

ISSA Proceedings 2006 - The Strategic Use Of Antithesis In The Argumentation Stage Of A Critical Discussion

✘ 1. Introduction

In this paper I am concerned with investigating the role that antithesis plays when arguers try to reconcile their dialectical aims with their rhetorical aims in the argumentation stage of a discussion. My intention is to show that different kinds of the usage of antithesis may help an arguer to present his arguments in such a way that they seem as strong as possible to the audience or they are difficult to attack.

Antithesis can be defined, starting from Aristotle's comments and examples, as "a verbal structure that places contrasted or opposed terms in parallel or balanced cola or phrases" (Fahnestock 1999, p. 46). Although it received some attention in classical rhetoric, other figures such as metaphor have been more largely described and the functions that they play have been more closely examined. However, when looking into the description of this figure, one can easily notice that antithesis is not merely an ornament added to plain speech, but it can have different functions, such as giving emphasis to specific aspects. This effect occurs due to its placement most often in parallel balanced structures that attracts the attention of the readers more easily than if placed in sentences with different patterns. Therefore, I consider that the various kinds of effects of antithesis are worth investigating in argumentative discourse.

Before providing a detailed account of the possible effects of various forms of antithesis, I take a brief look at the history of this figure. An account of how this figure of speech is described by different authors can point to possible effects the figure of antithesis can have.

To start with, Aristotle pays special attention to antithesis in Book III of his *Rhetoric* where he shows that, along with metaphor and *energeia*, it stands as one of the devices employed to form a polished prose style. The reason for him to affirm this is determined by the fact that he believes that antithesis satisfies the syntactic criteria of being placed in a symmetrical parallel phrasing capable of

drawing the attention of the audience through this strategic positioning. As an example he gives the following: "It happens often in these circumstances that the wise fail and the foolish succeed" (Kennedy: 1991, p. 239). As Fahnestock (1999, p. 47) rightly notices, "antithesis as a figure of speech at the sentence level builds on these powerful natural pairs, the use of one in the first half of the figure creating the expectation of its verbal partner in the second half". Should this expectation be defeated, the consequence would be a loss of its force, otherwise supported by the syntactic pattern.

According to Aristotle, the contrasted wording in antithesis can use four modes of opposition: contraries such as *good* and *bad*, contradictions, such as *certain* and *uncertain*, correlatives, such as *cause* and *effect* and privation/possession pairs, such as *blindness* and *sight*. As concerns the last category mentioned, Fahnestock (1999, p. 49) argues, and I agree, that "it collapses readily into the other categories". According to her, a pair such as *blindness* and *sight* can be treated either as a contradiction in the sense of *to see* and *not to see* or as a pair of contraries in the sense of *blind* and *sighted*. Whether the terms opposed in an antithesis are contraries, contradictories or correlatives, Aristotle believes that the figure requires in all cases a parallel phrasing. The main function of this kind of construction is that it is capable of attracting the attention of the audience by bringing into the foreground the opposed terms. A reinforcement of this emphasis is achieved when all words, except for the contrasted terms, are repeated or when similar grammatical forms are employed. In both cases, the opposed terms occur in similar positions, which highlights their difference. To such cases, Fahnestock (1999) adds the possibility to place one of the pairs at the end of the balanced cola. In an example such as "You have everything to win/and nothing to lose", Fahnestock (1999, p. 50) is right to claim that the end focus gives more prominence to the contrasted terms.

Fahnestock (1999, p. 50) proposes one explanation why the parallel phrasing would be the ideal form for an antithesis. This explanation is connected with the ability one has to perceive a contrast, which is enhanced when a uniform background is provided. One perceives more easily red and green dots against a white background. Similarly, according to Fahnestock, "different grammatical structures in the two halves of an antithesis would diminish the intended contrast between the paired opposites". Given that the device was first identified in Greek oral practice, audible parallelism was important at that time to create an

emphasised sound pattern.

The author of *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* places also antithesis among important figures, but as a new aspect, he marks a distinction between antithetical thought and antithetical phrasing, a combination of which would create a perfect figure. In addition, it is possible that one functions without the other. Given that in the examples the author provides antithesis has not survived translation, I limit myself to adding that the parallel construction is no longer the only one possible for the figure, the presence of contrasted wording being considered sufficient. An instance such as “Let the rich and prosperous give to the poor and needy” counts in this case as an antithesis.

Later, the author of *Rhetorica ad Herennium* simply treats antithesis among many other figures without particular emphasis on this device. Its defining features appear when treating different forms of antithesis, such as *contentio*, when the style is built upon contraries (Cicero IV, XV, 21) in order to impress and give distinction to the discourse, as in the following example provided: “To enemies you show yourself conciliatory, to friends inexorable”. Another form discussed by the author of this treatise is *contrarium*, “the figure which, of two opposite statements, uses one so as neatly and directly to prove the other” (Cicero IV, XVIII, 25) as in the following instance: “Now how should you expect one who has ever been hostile to his own interests to be friendly to another’s?”.

In his *Institutio Oratoria*, Quintilian (IX, III, 81-83) offers a thorough account of antithesis, to which he refers as *contrapositum* and lists all possible forms of verbal antitheses: single words with single words, cola with cola and sentences with sentences. Moreover, Quintilian (IX, III, 81-83) adds, “nor is the contrasted case always placed immediately after that to which it is opposed, but (...) we (...) may have correspondence between subsequent particulars and others previously mentioned”. A parallel construction is no longer imposed, although the examples provided have this feature.

In recent publications, Fahnestock (1999, 2003, 2004, 2005) pointed out the heuristic and persuasive use of antithesis by showing how scientists can argue when making use of antithesis. In the first case the author mentions, arguers draw on already accepted pairs of opposed terms, the frame of the figure being used to invent or construct arguments. Since the terms are already accepted, the form becomes what Fahnestock (1999, p. 59) calls “an inventional prompt”, the first colon determining the choice of terms and the form of the second. The effect

it has on the audience depends on its prior recognition and it can be so strong that even the use of a partial antithesis secures a good effect. As an example Fahnestock takes the case of a sentence such as “I am tired of words” that inevitably calls for “deeds”.

In the second case that Fahnestock indicates, arguers construct an argument to set terms apart, to create new contraries out of terms that have not been previously opposed for the audience. Terms are forced into opposition and placed into strategic positions, as in the following example from the work of a physiologist: “(...) the roots of the nerves that arise from the spinal cord have different functions, that the posterior appear more especially intended for *sensations*, whereas the anterior seem to be more particularly linked with *movement*. (my italics). “Sensation” and “movement” do not represent an established opposition, but they become opposed by their placement in this figure, linked with the established antonyms “posterior” and “anterior”.

In the third case the author indicates, the nature of an existing opposition is reconfigured. An antithesis of a different kind is created in such a case, as when intermediates are formed from previously opposed terms. A case in point can be “indifference” as an intermediate between “love” and “hate”. As Fahnestock (1999, p. 72) explains in this case, arguers “have the more modest goal of reconfiguring the kind of opposition represented by a pair of terms”. The midpoint of the terms obtained is not an average of properties, but “a sharp boundary producing a dichotomy” (Fahnestock 1999, p. 73). The reader is encouraged to accept the opposition by arguments offered in favour of each of the contrasted terms.

This short description of the figure of antithesis indicates that this device is not merely aesthetic, but it can have certain functions. The placement of opposed terms in parallel balanced grammatical constructions may convey certain effects, such as giving presence to certain aspects, placing others into the background or encouraging the audience to accept certain oppositions.

My aim is to make clear different kinds of effects that may be achieved when arguers employ antithesis. In order to achieve my goal, I examine the role of this figure in the context of what van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2000, 2002) have called *strategic manoeuvring*, that is the arguers’ attempts to reconcile their rhetorical and dialectical aims, making a strong case, but avoiding to put forward

moves that are not reasonable. My focus in this paper is on the argumentation stage in order to investigate to what extent antithesis helps arguers to put forward strong arguments, more difficult to attack.

I present first an overview of possible effects that different forms of antithesis can have as shown by classical and modern authors concerned with the study of this figure. These effects are an addition to the effects presented already above. Starting from these general effects, I try to indicate in the final section of the paper how arguers can manoeuvre strategically in the argumentation stage.

2. Effects of antithesis

According to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969, p. 172), figures can have effects such as imposing or suggesting a choice, bringing about communion with the audience or increasing the impression of presence. Antithesis can have the last two of these effects. Just like any other figure, antithesis is employed to have some striking effects on the audience, a fact underlined also later by Fahnestock (1999) and Tindale (2004). Fahnestock focuses in her treatment on how a pattern consisting of opposing terms is experienced encouraging the audience to follow it, “fulfil its predictions and even feel its force” (1999: 69). An even greater effect is achieved as in the case exemplified above where an argument is constructed to set terms apart that were not viewed as such before. The impression of presence is created when the antithetical pattern occurs in symmetry through parallelism, an efficient choice to reinforce the arguments. Apart from these two general effects, antithesis can have other possible effects determined by the various forms under which it can occur.

Quintilian (IX, III, 35) indicates that an antithesis of the *regressio* type intensifies the contrasting effect through repetition whose role is to strengthen the opposition and draw attention to the elements contrasted. One of the examples he gives is the following: “The reputation of the leaders was approximately equal, but that of their followers was not so equal”.

In the case of an antithesis of the *comparatio* type, two elements are paralleled in order to focus on one of them, accentuating the distinction that exists already. One of the elements is singled out to give it a presence in the discourse. In *Rhetorica ad Herenium* (IV, XL, 59) the following example is provided to illustrate the effect of this type of antithesis: “Unlike what happens in the palaestra, where he who receives the torch is swifter in the relay race than he who hands it on, the new general who receives command of an army is not superior to the general who

retires from its command. For in the one case it is an exhausted runner who hands the torch to a fresh athlete, whereas in this it is an experienced commander who hands over the army to an inexperienced”.

A contrast can be established between the ordinary meaning and the emphatic meaning through an antithesis of the *distinctio* type, as in: “That is not economy on your part, but greed, because economy is careful conservation of one’s goods and greed is wrongful covetousness of one’s goods” (*Rhetorica ad Herennium* IV, XXVI, 36). The strength in this case comes from accentuation, brevity and clarity by pointing out certain aspects that explain the difference between two qualities or entities. A distinction is then made between two notions, one positive and the other negative, explaining why a positive term should be replaced by a negative term. In this example, the term *economy* is weakened by the employment of a negation and receives a mitigated reading, that of *greed*. The negation repairs the description by providing a milder reading of it. A contrast of this kind calls for the acceptance by the reader of the second term given that the first term is negated and reasons to adopt the second term are offered through the explanation of both terms.

Terms may also be placed in opposition against the expectations of the audience. Sloane (2001) describes New York in the following terms: “It has the poorest millionaires, the littlest great men, the haughtiest beggars, the plainest beauties, the lowest skyscrapers, the dullest pleasures of any town I ever saw”. In the case of the antithesis of the *oxymoron* type as in this example, a new strange unity of things is created that emphasizes the fact that something is unexpected and unusual.

3. *The strategic use of antithesis in the argumentation stage*

According to van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2002), parties engaged in argumentative discourse make use of what has been termed *strategic manoeuvring* in order to reconcile their dialectical aims with their rhetorical aims. To explain, the parties remain committed to complying with the critical norms, but they try to achieve at the same time a persuasive result in order to win the discussion. Pursuing a different goal besides that of resolving a difference of opinion does not prevent people from achieving the latter aim.

In the argumentation stage, which is the focus of the present paper, protagonists put forward arguments for their standpoints that are intended to overcome the

doubts of the antagonists or to refute the critical reactions of the antagonists (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, p. 61). The antagonists judge whether the argumentation that is advanced is acceptable. If it is not fully convincing, they provide further reactions, followed by further argumentation from the protagonist, so that the structure of the argumentation that is advanced can vary from very simple to very complex.

The dialectical objective at this stage is to test the tenability of the standpoints that shaped the difference of opinion in the confrontation stage. Rhetorically, the parties aim at making the strongest possible case and launching the most effective attack. They choose a strategic line of defence that best suits the speaker. All moves made are adapted to the preferences of the audience, in other words they respond to audience demands. This kind of adaptation involves creating a sense of communion with the audience, involving moves such as reference to principles that the audience agrees with. To achieve these aims, presentational devices are strategically employed in order to convey the various moves in the discourse in an effective way. Unclear formulations that might weaken one's case are avoided, arguments are put forward in a fashion that appeals to the audience and arguments are so formulated as to bring about less criticism.

In practice, all these aspects work together in order to influence the result of the argumentation stage. According to van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2002, p. 141), "argumentative strategies (...) are methodical designs of moves for influencing the result of a particular discussion stage, or the discussion as a whole, to one's own advantage, which manifest themselves in a systematic, coordinated and simultaneous exploitation of the opportunities afforded at that stage".

I analyze in what follows some examples in order to show how different forms of antithesis presented above can help the arguer to give forcefulness to his arguments and to make them appealing to the audience so that they are hard to attack. Consequently, the possibility of manoeuvring strategically by employing different forms of antithesis will be analyzed in the context of the argumentation stage.

The following example stands as an instance of the strategic employment of antithesis where the arguer attempts to make the audience accept that the products his company produces are of a high quality. In order to support the standpoint that he believes his products to be very good, the arguer reinforces a

connection between two contrasted aspects, high quality and low costs:

(1) At Haiwei we actually work hand in hand with our customers to develop *high* quality technology solutions, swiftly and at *low* costs to satisfy real customer needs.

Possible criticism that a high quality product might involve high costs is anticipated and responded to by the arguer who highlights, through the use of an antithesis that indicates that the good quality is accompanied by a low price, only the advantages of the product. Although linguistically a pair of opposites varying along the scalar dimension of vertical extension in a metaphorical sense, the oppositeness of meaning suggests in this example the necessity of unity between the two features of the pair *high-low* and it is this bringing together that gives a strong argument for the audience to be persuaded.

In the next example, too, there is a case of lexical contrast between single words, but the oppositeness of meaning in this case helps to fulfil a different rhetorical goal:

(2) He seems to be an honorable person, hardworking and probably intelligent enough. (...) But he is suffering from complete isolation. It is the isolation of an Arab in Amman, educated at the local university but cut off from significant contact with the outside world (...). He cannot go to the United States. He cannot go to Iraq. He has been denied access to the defendants in prison. He has been denied access to the documentary evidence that is slowly being entered into a database in Baghdad. He has seen no deposits and he does not know if they have been taken. He has not been informed of the charges. (...). There have been no phone calls from the officials at the tribunal. (...). Abandoned, therefore, he wanders through the wilds of the Internet, reassured by the appearance of a global *connection*, but essentially alone and exposed to the Internet's depredations. (*The Atlantic*, June 2005, p. 72).

The arguer tries to support the standpoint that the leader of the committee of the legal defenders of Saddam Hussein is someone who has the qualities necessary to do a proper job for the defence of his client. Despite this, he has an ironic fate described in this example through the employment of antitheses. The forcefulness of the argument is enhanced through grammatical symmetry in the form of parallelism, the use of synonymous words - *isolated and abandoned* - that contrast with a seeming *connection* to the world through Internet - connection - and the use of negatives whose function is to deny that a certain state of affairs

exists, namely communication with others. The negation acts as an intensifier, highlighting the information within its scope. The multiple emphatic use of negation helps to amplify that the person described is in complete forced isolation despite his apparent relation with the world and it pronounces so much this state that criticisms can no longer be raised. The negatives take away any appearance of link with others and place the focus on the first feature in the pair of opposites.

A few lines further in the same text, an antithesis of the *regressio* type functions as a strong argument for the same standpoint as in the previous example, this time through repetition:

(3) He is not exactly a *clown*, but he brings a carnival atmosphere to this whole affair.

The contrast results from partial repetition of words with similar connotation - *clown and carnival* - that epitomizes a causal argument. One argues from a causal agent - a clown - to an effect - *a carnival atmosphere* - preserving the core of meaning and changing the form. The negation of what is said about the agent - *he is not a clown* - and the affirmation of the effect - *he brings a carnival atmosphere* - calls for acceptance from the audience. The denial implied in the negation curtails the interpretation of the negated constituent, but does not discard it completely. By keeping part of the meaning in the second part, the contrast is maintained and the strength of the argument comes precisely from keeping the opposition and emphasizing the effect.

An example of the use of antithesis that forces terms apart can be found in the following passage from an interview in which the interviewee talks about his plans on how to deal with the problem of corruption. The arguer puts forward arguments in support of the standpoint that he is doing his job in order to keep corruption under control:

(4) I am not very interested (...) in the *small fish*. The small fish has to be captured by any prosecutor, by any policeman, by any person who has a job to act against corruption. But my objective as president is to remove the *big sharks* from the political waters. (*Euronews*, 2005)

There are several pairs of oppositions that emerge from this paragraph. Although the emphasis is expressed metaphorically between those that are involved in corruption to a certain degree - *the small fish and the big sharks* - another opposition comes out, that between the person speaking, the president of a

country and the others, referred to as “any policeman, any prosecutor”. This strongly context-dependent instance of adversativity is made possible not only on the basis of pragmatic knowledge, but also due to the occurrence of the systemic pair of opposites *small-big* that can be handled along strictly semantic lines and that transmits its meaning to the other terms. The creation of the opposition in this way is strategic since it underlines that the arguer is attempting to prevent any criticism that he is not doing enough. The attention is shifted from the ordinary case to the big problems and especially to the big role the interviewee can play in solving them. The first element is depicted as a less important aspect of the matter and the second is accentuated, pronouncing at the same time the role of the arguer. The rhetorical effect obtained consists in the speaker defending himself against possible accusations of non-involvement with the problem of corruption.

Another effective way of offering strong arguments that have an impact on the audience is the employment of an antithesis of the *oxymoron* type. In the following newspaper excerpt, the journalist gives his reasons to support the position that the choice of the cardinals for the new Pope is a good one:

(5) (...) Brilliant theologian. Good listener. Very conservative. (...) The Church is emphatically not a corporation, and it has nothing resembling a next-quarter mentality. It is *ancient*, and its leaders think in time slots that no *modern* company could consider. After all, the Church’s mission relates to *eternity*, not *annual* result. (...) The Vatican can also make the argument that churches that stand for something are the ones that are growing. Fundamentalist Islam is strongly on the rise globally. In the US, the most conservative churches are growing – including Mormons and evangelicals. In contrast, the churches that have made too many accommodations to secular culture are crumbling. And the Catholic Church has strongly conservative constituencies around the world are expanding.

The employment of an antithesis of the *oxymoron* type suggests an incompatibility between the new Pope’s ideas and the nature of the church nowadays, but the suggestion goes into the direction of uniting the two possibly incompatible features, which creates in this context strong support in favour of the standpoint that the newly elected person is a suitable person to act as Pope. Attention of the audience is attracted via the incompatibility, but this implies in reality a non-contradiction in the direction that the new Pope is a suitable person for the job.

Even if a simple antithesis would have highlighted the contrast, an antithesis of the oxymoron type is a more forceful manner to achieve one's objective. A seemingly irreconcilable case is resolved when the two surprising elements are brought together into a unity. Rhetorically, the attention is shifted away from the obvious contrast to the possible unification of opposites.

In the example below, the negation mitigates the interpretation of the negated component, repairing the description into a less negative term. The arguer employs an antithesis of the *distinctio* type to defend the standpoint that in an Europe that includes more states money is an important matter for the enlargement:

(6) The Commission President said some time ago you can't have more Europe with less money. We are in fact facing the challenge of producing more Europe in the enlarged union, and money, I would say, unfortunately matters. We are talking, that's important to remember, about money which is being used through structural funds to invest. It's not *charity*, it's not *handouts*, it is just *investments*. (Euronews, 2005).

In order to show that he does not subscribe to the position that the money provided to the new countries of the enlarged Europe is a form of charity, but to support the idea that the money given should be seen as an investment, the arguer denies a term through a distinction involving a redefinition of the same term. The negative connotation of the first term is denied in order to enhance its meaning through a reformulation in positive terms, which explains the possibility it creates of raising less criticism. The redefined term - *investment* - is placed in opposition to the negated terms - *charity* and *handouts* - and it acquires emphasis precisely by this placement.

4. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have tried to show that antithesis as a figure of speech may play a role in the way in which arguers' manoeuvre strategically in the argumentation stage of a discussion. As I tried to show, when arguers make use of antithesis, they can give presence to their arguments, make them seem stronger in the eyes of the audience and less open for criticism.

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