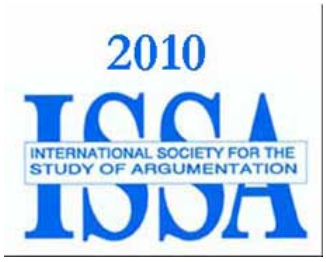
# ISSA Proceedings 2010 – Analyzing Repetition In Argumentation




*1. Introduction*

I submit that repetition is a strategy that skilled arguers may use to openly incur responsibility for the veracity of their claims and propriety of their argumentative conduct; and that a normative pragmatic perspective accounts for how it does so. To support this claim, I explain how a normative pragmatic perspective approaches analysis of repetition in argumentation, and illustrate claims about what aims repetition in argumentation may be designed to achieve and why it may be reasonably expected to achieve them using Abraham Lincoln's 1860 *"Cooper Union"* speech as a case study. By doing so I add to scholarship discussing repetition in argumentation that makes claims about what repetition is designed to do but does not provide a rationale for why arguers may reasonably expect it to work for a situated audience.

*2. Repetition from a normative pragmatic perspective*

Normative pragmatic theories of argumentation aim to account for strategies arguers actually use – to explain why strategies may be expected to do what they are apparently designed to do (e.g., Goodwin 2001, Innocenti 2006, Jacobs 2000, Kauffeld 1998). Normative pragmatic theories approach repetition differently from other theoretical perspectives in three main ways.

First, from a normative pragmatic perspective, repetition does not fall outside the scope of analysis but is considered to be a design feature that argumentation theory ought to be able to account for. This is in contrast to an analytical method that involves standardizing an argument in premise-conclusion form and therefore deleting repetition (e.g., Govier 2005, pp. 31, 34; Johnson and Blair 2006, p. 264) in order to evaluate the acceptability, relevance, and sufficiency of the premises. This is also in contrast to an analytical method that involves reconstructing argumentation as a critical discussion in order to measure it against that normative ideal. That analytical method calls for deleting material that is redundant (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, p. 108), although it may not always be clear when repetition of, say, a standpoint in different ways becomes a different standpoint (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992, p. 24).

Second, from a normative pragmatic perspective, the purposes of repetition are not predetermined by critics and inherent in its analytical methods. Identification of purposes is based on what speakers say and do and on the situation. This is in contrast to informal logic which, broadly speaking, focuses on justified belief; and on pragma-dialectics which focuses on resolving differences of opinion and arguers getting their own way (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2000).

Third, normative pragmatic theories provide accounts of repetition that incorporate the full dynamic of the communication transaction: speech, speaker, audience. A brief survey of some of the scholarship on repetition indicates that other accounts cover only part of the transaction. For example, a claim that repetition expresses emotion (Fogle 1986) may begin to explain the speaker-speech side of the transaction but does not incorporate the audience. Likewise, claims that repetition may unify ideas, divide a narrative into segments, or emphasize (Fogle 1986), or that some figures relating to repetition may associate (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, p. 504) while others "really aim at suggesting distinctions" (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, p. 175; see also p. 478) may describe the speech itself but not how it is designed by a speaker to work for a situated audience. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca orient their account of repetition toward how a text may affect an audience when they include repetition among "figures relating to presence" which "make the object of discourse present to the mind" (1969, p. 174; see also p. 144) but do not incorporate the speaker. A normative pragmatic perspective, in contrast, aims to account for strategies by explaining how speakers use them to openly undertake commitments for themselves and to generate obligations for auditors; put differently, speakers design strategies that involve manifestly undertaking risks for themselves and creating risks for auditors.

*3. Case study*

One exemplar of civic argumentation, Abraham Lincoln's 1860 "Cooper Union Address," features repetition. There are many kinds of repetition – repetition of parts of words, of entire words, of phrases, sentences, ideas (Quinn 1993, pp. 73-95). For now I focus on Lincoln's repetition of the standpoint that in the understanding of the founding fathers, there is nothing that properly forbids the federal government from controlling slavery in federal territories. Why does Lincoln, an astute reasoner and consummate stylist, choose to repeat this conclusion more than a dozen times? What is it designed to do, and why may he

reasonably expect it to do just that?

To answer this question, first consider the context in order to understand Lincoln's purposes. The speech is part of a campaign to secure the Republican nomination for President of the United States. It was reprinted in newspapers and as a political pamphlet. Lincoln wanted to feature his attractiveness as a candidate to run against the Democrat Stephen Douglas (Leff and Mohrmann 1974, p. 347). In particular, he aimed to be a voice of moderation amidst partisan rancor and the voice of Republican party principles (Leff and Mohrmann 1974, p. 347-48; White 2009, p. 314). One obstacle he faced was that he was a relative unknown to New Yorkers and, as one planner of the Cooper Union speaking event put it, "[t]he first impression of the man from the West did nothing to contradict the expectation of something weird, rough, and uncultivated" (White 2009, p. 311). In short, Lincoln wants to induce serious attention to his potential as a Republican presidential candidate.

The speech may be divided into three sections: a discussion of Douglas' claim to be on the side of the framers of the United States Constitution regarding whether the federal government can control slavery in federal territories, an address to the South, and an address to members of the Republican party. For now I focus on the first section and its refutation of Douglas' claim to be on the side of the framers. Focusing on Lincoln's repetition of the point that in the understanding of the founding fathers, there is nothing that properly forbids the federal government from controlling slavery in federal territory is justified by its strategic intensity. A recent analysis of the speech describes that line as a phrase that "will echo like mortar fire, repeatedly and relentlessly, throughout the Cooper Union address" (Holzer 2004, p. 120) and as "[t]he rhetorical spine around which Lincoln will hang his proof – and the oration's rhetorical delight as well" (Holzer 2004, p. 121).

Critics of the speech have proffered claims about what repetition does. Here I focus on those of Holzer, recent author of a book-length study of Lincoln at Cooper Union, and Leff and Mohrmann, rhetorical critics who have given the closest attention to the rhetorical dynamics of the speech. Holzer points to the sheer entertainment value of repetition as well as its properly argumentative functions when he speculates about how "the audience breathlessly awaits the next iteration" and is "eager to hear how Lincoln next pronounces it, and how he uses it to punctuate an argument, puncture a Democratic viewpoint, or implicitly

pillory Douglas" (2004, p. 122). In addition, Holzer points to its capacity to associate when he notes that Lincoln "associates slavery with the founders by repetition of their names and votes on slavery-related issues" (2004, p. 122). He also points to its capacity to dissociate when he notes that "through similar thrusts of repetition, he mocks Stephen A. Douglas's contrary assertion that the Constitution bars congressionally imposed limits on slavery" (2004, p. 122). Holzer summarizes Lincoln's case in the first section of the speech: Lincoln "has shown himself a master of history, a self-confident logician, and a merciless debater, using repetition to crush and ridicule his absent opponents" (2004, p. 131). Likewise, Leff and Mohrmann point to the role of repetition in association when they note that Lincoln associates himself and the founding fathers with Republicans (1974, p. 348; Leff 2001, p. 234). They also note that repetition can be used for emphasizing arguments when they remark that repetitions "accentuate the single line of argument" and that Lincoln "weaves [repetitions] into the fabric of the inductive process. Furthermore, the repetitions concomitantly reinforce and control the emotional association with the fathers and their understanding of the Constitution" (1974, p. 351). Leff notes that at the close of that section Lincoln could assert that the Republicans were on the side of the founding fathers "with considerable logical force" (2001, 237).

A normative pragmatic perspective builds on the insights that repetition may associate and dissociate, emphasize, augment logical force, orchestrate emotion, invite attitudes, and more by explaining why Lincoln's use of repetition pressured addressees to give his candidacy serious consideration. In this case repetition intensifies how Lincoln openly incurs responsibility for the veracity of his claims and propriety of his conduct.

First, consider how Lincoln designs the initial iteration of the point: "In his speech last autumn, at Columbus, Ohio, as reported in 'The New-York Times,' Senator Douglas said: '*Our fathers, when they framed the Government under which we live, understood this question just as well, and even better, than we do now*'" (Holzer 2004, p. 252). He describes this text as "a precise and an agreed starting point for a discussion between Republicans and that wing of the Democracy headed by Senator Douglas" (Holzer 2004, p. 252). After defining key terms including "the frame of government under which we live" and "our fathers that framed the Constitution," Lincoln states "the question which, according to the text, those fathers understood 'just as well, and even better than we do now'":

"Does the proper division of local from federal authority, or anything in the Constitution, forbid *our Federal Government* to control as to slavery in *our Federal Territories*" (Holzer 2004, p. 253). About this question Lincoln asserts: "Upon this, Senator Douglas holds the affirmative, and Republicans the negative. This affirmation and denial form an issue; and this issue – this question – is precisely what the text declares our fathers understood 'better than we'" (Holzer 2004, p. 253).

This initial iteration holds Douglas accountable for the position and manifests the propriety of Lincoln's argumentative conduct. It holds Douglas accountable because the words are Douglas'. At the same time, using Douglas' words brings to bear on the situation and manifests Lincoln's adherence to two norms of argumentation: willingness to find common ground with opponents and openness to discussing issues with them. Lincoln openly incurs responsibility for his argumentative conduct not only by what he does but by saying what he is doing: using Douglas' words as "an agreed starting point for discussion." Thus Lincoln enacts the kind of campaign he would run if nominated. He chooses to engage Douglas rather than, say, opponents for the Republican nomination, and he engages him in a manifestly appropriate way. Other things being equal, addressees who do not tentatively consider a responsibly-made case risk criticism for irresponsible argumentative conduct. In Lincoln's situation the risk is particularly serious given that partisan rancor was splitting the union. Addressees can avoid the risk by giving his potential for candidacy serious consideration.

In the first point of the proof that follows, Lincoln discusses six occasions on which one or more of the original framers of the U.S. Constitution acted on the question. He repeatedly concludes that of the framers who voted on relevant issues, almost all indicated that "in their understanding, no line dividing local from federal authority, nor anything in the Constitution, properly forbade Congress to prohibit slavery in the federal territory" (Holzer 2004, p. 258; see also pp. 254-55, 257, 259. 260). Certainly repetition emphasizes the point, but why emphasize at all and by repeating it? The strategy pressures addressees to seriously consider his candidacy for Republican nominee for President. By repeating the standpoint, Lincoln incurs and intensifies responsibility for the veracity of the claim, because repeating it creates argumentative conditions in which it becomes increasingly difficult for him to deny a commitment to its veracity. Addressees can reason that Lincoln would not open himself to criticism

for poor judgment or inappropriate argumentative conduct unless he had made a responsible effort to ascertain the facts. Thus repetition of the standpoint creates a reason for addressees to take his candidacy seriously. At the same time, repetition creates risks for addressees if they do not take his candidacy seriously. Because the repetition comprises Douglas' words, each iteration manifests Lincoln's adherence to norms of finding common ground and discussing issues with opponents. Again, other things being equal, addressees who do not tentatively consider a responsibly-made position risk criticism for acting irresponsibly.

When Lincoln concludes this subsection, he makes manifest the alignment of norms of argumentation with norms of political action, namely responsibility for the veracity of standpoints and propriety of conduct. He remarks that of the twenty-three framers "who have, upon their official responsibility and their corporal oaths, acted upon the very question which the text affirms they 'understood just as well, and even better than we do now,'" twenty-one of them "so act[ed] upon it as to make them guilty of gross political impropriety and willful perjury, if, in their understanding, any proper division between local and federal authority, or anything in the Constitution they had made themselves, and sworn to support, forbade the Federal Government to control as to slavery in the federal territories" (Holzer 2004, p. 261). Lincoln also asserts that "as actions speak louder than words, so actions, under such responsibility, speak still louder" (Holzer 2004, p. 261). Thus Lincoln holds addressees accountable for norms of veracity and propriety in arguing and political action; other things being equal, failing to recognize them is a fallible sign that they were not attending to Lincoln's speech or that they do not understand appropriate political action. In either case they risk criticism for poor citizenship if they do not recognize that his case and therefore his candidacy deserve serious consideration. Moreover, at this point in the speech Lincoln does not openly and explicitly accuse Douglas of willful perjury or gross political impropriety. Instead he openly and explicitly considers norms of argumentation and political action adhered to by the framers of the U.S. Constitution. In this way Lincoln manifests restrained partisanship instead of partisan rancor, thereby creating an additional reason for addressees to seriously consider his candidacy.

Lincoln's next two points cover the topic of the understanding of those framers who "left no record of their understanding upon the direct question of federal

control of slavery in the federal territories" (Holzer 2004, p. 262) and the understanding of those in the first Congress. Predictably, Lincoln concludes by repeating that "a clear majority of the whole – certainly understood that no proper division of local from federal authority, nor any part of the Constitution, forbade the Federal Government to control slavery in the federal territories; while all the rest probably had the same understanding. Such, unquestionably, was the understanding of our fathers who framed the original Constitution; and the text affirms that they understood the question 'better than we'" (Holzer 2004, p. 263). It is recorded that this line was followed by laughter and cheers from the audience (Holzer 2004, pp. 263, 250-51).

Certainly this iteration contributes to what Leff describes as logical force and the entertainment value of the speech. It also creates reasons for addressees to give his position and therefore his candidacy serious consideration. First, continuing to repeat Douglas's words continues to manifest his adherence to the norms of finding common ground with opponents and openness to discussing differences of opinion. Further, by repeating his standpoint Lincoln intensifies his commitment to it and thus creates conditions for addressees to reason that he would not continue to risk criticism for getting the facts wrong unless he were confident about the veracity of the standpoint.

Second, repeatedly examining Douglas' words with respect to a variety of evidence, and concluding that the evidence supports Lincoln's standpoint rather than Douglas', makes manifest the quality of Lincoln's reasoning skills and discredits both Douglas' argument and method of arguing. This strategy pressures addressees to seriously consider Lincoln for the Republican nomination for U.S. President, because not doing so would be a fallible sign that they do not recognize appropriate argumentation. Consequently, the strategy puts them at risk of criticism for poor citizenship. They can avoid the risk by giving Lincoln's candidacy serious consideration. Moreover, the strategy increases the risk Lincoln undertakes because it becomes increasingly apparent that Lincoln is impugning Douglas' conduct. Addressees may reason that Lincoln would not risk Douglas' wrath for impugning his character and conduct unless he were confident in the veracity of his claim and the propriety of his conduct.

The final point Lincoln makes in this section of the speech is that opponents are on shaky ground when, based on amendments to the U.S. Constitution, they argue that federal control of slavery in federal territories is unconstitutional. Lincoln

notes that the amendments were framed by the first Congress that sat under the Constitution, and that this Congress passed the act that enforced the prohibition of slavery in the Northwest Territory (Holzer 2004, p. 264). Lincoln concludes the point with another iteration:

I defy any man to show that any one of them ever, in his whole life, declared that, in his understanding, any proper division of local from federal authority, or any part of the Constitution, forbade the Federal Government to control as to slavery in the federal territories. I go a step further. I defy any one to show that any living man in the whole world ever did, prior to the beginning of the present century, (and I might almost say prior to the beginning of the last half of the present century,) declare that, in his understanding, any proper division of local from federal authority, or any part of the Constitution, forbade the Federal Government to control as to slavery in the federal territories. To those who now so declare, I give, not only 'our fathers who framed the Government under which we live,' but with them all other living men within the century in which it was framed, among whom to search, and they shall not be able to find the evidence of a single man agreeing with them. (Holzer 2004, pp. 265-66)

Using repetition, Lincoln continues to incur responsibility for the veracity of his claims and the propriety of his conduct. In this iteration Lincoln increases the emotional intensity and the intensity with which he impugns Douglas' conduct. But because he does not attack Douglas by name, he continues to enact restrained partisanship, thus manifesting his merits as a political candidate.

This strategy is more apparent in the paragraph that concludes this section of the speech. In that paragraph he twice repeats the lines about the proper division of federal and local authority or anything in the Constitution forbidding the federal government from controlling slavery in federal territories and does so in the course of impugning opponents' conduct. He states that if anybody "sincerely believes" that the federal government may not prohibit slavery in federal territories, "he is right to say so, and to enforce his position by all truthful evidence and fair argument which he can. But he has not right to mislead others, who have less access to history, and less leisure to study it, into the false belief," thereby "substituting falsehood and deception for truthful evidence and fair argument" (Holzer 2004, p. 266). He repeats that if anyone believes this "he is right to say so. But he should, at the same time, brave the responsibility of declaring that, in his opinion, he understands their principles better than they did

themselves; and especially should not shirk that responsibility by asserting that they 'understood the question just as well, and even better, than we do now'" (Holzer 2004, p. 266). Again, then, Lincoln uses repetition to openly incur responsibility for the veracity of his claims and the propriety of his conduct, and thereby to pressure addressees – even those who view him as "weird, rough, and uncultivated" – to give his potential candidacy serious attention or risk criticism for poor citizenship. Moreover, by openly impugning Douglas' conduct, he creates conditions for addressees to reason that he would not risk Douglas' wrath unless he had made a responsible effort to assess Douglas' claims and conduct.

*4. Conclusions*

In short, in the *"Cooper Union"* speech Lincoln uses repetition to openly incur responsibility for the veracity of his claims and the propriety of his conduct, and to put addressees at risk of criticism for not seriously attending to his candidacy for the Republican nomination for the office of U.S. President. A normative pragmatic perspective explains how repetition may be designed to work in argumentation by considering both sides of the rhetorical transaction – speaker and audience – and helps to explain why repetition pressures even reluctant addressees to manifest serious consideration of Lincoln's merits as candidate for the Republican nomination for U.S. President.

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