

Commentary

Comments ‘Strategic Maneuvering through Persuasive Definitions: Implications for Dialectic and Rhetoric’

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In *Methods and Criteria of Reasoning*, published in 1957, Rupert Crawshay-Williams indicated that speakers can enhance the acceptability of a statement by manipulating the scope of the definitions that they give of the terms they use in their statements (p. 16). Crawshay-Williams, however, did not explain how language users still succeed in persuading others to accept their views even though these definitions may upon closer scrutiny turn out to be inaccurate. In his paper, ‘Strategic Maneuvering through Persuasive Definitions: Implications for Dialectic and Rhetoric’, David Zarefsky addresses just this question.

I understand Zarefsky’s analysis of persuasive definitions as an attempt to discuss an important question relating to the potential unification of rhetoric with dialectics, namely the question as to how to achieve this unification. Besides the fact that the paper fills in a gap about one ubiquitous and yet insufficiently studied rhetorical strategy, namely persuasive definitions, it also comes as a natural continuation to Zarefsky’s most recent work, where he discussed the adaptation of the pragma-dialectical rules of critical discussion to rhetorical argument (Zarefsky, 2006).

Zarefsky is concerned with the question as to why a definition can be an obstacle for a normatively fruitful argumentative exchange and at the same time an effective technique for persuading specific audiences. He proceeds to answer this question by regarding the use of definitions in argumentative discourse as a form of strategic manoeuvring. Writing from a rhetorical perspective, the author acknowledges the dialectical structure underpinning definitions and attempts to investigate the possibility of viewing it in relation to its rhetorical function. To clarify his approach, he gives a critical analysis of George W. Bush’s definition of the September 11 attacks as an act of war as a means for legitimising his subsequent military actions. In this essay I attempt an analysis of Zarefsky’s approach, focusing mainly on his application of the concept of strategic manoeuvring and on his dissociation between the rhetorical and dialectical models of argument.

Zarefsky's application of the concept of strategic manoeuvring to the analysis of persuasive definitions is characterised by some reluctance. Specifically, when it comes to the question as to how definitions function persuasively in actual argumentative discourse regardless of their soundness, he suggests that a normative approach in which an ideal model of critical discussion is central may not be helpful because this model imposes obligations on arguers that are different from, and more restraining than, those imposed by the rhetorical situation in which persuasive definitions occur. As an alternative, he proposes that for a more insightful perspective, the concept of strategic manoeuvring could be integrated into a rhetorical perspective. He explains that persuasive definitions in which a rule of critical discussion has been violated, resulting thus in the derailment of strategic manoeuvring, are only fallacious in the idealised context of critical discussion and not in the context of resolving actual public disputes. The resulting picture that almost takes full shape towards the end of the paper consists of a strategic manoeuvring that is independent of the normative model of critical discussion.

In my opinion, van Eemeren and Houtlosser's (1999, 2003) incorporation of the rhetorical dimension of argumentative discourse into the pragma-dialectical framework through introducing the concept of strategic manoeuvring stems from a recognition of the inherency of the arguer's pursuit for rhetorical effects in any act of argumentation. This pursuit has been conceptualised in terms of the arguer's ambition of resolving the difference of opinion in his own favour. The aim of conceiving of the arguer's conduct within argumentative exchanges as strategic manoeuvring is not to make any statements about how arguers can enhance their persuasiveness, but rather to improve the evaluative potential of the pragma-dialectical theory by bringing into its normative component the view that some of the fallacies that may be committed in argumentative practice can be justified by considering the rhetorical ends that go with these practices (van Eemeren and Houtlosser, 1999).

Surely, it does not follow from admitting that strategic manoeuvring takes place at every stage of discussion that the arguer can ever be dispensed of observing the rules of critical discussion. Sound strategic manoeuvring is one thing and being persuasive is another. The former is a combination of dialectical and rhetorical success while the latter is attainable without dialectical success. One may conclude that, since the use of definitions takes place in rhetorical settings and since one may resort to a bogus definition just to get his views accepted, it becomes possible to explain why definitions are sometimes fallacious and yet persuasive. Therefore, the fact that a fallacious definition is persuasive for some audience and not for another does not

immediately mean that relying on the ideal model no longer helps, but only that, for different reasons—which can only be established empirically—some audiences may not be able to notice the fallaciousness of some definitions, while others may.

One challenging part of Zarefsky's approach is his clear-cut separation between a dialectical and a rhetorical situation. Starting from the rhetorical model of persuading an audience, Zarefsky states that "it is strategic manoeuvring all the way down." I agree with him, but the concept of strategic manoeuvring may not have its proper meaning without an ideal model of critical discussion against which argumentative discourse can be evaluated. In other words, in order for arguers to manoeuvre strategically through defining terms in advantageous ways, they need two or more potentially conflicting goals to manoeuvre between, namely the dialectical goal, with its rules and commitments, and the rhetorical goal, with its opportunities. Placing strategic manoeuvring in a purely rhetorical framework and disregarding the ideal model deprive the practice of strategic manoeuvring of its essential nature, and perhaps even of the reason for its existence. In fact, within a rhetorical model, strategic manoeuvring becomes almost self-cancelling.

Placing the practice of persuasive definitions within a dialectical context, Zarefsky argues, would have implications that do not square with the conditions under which persuasive definitions normally function. In my understanding, the fact that with specific audiences and under specific circumstances some arguers may manage to attain persuasive effects by means of definitions that are normatively speaking fallacious does not mean that the ideal model ceases to function meaningfully for those situations. As pointed out above, this discrepancy is already taken into account in the concept of strategic manoeuvring. In fact, even within these less-than-ideal contexts, not any definition that the arguer may favour is persuasive and it is quite possible to find cases in which some fallacious definitions are consistently unpersuasive because they are found fallacious—although this remains an empirical claim that neither dialectics nor rhetoric is meant to account for on its own.

One might find Zarefsky's proposition to consider two separate argumentative situations, one rhetorical and another dialectical, more understandable if one would also accept to reduce the analytic potential of the pragma-dialectical approach to only those argumentative exchanges in which two participants mutually strive to resolve a difference of opinion in a reasonable way, but such is not the case; a situation in which a speaker takes up the task of persuading a (passive) audience to adopt a certain point of view can still be conceived of as dialectical, without undermining the rhetorical nature of the situation.

For a proper evaluation of the discourse, the audience will be reconstructed as an antagonist who is in a state of doubt, unless there are clues for an alternative reconstruction, and hence as assuming fewer obligations than the speaker (van Eemeren and Houtlosser, 1999). Certainly, it is dialectically speaking hard to imagine that even an audience may come to assume a burden of proof for challenging a certain definition, or any argument for that matter, but the burden of proof, while essentially dialectical, is also subject to the pragmatic impositions of the situation; these impositions can sometimes affect (the order of) its allocation quite radically (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2003).

To conclude, although Zarefsky clearly favours a unification between dialectics and rhetoric through the integration of the former into the latter, he does acknowledge that “which way we proceed does not really matter”. This, he maintains, depends on the aims of the research project within which the integrating attempt is carried out. Zarefsky, nonetheless, does not deny that either way has its implications for the analysis and evaluation of argumentative discourse and can provide different insights into the way people go about persuading each other. If anything, this commentary is meant to further underline the challenges of taking one or the other direction.

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