

# ISSA Proceedings 2010 - The Argumentum Ad Hominem In A Romanian Parliamentary Debate



## 1. Preliminary remarks

This paper [i] is an attempt to apply the extended pragma-dialectical theory of strategic maneuvering in argumentative discourse (van Eemeren 2010) to the particular case of the *argumentum ad hominem*, using the data provided by a debate in the Romanian Parliament (April 19, 2007). The debate had on its agenda the proposal of President Trajan Băsescu's suspension from office, a proposal initiated by the Social Democratic Party, the main opposition party at that time.

Taking as a starting point the idea of the context-dependency of different communicative practices (van Eemeren 2010, p. 129), we shall focus on those aspects of the debate under consideration which have an impact on the evolution of the argumentative processes. The next step will be the reconstruction of the debate as a critical discussion, keeping in mind the relationship between the four stages of a critical discussion as an ideal model: the confrontation stage, the opening stage, the argumentation stage and the concluding stage, and their empirical counterparts: the initial situation, the starting points, the argumentative means and the outcome of the argumentative discourse (van Van Eemeren 2010, p. 146).

In defining the fallacies in general, we shall make reference to the basic concept of strategic maneuvering; the violation of one (or more) critical discussion rule will be the criterion used to distinguish the main types of fallacious moves. The analytical part proper will discuss and comment the way the three basic variants of the *ad hominem* arguments are actualized in the considered debate.

## 2. Argumentative processes in the considered parliamentary debate

The considered debate is a concrete speech event representing the communicative activity type of the parliamentary debate, which belongs to the domain of political communication. Its specific goal is to scrutinize the President's

performance (consisting of his policies and actions) and accordingly to evaluate it as being up to constitutional standards or not. Given the quite uncommon topic of this debate, beside the general conventions for conducting a certain form of parliamentary activity, a number of distinctive conventions can also be noticed. They design a special format of this debate.

Debating the proposal of suspending the President from office was the unique point on the agenda of a joint session of the two Chambers of the Romanian Parliament. Even if parliament is typically a confrontational setting, the case under consideration illustrates a particularly hostile form of parliamentary argument, engaging two polar groups: the President's supporters (his former party fellows[**ii**]) and his opponents (the members of all the other parliamentary parties). The representatives of these two groups were given approximately the same amount of time for their interventions, the Chairman of the session keeping a strict record of the timing.

Participants' positions are completely predictable, as predetermined by their party membership. The speeches were written (or at least sketched) in advance (usually, by specialized teams). Consequently, they appear as basically monological in nature, even if they could make reference to certain definite adversaries or anticipate their position.

The attempt to reconstruct this debate as a critical discussion brings forward some particular aspects determined by the above described specific features of the context where argumentation takes place. The standpoint at issue could be phrased as "the President should be suspended from office because he infringed the Constitution". The confrontation stage is mostly implicit, as involved in the definition of the activity type represented by the considered speech event. The difference of opinion is already included on the agenda of the parliamentary session.

Practically, the discussion starts with the expression of the commitments of the two parties, that serve continuously as a frame of reference for the arguers in the rest of the discussion. This can be seen as the opening stage.

The participants' roles are preassigned by the procedural institutional rules. The protagonist's role is played by the President's opponents (as authors of the suspension proposal), starting with the leader of the Social Democratic Party. The President's supporters play the antagonist's role; they attack the protagonist's

standpoint concerning the President's status and performance, and express a negative standpoint with regard to his suspension from office.

In the argumentation stage, the members of each group successively present their pros and contras. One can notice a certain uniformity of the arguments advanced by the representatives of the same group. Most of the arguments are connected with the fact that the President explicitly defined himself as a "president-player". The protagonists consider this definition as contravening with the constitutional requirements. In the antagonists' opinion, the President's involvement in solving a large diversity of problems is a positive feature of his performance. Mutual concessions lack completely.

Accordingly, the concluding stage does not bring a change in the initial position of the two groups. The dispute is not resolved by the parties involved, but settled by the final vote of the MPs, whose decision is mandatory for everybody.

The genre of communicative activity implemented by the considered speech event is mainly the deliberation. Still, there are some special aspects that should be mentioned. As usual in a public debate, it is not each other that parties try to convince, but the audience that determines the final outcome. This feature brings the case dealt with close to the adjudication genre (see also Iețcu-Fairclough 2009, p.136). Moreover in this case, when the speakers' main target was not represented by the insiders (the MPs who did not take the floor), as their voting decision was predictable, depending on their party affiliation. Given the institutional regulations, if the final vote is in favor of the President's suspension - as it happened - after 30 days a national referendum should decide on whether he should come back into office or not. The speakers had in view a multilayered audience of outsiders whose future voting decision should be influenced.

### *3. Strategic maneuvering and fallacies*

As van Eemeren and P. Houtlosser (2002, p.132, footnote 4) have put it, reasonable argumentation can occur in all spheres of life, including those where value judgments may play a major part, such as political discourse. This type of discourse has an important persuasive component, and a good rhetorical move becomes effective if justified by the political/ institutional goals (Iețcu-Fairclough 2009, p. 133).

The concept of strategic maneuvering (see van Eemeren & Houtlosser 2002, and especially van Eemeren 2010) proves to be a very useful analytical instrument. It

defines a discourse management form aiming at diminishing the potential tension between the dialectical and the rhetorical goals, simultaneously pursued by the speakers within a critical discussion.

Strategic maneuvering is affected by institutional primary and secondary preconditions, that may impose some constraints on the topical choices of the parties, on the adaptation to audience demand, as well as on the use of presentational devices (van Eemeren 2010, p. 152). Each form of strategic maneuvering has its own continuum of sound and fallacious acting (van Eemeren & Houtlosser 2002, p. 142). One cannot draw the boundaries between sound and fallacious strategic maneuvering in different macro-contexts in exactly the same way (van Eemeren 2010, p. 199).

Fallacies involve a derailment from the sound strategic maneuvering, by the violation of a pragma-dialectical rule in a certain stage of a critical discussion (van Eemeren, Garssen & Meuffels 2009, p. 28). The interpretation of an argumentative move as sound or fallacious always depends on the communicative context, as these moves are instances of „situated argumentative acting” (van Eemeren & Houtlosser 2002, p. 142). Fallacies are considered prejudicial for the realization of the general goal of a critical discussion to resolve the difference of opinion on a certain issue (van Eemeren 2010, p. 192). Understood as part of a normative theory of argumentation, they are treated as “faux pas” (van Eemeren 2010, p. 193). Usually, the strategic maneuvering gets derailed when arguers’ commitment to reasonableness is neglected in favor of their eagerness to achieve effectiveness (van Eemeren 2010, p. 198).

Within the political discourse it is particularly difficult to distinguish between sound and fallacious strategic maneuvering (Zarefsky 2009, p. 120). This happens because, in this case, the balance between the arguers’ dialectical and rhetorical goals is quite unsteady, given the fact that for most arguers winning a heterogeneous audience and gaining image is more important than committing to the critical ideal of a discussion.

#### *4. The ad hominem arguments in the considered parliamentary debate*

*Ad hominem* arguments belong to the class of emotional arguments (along with *ad misericordiam* and *ad baculum*). They involve a derailment of strategic maneuvering and accordingly are characterized as fallacies.

Van Eemeren, Garssen & Meuffels (2009, p. 6) define *ad hominem* as the fallacy of attacking the opponent personally instead of responding to the actual arguments put forward by the opponent in support of a standpoint. It involves a violation of the Freedom Rule, the first rule for the resolution of differences of opinion, “by hindering the expression of a standpoint or doubt in the confrontation stage through a personal attack that prevents the other party from fulfilling his role in a critical discussion” (van Eemeren 2010, p.201, footnote 18). In other words, parties should not prevent each other from presenting standpoints, putting forward arguments or expressing doubts or other forms of criticism. Affecting the personal liberty of the other party involves also discrediting his expertise, impartiality, integrity or credibility (van Eemeren 2010, p. 196).

Defining the *argumentum ad hominem* in connection with the violation of the first rule of the critical discussion, pragma-dialectics diverges from the traditional definition of this class of arguments, restricting it “to the fallacious cases of strategic maneuvering” (van Eemeren 2010, p. 201).

It should be added that when analyzing the fallaciousness of the *ad hominem* arguments the primary as well as the secondary preconditions of a certain communicative event type must be taken into account. In the considered case, they are represented by the general formal and procedural preconditions of a plenary debate in a Parliament, well known and accepted by the participants, and the informal and substantial preconditions (as, for example, serving the interests of a certain political party). These preconditions could explain, for example, why the antagonists use more *ad hominem* arguments than the protagonists or why their attacks are directed mainly not towards a certain opponent, but towards the whole group supporting a different standpoint. Being a numerically inferior group, their defeat in the final vote is foreseeable. As they could remain in power provided that the President comes back into office after the national referendum, they are interested in discrediting their adversaries, undermining their credibility.

There are three variants of the *argumentum ad hominem*: (a) the abusive, (b) the circumstantial and (c) the *tu, quoque* variants. The first variant involves a direct personal attack where one party casts doubts on the individual or moral quality of the other party, trying to undermine his credibility. The second variant involves an indirect attack, based on references to special circumstances bringing forward the suggestion that the standpoint or the arguments of the other party are not

motivated by rational criteria, but by certain personal interests. The third variant involves a conflict in the positions expressed by the other party on different occasions: either he lacks consequence or his acts contradict his affirmations.

Most of the *ad hominem* arguments in the considered debate illustrate the circumstantial variant. They are used by the antagonists:

(1) It is in fact some people who have been disturbed from their business, taking revenge over the one who had systematically jeopardized their games.

(2) The initiators of the suspension process don't care too much for the Constitution or for the country and the people. What motivates them is their own interest, unfortunately one that is mean and dirty.

(3) At a certain moment, it seemed that these so-called knights of the justice from different parties put on their shining armor, mounted on white horses and started brandishing the arms of the democracy. Eventually, it turned out that the glorious cortège was a masquerade concocted by a bunch of barons who have been constantly harassed by this Trajan.

The President's supporters deny the legitimacy of the President's adversaries to criticize his performance, discrediting their impartiality. The adversaries are not animated by the ideal of serving the national interest, but have personal reasons for demanding President's suspension: in his direct and objective manner, the President brought to light their onerous combinations, their corruption or unmasked some of them as crypto-communists. This is an attempt to stop the discussion in the confrontation stage, eliminating the political adversaries as credible discussion partners. The presentational devices vary from the simple definition of the attacked group (ex. 1) to rude evaluative expressions: *mean*, *dirty* (ex. 2) or even the use of a complicated ironic allegory (ex. 3)

There are not too many examples of the *ad hominem* abusive variant. They appear in the speeches of President's opponents:

(4) From the viewpoint of the President's supporters there was nothing good before, all starts with Mr. Bănescu's mandate and I cannot accept that and I believe that no mentally sound person over two and a half years can accept that.

(5) I am sick and tired to accept labels like "the Mafiosi's revenge", "pack", "hyenas" and so on from the part of some good-for-nothing, who don't understand that I respect their right to vote against the suspension and I don't insult them, and I don't criticize them; it is their right and I have the same right; and it should be normal that they respect my right to express my opinion.

(6) And because I don't like to owe anything to anybody, honorable Mr. Vasile Blaga, no, our parties did not gather against the President, but around the Constitution. It is a change of stress. Of course, you have the freedom of expression, we are living in a democratic state.

In example (4), the target of the attack is the credibility of the adversaries' viewpoint. The sharp irony is the presentational device exploited by the speaker. In example (5), a negative label is applied to the adversaries: *good-for-nothing*. One can notice also that the speaker uses some formal aspects of the adversaries' discourse: its stereotypic character, the vulgarity of its language, to anchor his attacks. The final part includes a metacommunicative comment on the issue of the freedom of expression. The parallel between the attitude of the two groups regarding this matter serves also as a means of criticizing the rigidity of the adversaries' views. In example (5), the attack is directed towards a definite member of the adversarial group. It has the form of a correction act, strategically presented in the following metacommunicative comment as non-impositive.

The only example of the *tu, quoque* variant of *ad hominem* includes an attack directed towards Mircea Geoană, the president of the Social Democratic Party, who presented the suspending proposal:

(7) Yesterday, the president of the same SDP, tried to destabilize and compromise four institutions of the state. Applying the same logic that is applied to the President, Mircea Geoană should also suspend himself from office.

The speaker tries to cast doubt on the honesty and impartiality of an important adversary, revealing the fact that the accusations he stated against the President are equally valid in his case.

##### 5. Final remarks

Writing this paper was to us an opportunity to reflect on the general problem of the relationship between an ideal model: the standard pragma-dialectical model (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004) and its actualization in a specific situation and context, that is on the relationship between a theoretical construct and the reality modeled by it. At the same time, the analysis of a concrete speech event created a good opportunity to determine and evaluate the impact of the institutional primary and secondary preconditions on the possibilities of strategic maneuvering and to explain the presence of fallacious argumentative moves. We realized the importance of the concept of strategic maneuvering in integrating the

theoretical and practical aspects of argumentation. At the same time, relating the fallacies to the standards expressed in the rules for critical discussion appeared as an appropriate way to avoid subjectivity in distinguishing between sound and fallacious moves.

## NOTES

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**[ii]** In Romania, the President is obliged to resign from his political party after he had been elected.

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