

Comments on ‘Strategic Maneuvering in Political Argumentation’

Yvon Tonnard

Published online: 6 May 2008
© The Author(s) 2008

In this paper, David Zarefsky suggests some constraints that political arguers face when trying to persuade an audience, and discusses some of the devices with which they respond to these constraints. In his treatment of these devices Zarefsky makes use of the concept of strategic manoeuvring as proposed by van Eemeren and Houtlosser. By taking into account the three manifestations of strategic manoeuvring—topical potential, audience adaptation and an effective presentation (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2002, p. 139)—he identifies and discusses several possible ways of dealing with these situational constraints. Regarding the ‘activity type’ (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2005) of political argumentation, Zarefsky focuses on large and open-ended public debates that engage entire societies. He rightfully indicates that it seems strange to consider these kinds of political argumentation as a specific kind of institutionalised discourse: political argumentation is in principle unregulated, free-form and requires no technical expertise of its participants in the discussion. In order to be able to discuss strategic manoeuvring within this kind of political context, characteristics of political argument need first to be specified. Zarefsky mentions four characteristics that can be of help to define the genre and to establish its conventions. In these comments, I will focus on the first part of the paper, which is about these characteristics of political argumentation: as a supplement to Zarefsky’s paper, I will give a tentative analysis of how the four characteristics mentioned constrain the possibilities to manoeuvre strategically.

Van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2005) have indicated that the need for defining activity types stems from the fact that strategic manoeuvring, due to its rhetorical dimension, is strongly situation-dependent: “the preconditions for strategic manoeuvring are in each activity type somewhat different and the rhetorical circumstances vary accordingly” (pp. 76–77). The activity type, therefore, may

Y. Tonnard (✉)

Department of Speech Communication, Argumentation Theory and Rhetoric, University of Amsterdam, Spuistraat 134, 1012 VB Amsterdam, The Netherlands
e-mail: Y.M.Tonnard@uva.nl

affect strategic manoeuvring in two ways: on the one hand, it can provide further specification of the dialectical obligations as they are stipulated in the rules for critical discussion (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004) which means that the activity type may pose constraints on what could be called a reasonable discussion move. An example are the special rules concerning the burden of proof and the kinds of proof that count as acceptable in the case of adjudication (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2005, p. 77). In an earlier paper Zarefsky (2006) also referred to this effect of an activity type: “the goal of the activity is a constraint that influences judgements about the acceptability of any case of strategic manoeuvring” (p. 400). On the other hand, the ways to manoeuvre strategically can also be constrained because the activity type poses typical restrictions on the rhetorical possibilities by which argumentation can be persuasive. Not every realization of a dialectically relevant move contributes to the desired outcome of the discourse due to specific characteristics of the audience, the speaker or the situation that typify the activity type. Considering Zarefsky’s characteristics of political argumentation, I will argue that they specify the rhetorical opportunities for being persuasive, but not so much the dialectical obligations. To explain why it is of importance to make a distinction between these two kinds of specifications, I will briefly discuss the function of the four characteristics mentioned by Zarefsky for a pragma-dialectical analysis of argumentation.

From a pragma-dialectical perspective a characteristic of the discourse is a dialectical constraint when it specifies the dialectical obligations as they are imposed by the critical testing procedure. In order for this to be the case, a characteristic must be of a procedural nature. Regarding the four characteristics Zarefsky mentions, this seems to hold true for all of them: the fact that political argumentation has no temporal limits, is open to every discussant, addresses a heterogeneous audience and is open-ended are characteristics that can be conceived as regulating the dialectical procedure. They can, however, not be understood as further specifying the critical testing procedure, because they are incorporated in this procedure already. This can be illustrated for the first two characteristics by referring to the pragma-dialectical rules for a critical discussion. The fact that political argument has no temporal limits and that everybody can take part in the discussion is simply in line with these rules: they stipulate or imply that no conditions apply to the position or status of the speaker, or to the time it takes to defend or refute a proposition (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, p. 136).

Something similar can be said for the third characteristic of the heterogeneous audience, which could be described as ‘schizophrenic’, as Zarefsky does. I think though, that it can only be called schizophrenic from a strategic point of view, because it is only then that one has to address all these different audiences as being one. In a dialectical analysis such a schizophrenic audience would consist of different antagonists, all with their own specific commitments. This would, of course, render an analysis extremely complicated, but the dialectical procedure can handle, or even resolve, this schizophrenia: in the analysis the different personalities are separated and, therefore, in the evaluation the heterogeneous audience no longer exists. Therefore, this characteristic can also not be seen as a specification of the critical testing procedure. From a pragma-dialectical perspective, addressing a

heterogeneous audience is just a part of argumentative reality that asks for a way of strategic manoeuvring in which the aspect of ‘adaptation to the audience’ is the biggest challenge. The rhetorical opportunities are to a large extent dependent on this characteristic.

Concerning the fourth characteristic—that there is no way to be sure that the argument is over—determining whether it implies a specification of the dialectical obligations is more complicated. This characteristic refers to the fact that a political discussion has no clear ending, or that the ending does not satisfy every audience. The former refers, for example, to a discussion that is dormant; the latter to discussions in which an ending is determined by a judge or by voting. When the ending is part of an institutionalised agreement, as in the case of an election or a trial, it has to be considered a dialectical constraint because it specifies how the conclusion of the discussion will be established. The fact, however, that a discussion is picked up again at one time or another, has no implications for the dialectical obligations because, analytically speaking, these re-openings of the discussion are seen as different discussions, or as the same, if the discussion continues under the exact same conditions. When these conditions change—for example, because the discussion starts with slightly different standpoints or from different starting points—it is a discussion that has to be analysed as a different one. Therefore, the problem indicated by Zarefsky that, due to a lack of this kind of temporal boundaries, different arguers may be at different stages of the same discussion, seems a strategic problem: trying to address an audience that seems to ask for different argumentative moves is rhetorically challenging. It is by exploiting the three aspects of strategic manoeuvring that such a characteristic might be turned into a rhetorical advantage.

The previous paragraphs illustrate that it is hard to determine whether large open-ended political debates could be termed an activity type that specifies the dialectical procedure. Fortunately however, that is not the intention of these comments. My aim was to show more precisely, how Zarefsky’s paper contributes to the understanding of strategic manoeuvring within an institutionalized context. What his paper provides are some of the characteristics of a specific kind of political argumentation that determine the rhetorical opportunities by which the three aspects (‘topical choice’, ‘adaptation to the audience’ and an ‘effective presentation’) can be realized within this kind of discussion. A question that remains, then, is why each of these characteristics is called a ‘convention of an activity type’ by Zarefsky in the conclusion of the first part of the paper. The expectation of a public debate that it is without temporal limits and open to every discussant at any moment, could be called conventional due to shared principles of its participants. These conventions are, however, identical for the pragma-dialectical ideal of a critical discussion and can, therefore, not provide a more specified definition of the activity type within this framework. What seems to be the most distinguishing characteristic of this kind of political discussion is the heterogeneity of its audience (whose members either hold different opinions, or are concerned with different stages of the discussion). This is also pointed out by Zarefsky in the conclusion of his paper: “political argumentation is shaped largely by the constraints of a sphere of argument that is open to all without preconditions regarding training, expertise, or prior

commitments". However, the existence of a heterogeneous audience is not a convention in itself, but rather a result of the convention that political argumentation is open to every discussant at any moment. Yet, such a non-conventional characteristic is of importance to the analysis: the fact that almost all strategies mentioned in the second part of Zarefsky's paper deal with this problematic characteristic of the heterogeneous audience, makes clear that there is a need to also take such kinds of regularities into account when discussing strategic manoeuvring.

In conclusion, one could say that institutional rules and conventions constrain the realisation of the three aspects of strategic manoeuvring, but not every constraint exists because of an institutional rule or convention; it can also be just a characteristic of the public, the speaker or the situation that is typical for the activity type. And, in my opinion, the characteristics as Zarefsky proposed them, have to be judged as such: as characteristics of an activity type that specify the rhetorical opportunities for persuading the audience.

Open Access This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Noncommercial License which permits any noncommercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and source are credited.

References

- van Eemeren, F.H., and R. Grootendorst. 2004. *A systematic theory of argumentation: The pragma-dialectical approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- van Eemeren, F.H., and P. Houtlosser. 2002. Strategic manoeuvring. Maintaining a delicate balance. In *Dialectic and rhetoric: the warp and woof of argumentation analysis*, ed. F.H. van Eemeren, P. Houtlosser, 131–159. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- van Eemeren, F.H., and P. Houtlosser. 2005. Theoretical construction and argumentative reality: an analytic model of critical discussion and conversationalised types of argumentative activity. In *The uses of argument: Proceedings of a conference at McMaster University, 18–21 May 2005*, ed. D. Hitchcock, 75–84. Hamilton, ON: Ontario Society for the Study of Argumentation.
- Zarefsky, D. 2006. Strategic maneuvering through persuasive definitions: implications for dialectic and rhetoric. *Argumentation* 20: 399–416.