Rhetorical Analysis Within a Pragma-Dialectical Framework

The Case of R. J. Reynolds

FRANS H. VAN EEMEREN and PETER HOUTLOSSER

Department of Speech Communication, Argumentation Theory and Rhetoric
University of Amsterdam
Spuistraat 134
1012 VB Amsterdam
The Netherlands

ABSTRACT: The paper reacts against the strict separation between dialectical and rhetorical approaches to argumentation and argues that argumentative discourse can be analyzed and evaluated more adequately if the two are systematically combined. Such an integrated approach makes it possible to show how the opportunities available in each of the dialectical stages of a critical discussion have been used strategically to further the rhetorical aims of the speaker or writer. The approach is illustrated with the help of an analysis of an ‘advertisement’ published by R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company.

KEY WORDS: argumentation theory, argumentative strategy, dialectic, pragma-dialectics, rhetoric

1. THE PRAGMA-DIALECTICAL THEORY OF ARGUMENTATION

In the 1970s, inspired by Karl Popper’s critical rationalism, an approach to argumentation was developed at the University of Amsterdam that aimed for a sound combination of linguistic insight from the study of language use often called ‘pragmatics’ and logical insight from the study of critical dialogue known as philosophical ‘dialectics’ (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 1984). Therefore, its founders labelled this approach pragma-dialectics. In pragma-dialectics, argumentation is viewed as a phenomenon of verbal communication; it is studied as a mode of discourse characterized by the use of language for resolving a dispute. In the firm belief that argumentation is a type of discourse that requires special critical attention, its quality and possible flaws are measured against criteria connected with this purpose.

In the 1980s, a comprehensive pragma-dialectical research programme was started. This programme was, on the one hand, based on the assumption that a philosophical ideal of critical rationality must be developed, in which a theoretical model for argumentative discourse in critical discussion could be grounded. On the other hand, the programme’s point of departure was that argumentative reality has to be investigated empirically to
achieve an accurate description of actual discourse processes and the various factors influencing their outcome. In the analysis of argumentative discourse the normative and descriptive dimensions were to be linked together by a methodical reconstruction of the actual discourse from the perspective of the projected ideal of critical discussion. Only then, the practical problems of argumentative discourse as revealed in the reconstruction could be diagnosed and adequately tackled.\(^2\)

Crucial to grounding the pragma-dialectical theory in the philosophical ideal of critical rationality is a model of critical discussion. The model provides a procedure for establishing methodically whether or not a standpoint is defensible against doubt or criticism. It is, in fact, an analytic description of what – public as well as private – argumentative discourse – irrespective of the subject matter it deals with and the monologue or dialogue form it may take – would be like if it were solely and optimally aimed at resolving a difference of opinion (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 1984, 1992). The orientation toward dispute resolution is not tantamount to entertaining the philosophical ideal of aiming for consensus: it is merely instrumental in the endeavor of critically testing the acceptability of a standpoint by dealing in a reasonable way with all the doubts and criticisms of a – real or imagined – antagonist (or group of antagonists), not just by logically valid reasoning, but by taking into account all the rules for critical discussion.

The model of critical discussion specifies the resolution process, its stages and the various types of speech act instrumental in each stage. Four stages are distinguished: the ‘confrontation’ stage, where the difference of opinion is defined; the ‘opening’ stage, where the starting point of the discussion is established; the ‘argumentation’ stage, where arguments and critical reactions are exchanged; and the ‘concluding’ stage, where the result of the discussion is determined. At every stage, specific obstacles may arise that are an impediment to the resolution of the difference. The pragma-dialectical rules, which provide a definition of the general principles of constructive argumentative discourse, are designed to prevent such obstacles, traditionally known as fallacies, from arising – and to enable the analyst to point them down.

Apart from its critical function, the model of a critical discussion serves a heuristic goal in the reconstruction of implicit or otherwise opaque speech acts that are relevant to a critical evaluation (van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson and Jacobs, 1993). A pragma-dialectical reconstruction is aimed at achieving an analytic overview that provides a description of the difference of opinion that lies at the heart of the discourse, the point of departure chosen in dealing with the difference, the arguments put forward to resolve it, the argumentation schemes employed, and the argumentation structure (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 1992, pp. 93–94).