928 in Britain.

The following aspects of refutation-oriented definitions will be particularly examined in Emmeline Pankhurst's speech:

- What are the major types of definitions used as refutations and what are their distinguishing characteristics?
- How are definitions signalled linguistically and rhetorically?
- What particular rhetorical features co-occur with definitions?

#### 6. *Definition-based refutations in Emmeline Pankhurst's speech*

The fact that Emmeline Pankhurst's speech *Militant suffragists* is delivered in the United States and not in England, her home-country, places her in an entirely new rhetorical situation and conditions the way in which she structures her speech and confronts the new audience. Realising that she is addressing a different audience in the United States than back home in England, Emmeline Pankhurst adjusts her Hartford speech so as to involve her listeners both rationally and emotionally, by appealing to their personal experiences, as well as to the particular values and norms to which they were expected to subscribe. She appears persuasive from the start, just by explaining why she came there and in what capacity. This straightforward move enables her to establish direct contact with the audience and to better help them understand her position and her point of view. The speech has a powerful *ex abrupto* start where she refers to her political commitment by means of two explicit negations, as illustrated in example (1):

(1)

*"I do not come here as an advocate, because whatever position the suffrage movement may occupy in the United States of America, in England it has passed beyond the realm of advocacy and it has entered into the sphere of practical politics. It has become the subject of revolution and civil war, and so to-night I am not here to advocate woman suffrage. American suffragists can do that very well for themselves."*

While treatises of rhetoric normally advise young orators against starting a speech with a negation, Pankhurst deliberately violates this very principle in order to directly refute her audience's presumed expectations and to avoid potential

misunderstandings. Both her first and second utterances consist of self-reference by denial which is meant to re-define her identity, which goes beyond an advocate's role. Throughout her speech, Emmeline Pankhurst can be seen to refute several of her American hearers' presumed assumptions about her role. Example (1) displays a double refutation of presupposed inferences about her presumed political role and motivations among the American audience members. By refuting twice the unexpressed assumption that she is an 'advocate' of woman suffrage, Pankhurst is actually re-defining the term to strengthen her argumentative position. At the same time, she performs a face-saving act in relation to the various categories of American listeners by reassuring them that, on the one hand, she trusts the professionalism of her fellow American suffragists and, on the other hand, she does not intend to instigate rebellion or civil unrest in America.

Pankhurst's two introductory refutations concerning her role as advocate are also meant to challenge the audience's expectations in order to capture their attention. Moreover, she anticipates her next move by raising the listeners' curiosity, which is meant to prepare them for an explanation and a new perspective on her role and position. On account of their anticipatory nature, these two refutations can be regarded as *refutations by anticipation*. Their main function in the introduction of the speech, as Cicero emphatically used to point out, is to establish the speaker's authority by rhetorical appeals to ethos. To better grasp the meaning ascribed by Pankhurst to the key word 'advocate', it is useful to examine its lexical definition, both etymological and context-related:

#### Advocate

*Etymology:* Middle English *advocat*, from Middle French, from Latin *advocatus*, from past participle of *advocare* to summon, from *ad-*"to" + *vocare* "to call", from *voc-*, *vox* voice (Online *Wordsmyth Dictionary-Thesaurus 2006*)

#### Advocate

1. a person who publicly supports or recommends a particular cause or policy
2. a person who pleads a case on someone else's behalf

(Online *Compact Oxford Dictionary 2006*)

According to several dictionary definitions, an advocate is mainly a supporter who voices a cause or a policy, which does not imply a deeper involvement in defending the respective cause or policy. It is precisely this aspect that prompts



Pankhurst to re-define her role in the woman suffrage movement. Her two refutations create a moment of uncertainty for the audience, who, at this point, can only speculate about her real underlying intention: they may be wondering whether she refutes being described as an advocate due to certain unforeseen circumstances, or whether her refutation implies a stronger identification with her role in the suffragist movement. The rhetorical strategy that she uses here is called *procatalepsis* (from Greek “anticipation”) or *prolepsis* (from Greek “preconception”) and it enables the speaker to refute anticipated objections and/or to attack the credibility of preconceived judgements by providing counter-arguments. It is based on the well-known principle that an objection answered in advance is weakened. Procatalepsis, by anticipating an objection and answering it, allows an arguer to continue moving forward, while taking into account points or reasons opposing either the adversary’s train of thought or final conclusions. In (1) this particular refutational argumentation rests on two closely linked syntactic relations: a causal relation, marked by the logical connective “because” and a conclusive relation, marked by the logical connective “and so”.

By referring to the American socio-political scene and comparing it with the situation in England, Emmeline Pankhurst shows, on the one hand, that she is aware of conceivable objections to her line of argumentation, and on the other, that she does not rule out the existence of reasonable counter-arguments. In order to convey this message, she uses the rhetorical figure called *apophasis*, by means of which a speaker asserts or emphasises something by apparently seeming to pass over, or deny it. A frequently used strategy in apophasis is the repetition, as in example (1): “I do not come here as an advocate”, “I am not here to advocate woman suffrage”. Pankhurst utters these two almost identical statements in order precisely to call the audience’s attention to sensitive facts without stirring up strong feelings in connection with the issue of women’s right to vote. The rest of her speech shows in fact that advocating woman suffrage is exactly the main topic.

To further clarify her position, Emmeline Pankhurst wants to make the audience aware of her non-American background with the purpose of opening a new perspective for them based on her own experience-based arguments in favour of the woman suffrage movement in England. She continues her self-presentation by defining her self-ascribed identity as ‘soldier’, as well as the other-inflicted identity as ‘convict’, as illustrated in example (2).

(2)

*I am here as a soldier* who has temporarily left the field of battle in order to explain - it seems strange it should have to be explained - what civil war is like when civil war is waged by women. [...] I am adjudged because of my life to be *a dangerous person*, under sentence of penal servitude in a convict prison. [...] I dare say, in the minds of many of you - you will perhaps forgive me this personal touch - that I do not look either very like *a soldier* or very like *a convict*, and yet I am both.

Whereas in (1) Pankhurst refutes an implicitly presumed assumption, in (2) she refutes an explicit assumption with which she confronts her audience - i.e. that she may be neither soldier nor convict because it is difficult to identify her with the two roles. Her refutational argumentation relies primarily on implicit explanatory definitions of the terms 'soldier' and 'convict', both of which had been used to define her current social roles in England. She continues by referring to 'civil war' when "waged by women" and she implies that there is a distinction between a civil war waged by men and a civil war waged by women. This strategy is similar to the *rhetorical dissociation* discussed in Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969), by means of which a seemingly unitary term is split in two and the speaker's position is linked to the term that concerns the line of argumentation. In this respect, her definitions acquire more strength and become polemical acts, since she implicitly evaluates and qualifies the commonly assumed interpretations of the two notions. Also, Pankhurst describes herself metaphorically in two different and contradictory capacities: as a soldier in a civil war, i.e. a person normally worthy of respect, and as a convict, i.e. a person normally not worthy of respect. Her underlying message is that, in spite of important differences, the two notions have an important element in common: both roles are deprived of power and authority. The lexical definitions of the terms in several dictionaries support this interpretation, which reinforces Pankhurst's multifaceted role. Thus, a soldier is defined as a "dedicated worker: somebody who works with dedication for a cause" in Encarta Online, as a "person who contends or serves in any cause" in Random House Unabridged Dictionary (2006), and as an "active, loyal, or militant follower of an organization" in American Heritage Dictionary.

Two metalinguistic parentheticals contribute to supplementing the argumentative definitions in example (2) and to strengthen the speaker's ethos: "it seems strange it should have to be explained"; "you will perhaps forgive me this

personal touch". The former parenthetical is message-oriented and functions as a rational appeal (to logos), whereas the latter is addresser-oriented and functions as an emotional appeal (to pathos). Through the change in rhetorical appeal these parentheticals help to refocus the hearers' attention and to mark the speaker's rhetorical transition from a lexical definition to a persuasive definition.

Among Pankhurst's roles, the one that raises most controversial interpretations is the role of convict and this is precisely what she wants her audience to become more aware of. On the one hand, the notion of convict may have a rather neutral meaning, i.e. "somebody serving a prison sentence" according to Encarta Dictionary, but on the other hand, it can have a clearly negative meaning, i.e. "someone who is in prison because they are guilty of a crime", according to Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary. The distinction consists in the existence or non-existence of guilt (+/- guilt). A more balanced view is taken by two other dictionaries, whose definitions include both the neutral and the negative meaning of 'convict':

#### Convict

1. a person who has been found guilty of a crime or misdemeanour (synonyms: criminal, offender, transgressor, etc.)
  2. a person who is serving time in jail or prison (synonyms: prisoner, captive, etc.)
- (Online *Wordsmyth Dictionary-Thesaurus 2006*)

#### Convict

1. a person found or declared guilty of an offence or crime
  2. a person serving a sentence of imprisonment
- (Online *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language 2006*)

The last two lexical definitions succeed in giving a realistic picture of the two practical implications in the use of the word 'convict', which can only be distinguished in the right context. It is possible to infer from Pankhurst's speech that she draws the audience's attention to the tendency to interpret the meaning of the word 'convict' more often in a negative, rather than in a neutral way, instead of starting off with the neutral interpretation, i.e. "to be presumed innocent until proven guilty".

Following up the argumentative strategy of refutation by means of definitions, Pankhurst continues with her refutational argumentation, as illustrated in

example (3):

(3)

[...] it is about eight years since *the first militant action* was taken by women. *It was not militant at all*, except that *it provoked militancy* on the part of those who were opposed to it. *When women asked questions in political meetings and failed to get answers, they were not doing anything militant. To ask questions at political meetings is an acknowledged right of all people who attend public meetings.* [...] At any rate in Great Britain it is a custom, a time-honored one, to ask questions of candidates for Parliament and ask questions of members of the government. *No man was ever put out of a public meeting for asking a question until Votes for Women came onto the political horizon. The first people who were put out of a political meeting for asking questions, were women.* [...] *we were called militant* for doing that...

Two major refutations are conveyed by Pankhurst in the excerpt above. For the first refutation she resorts to two related definitions: a *definition by negation* by means of which she denies the opponents' claims - "It [the action taken by women] was not militant at all" - and a *definition by explanation*, by means of which she points out that the act of asking questions is not necessarily militant, but it is "an acknowledged right of all people". While the major function of the definition by negation is to deny the opponent's argument in order to call into question its validity, an important function of the definition by explanation is to challenge the values to which one's opponents subscribe. In the first place, she denies her opponents' characterisation of women's actions as 'militant', and in the second place, she reasserts the right of women and men to ask questions when attending public meetings, refuting the accusation of militancy in question asking. It is significant to note in the following dictionary definitions that the meaning of the word 'militant' is semantically and pragmatically related to the meaning of 'soldier', used by Pankhurst earlier in her speech and illustrated in example (2).

Militant:

(Middle English, from Old French, from Latin *militans*, *militant-*, present participle of *militare*, to serve as a soldier)

1. feeling or displaying eagerness to fight
2. having or showing a bold forcefulness in the pursuit of a goal

(Merriam-Webster Online Thesaurus, 2005-2006)

Militant:

Engaged in warfare; fighting; combating; serving as a *soldier*

(Online *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary*, 1913/2006)

While the two meanings listed in the lexical definition provided by *Merriam-Webster Online Thesaurus* indicate general features of a militant person, the meaning indicated for 'militant' in *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary* is a *definition by analogy*: "serving as a soldier". The key word 'soldier' in example (2) is argumentatively correlated in Pankhurst's speech with the key word 'militant' in example (3) by means of the rhetorical figure called *scesis onomaton*. This figure usually emphasises an idea by expressing it in a string of generally synonymous phrases or statements: the word 'militant' is etymologically synonymous to *soldier* since it originates in the Greek verb *militare*, which means "to serve as a soldier" and implicitly to display a fighting spirit. After examining the structure and content of Pankhurst's speech it is reasonable to assume that she refutes particularly the label of war-like militancy ascribed by opponents indiscriminately to any action performed by women suffragists.

The second refutation in example (3) is related to the parallel the speaker draws between the attitude towards men and towards women, respectively, in relation to the right to ask questions. Although both men and women were in principle supposed to have the same rights, women were discriminated against when they were not allowed to ask questions at public meetings, while men had never been stopped from asking questions. When exposing this obvious injustice, Pankhurst's refutation is based on a definition by analogy and emphasises a clear situation of gender discrimination: for men it was normal to ask questions (no man was ever put out of a public meeting), but for women it was not (the first to be put out of a public meeting were women). This reinforces the idea that asking questions is not only an acknowledged right of citizens, but it is also potentially a very challenging act. Indeed, by asking questions people call into question an issue, a belief, a standpoint, a line of argumentation, etc. The goal of questioning practices is to hold political actors and decision-makers responsible in front of political peers and ordinary citizens. This is why Pankhurst insists on arguing that the right to ask questions was never questioned before the Votes for Women became a political question and they started being called 'militant'.

A special type of refutation is the one enacted by means of dialogic strategies, as illustrated in example (4). By representing or quoting imaginary dialogue cues,

Pankhurst enables her audience members to identify the polyphony of recognisable ideological voices:

(4)

“Put them in prison,” they said; “that will stop it.” *But it didn’t stop it.* They put women in prison for long terms of imprisonment, for *making a nuisance of themselves* – that was the expression when they took petitions in their hands to the door of the House of Commons;

The multi-voiced rhetoric gives her refutations a strong theatrical touch. Reproducing the directive “Put them in prison” and emphasising the derogatory comments of the legal representatives (“making a nuisance of themselves”), the speaker intends to involve her audience and to make them more sensitive to the suffragist cause that she defends. The polyphonic refutation in example (5), which continues in the same vein, is based on a definition by negation accompanied by correction:

(5)

*The whole argument with the anti-suffragists, or even the critical suffragist man, is this: that you can govern human beings without their consent.* They have said to us, “*Government rests upon force; the women haven’t force, so they must submit.*” Well, we are showing them that *government does not rest upon force at all; it rests upon consent.*

First, she denies the anti-suffragists’ claim that “government rests upon force” and second, she makes a corrective statement: “it rests upon consent”. In other words, her refutation consists in opposing the force of the argument to the argument of force used by anti-suffragists. A significant feature of the dialogic refutations above is the fact that the respective voices cannot be attributable to identifiable physical persons, but are generalisable and therefore more likely to have a stronger impact on the audience.

At the end of her speech, after having argued the legitimacy of the suffragist movement, Pankhurst adopts a different strategy: she starts to address specifically targeted members of her audience. This is illustrated in example (6), where she uses the rhetorical figure *apostrophe*, by means of which a speaker interrupts his/her speech and addresses directly a person or a group of persons.

(6)

*Now I want to say to you who think women cannot succeed, we have brought the government of England to this position, that it has to face this alternative; either women are to be killed or women are to have the vote. I ask American men in this meeting, what would you say if in your State you were faced with that alternative, that you must either kill them or give them their citizenship [...]? Well, there is only one answer to that alternative; there is only one way out of it, unless you are prepared to put back civilization two or three generations; you must give those women the vote.*

When she targets a particular category of listeners, namely those “who think women cannot succeed”, her intention is to enhance the appeal to pathos by displaying and eliciting intense emotionally loaded arguments. In the following utterance, where Pankhurst uses a rhetorical question, the targeted category of listeners is further narrowed down and includes only American men. Her goal is to shift the burden of proof from the suffragists to the decision-makers who, according to her, have to reach a final decision by choosing between two alternatives - one of which is obviously unacceptable, i.e. “women are to be killed”.

Throughout the speech, Pankhurst resorts to several offensive and defensive moves which are conveyed, on the one hand, by means of speech acts of accusation and on the other, by speech acts of explanation and justification. Her argumentation consists to a large extent of refutations based on definitions which define and re-define her own political role and the nature of her political cause. Starting from the audience’s presumed assumption about her identity as an advocate of women’s suffrage, Pankhurst chooses to re-define her current identity as going beyond and strengthening that of an advocate of the suffragette cause. She exposes her personal clash of identities when she admits that her self-assumed current identity is that of a soldier, whereas the identity inflicted upon her by the British law courts is that of a convict, as illustrated earlier in example (2): “I am here as a soldier who has temporarily left the field of battle in order to explain - it seems strange it should have to be explained - what civil war is like when civil war is waged by women. [...] I am adjudged because of my life to be a dangerous person, under sentence of penal servitude in a convict prison.” In re-evaluating the suffragette movement, Pankhurst re-defines the women’s suffrage movement as more than just a matter of advocacy, but rather a matter of higher dignity, a subject of “revolution and civil war”: “[...] you must give those women

the vote. Now that is the outcome of our civil war.” Her arguments show great determination and will power, as well as a deep commitment to the cause of suffragists.

### 7. *Concluding remarks*

This paper has examined the role played by refutation in the persuasion and dissuasion processes that rely on the use of definitions. In arguing, a speaker often appeals to definitions that reinforce the power of arguments and/or to definitions that help to refute the opponent’s arguments. The process of refutation in public speaking is meant to help the audience discover the factual errors and reasoning inconsistencies in a line of argumentation. By refuting the opponents’ previous or anticipated arguments, a public speaker tends to be primarily oriented towards the degree of coherence and consistency of informative and evaluative statements. The approach taken in this study lies at the interface between pragmatic and rhetorical analysis.

The aim of the present study was to illustrate the argumentative uses of definition in refutations by examining the various uses of definition-based refutations in Emmeline Pankhurst’s speech on women’s right to vote entitled *Militant suffragists*. This is a particularly significant speech, since apart from highlighting a very controversial issue of woman suffrage in England and other countries at that time, it was delivered not in her home country, but in the United States, which involved extra rhetorical processing and a special selection and presentation of the right arguments for the new audience. It shows that several factors are involved when successfully refuting an argument: relevant general background knowledge, critical thinking skills, intellectual abilities, personal commitment.

Three main aspects are significant when examining the use of definitions. In the first place, the act of defining involves processes of identification, categorisation and particularisation of the entity or phenomenon to be defined. In the second place, the act of defining implies the communicative act of making something clear and tangible. In the third place, the act of defining entails determining the outline and boundaries of the entity or phenomenon to be defined.

In Emmeline Pankhurst’s speech, definition-based refutations function as speech acts and are used to signpost the central debate issues and thus to facilitate the audience’s comprehension. Discursively and rhetorically, the definitions are instrumental in the process of social construction of identity and ideological polarisation, with a view to establishing support for the speaker’s arguments and



to call into question the opponents' standpoints. Her refutations are particularly targeted at the opponents' behaviour and communicative patterns, coherence, consistency and supporting evidence.

The most salient cases of refutations that occur in Emmeline Pankhurst's speech appeal to the listeners' shared community doxa are based on three types of definitions: definition by negation (whereby the speaker proceeds to direct attack of the opponent's statements and denies the validity or truth of their claim), definition by explanation (whereby the speaker puts forward counter-statements or counter-claims and provides reasons and/or examples to support them) and definition by analogy (whereby the speaker highlights and contrasts the opponent's arguments by correlating them with similar or comparable facts or phenomena). The examples taken from Emmeline Pankhurst's speech show that these definitions co-occur and complement each other to a great extent, as they are woven into the overall structure of the speech, producing varying shades of emphasis and focus.

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