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No News is Good News, or the Appeal of Controversy

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ABSTRACT: One of the strategies journalists use to attract their audience towards a news item is the suggestion of controversy. The terms by which issues are created influences the way discussions evolve. I will examine how such controversies can be part of an argumentative situation, and I will examine whether any evaluation standard can be developed in this matter. The style figure antithesis, as it is explored in Jeanne Fahnestock's work, is a useful tool in considering invention, form and function of controversy and opposition.

KEYWORDS: antithesis, controversy, figures, invention, media, rhetoric.

1. INTRODUCTION

The strategies parties develop in order to become a public issue and to be in the news are manifold. Journalists in their turn try to attract attention to the chosen news issues by presenting their items as attractively as possible and thus to enhance their relevance. One of the strategies often used to seduce the audience into watching or reading a news item is the suggestion of controversy: the suggestion of fighting parties has a certain appeal to it. Especially popular mass media seem to suffer from this rhetorical strategy. This strategy is being criticized by many, as the terms by which issues are created is indeed crucial for the way the arguments develop and the discussion does or does not evolve.

“Our job is to articulate and sort out what practitioners think they are doing and to account for how, or whether, the activity thus conceptualized works to achieve the purposes for which it is pursued. The concept of *issue* needs just such an articulation, sorting-out and accounting” Jean Goodwin (2002, p. 81) pointed out. Much work still needs to be done on the *why*, *what* and *how* of issues. In this paper, I will point out some aspects of controversy, and the ways in which it can become part of an argumentative situation.

In news reporting, controversy is generally presented or staged as being “just there”: parties are fighting over the right interpretation of a phenomenon, the right solution for a problem, the right decision for a community. But obviously, not all controversies are being reported upon, for all kinds of reasons. And on the other hand, it is questionable whether reporting about issues by presenting them as controversial is good argumentation and hence good journalism.

Deborah Tannen is one of the many scholars that are concerned about the appeal of controversy. Apparently, media believe that controversy is interesting and the absence of controversy is dull. But news items presented as if they were a fight affect the way we think about them, and affect in their turn the events themselves: reporting on battles is at the same time fomenting them. Moreover: “Framing news as

a fight between two sides often results in needed information not getting out – and even false information getting spread” (Tannen 1998, p. 33).

One of the many causes for this “argument culture” is language itself. In her comment on the power of catchy soundbites, Tannen argues: “Language is not something static that we learn as children once and for all but a constantly evolving organism. [...] citizens pick up not only the ideas they read and hear but the attitude, the tone, the very wording. The writer of a snappy headline or jazzy story is suggesting to citizens how they should regard their government, the world, and one another” (Tannen 1998, p. 91). Tannen does recognize the influence of style and wording, but she does this in the usual context of warning us for the dangerous effects of it.

Of course, some conflicts are “just there”. And some of them definitely should be in the news. But reporting on them is often seen as a matter of simply describing¹, not a matter of thoughtful writing. James Crosswhite, who conceptualizes argument as a form of social conflict, and as such an alternative to arbitrary power and violence, claims that thinking of argument as conflict is one way of being interested in discovery (Crosswhite 1996, p. 104). “Conflict is much more generative, all-pervading, and constructive than we are usually inclined to think. Considered from one angle, the angle of argumentation, conflict is a way of having peace and renewal” (Crosswhite 1996, p. 129). To Crosswhite, conflicts exist before they are brought into language:

Claims and questions do not appear out of nowhere as the result of a school exercise in invention. Rather, they are explicit forms of claimings and resistances to those claimings that already surround us and permeate us. Sometimes we have to ‘discover’ these conflicts in the sense of making them explicit as claims and questions about those claims. However, the conflicts are already there in implicit and sometimes explicit ways. When certain social-historical and ethical conditions are met, and where we have the right sort of perception and imagination, we can bring these conflicts into language with the hope of examining, exploring, clarifying, and perhaps resolving them reasonably (Crosswhite 1996, pp. 109-110).

To “discover” the preargumentative conflicts, Crosswhite clearly prefers “the right sort of perception and imagination” to “a school exercise in invention”². Both Tannen and Crosswhite deal with the way conflict and opposition can or cannot be dealt with in reasonable language, but at the same time they implicitly distrust the possibilities offered by language itself. And precisely this aspect of language needs some more considering. I will interpret Fahnestock’s work on rhetorical figures in general and on antithesis in particular in order to search for alternatives to the idea of controversies as being “just there”, or as a style and language “problem”. I will link the idea of controversy to the rhetorical principle of invention. The inventive possibilities generated by the figures in general and the figure antithesis in particular are explored by Jeanne Fahnestock in the field of science. But nothing prevents us from adapting this to invention in the media, a field that often considers itself to be far from rhetoric. That is the reason why I will also focus on the sporadic claims she makes about the public opinion, education, or the mass media.

¹ For a survey of work on fact construction, see Jonathan Potter (1996) *Representing Reality. Discourse, rhetoric and social construction*, Sage Publications, London.

² At some point, Crosswhite does mention the notion that in our very language use we carry hidden conflicts with us: “If one believes that there should or could be a form of discourse which is completely transparent, and that reason requires such a discourse, one will find here a fatal flaw in argumentation” (Crosswhite 1996, p. 114).

2. ARGUMENT IS WAR

Metaphor

The metaphorical structure “argument is war” is a central issue in the work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980). Expressions like ‘attacking a view’, or ‘choosing a strategy to defend a claim’ are not only ways of talking, as they are usually conceived by philosophers and linguists, but they structure our very concept of arguing. According to Lakoff and Johnson, the conceptual systems we use in thinking and acting can be traced back in our language use. And that is basically and systematically metaphorical. “The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of things in terms of another” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, p. 5). Moreover, it is an open concept: “So when we say that a concept is structured by a metaphor, we mean that it is partially structured and that it can be extended in some ways but not others” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, p. 13). The openness of this structure is somewhat enthusiastically demonstrated as such:

We have by no means exhausted all the cross-metaphorical coherences involving argument metaphors. Consider, for example, the extensive network of coherences based on the argument is war metaphor. Here it is possible to win or lose, to attack and defend, to plan and pursue a strategy, etc. Here arguments may be fortresses via the building metaphor, so that we can launch an attack on an argument, knock holes in it, tear it down and destroy it. Arguments may also be missiles, via the container metaphor. Thus we can offer the challenge “shoot!” and the argument in reply may be right on target and hit the mark. In defense you can try to shoot down your opponent’s argument (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, p. 105).

This approach is rhetorical, not only because the metaphor trope is considered to be a central issue, but also because it links metaphor to conceptual evolution and social action. Metaphors are dynamic: they can create new meanings, and also they can “sanction actions, justify inferences, and help us set goals” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, p. 142). This insight inspires the authors to suggest new ways of defining words and concepts. They claim that definitions of objects are interactional (and not just properties), and that categories are open-ended, which gives them the possibility of recategorization. Lakoff and Johnson try to escape from the objectivism/subjectivism dichotomy by their “experientialism” that claims that understanding takes place in terms of entire domains of experience and not in terms of “isolated concepts” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, p. 117).

Another rhetorical aspect of their project is the fact that they account for choice, in that a rhetorical approach always implies accounting for what has been said and what not. “In allowing us to focus on one aspect of a concept (eg. the battling aspects of arguing), a metaphorical concept can keep us from focussing on other aspects of the concept that are inconsistent with that metaphor” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, p. 10). When we mention the sexy blond guy we invited to our dinner party, or a renowned cellist, or a Marxist, we highlight and downplay different aspects of this one person. The “true” statements we make are based on the ways we categorize things. Categories are not fixed entities, but instead, we choose categories in function of our perceptions and purposes. The truth of a statement will always be relative to the way the category is understood for our purposes in a given context (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, p. 163-164).

In fact, Lakoff and Johnson explicitly go into Aristotle's *Rhetoric* when they are showing how metaphor can help us escape from the rigid opposition between objectivism and subjectivism, always defining themselves in opposition to the other. "But although Aristotle's theory of how metaphors work is *the* classic view, his praise of metaphor's ability to induce insight was never carried over into modern philosophical thought. With the rise of empirical science as a model for truth, the suspicion of poetry and rhetoric became dominant in Western thought, with metaphor and other figurative devices becoming objects of scorn again" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, p. 190). Their "experientalist synthesis" unites reason and imagination, and proposes some kind of "imaginative rationality" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, p. 193).

Their ideas have been criticized by many; also by Crosswhite, who argues that war and argumentation do share a process of conflict that is remarkably similar, but that physical conflict is by no means the ground of argumentation. "If anything, it would be more proper to say that argumentation is the ground of physical conflict, and that war and fighting would be impossible without it" (Crosswhite 1996, p. 129). But yet, their work has inspired many scholars (see further), and it is important to notice here that the authors go into the possibilities of metaphor in giving meaning to form (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, p. 126).

Figures

The heuristic possibilities created by analogy that allows for thinking one thing in terms of another are taken much farther by Jeanne Fahnestock in her work on the rhetorical figures.

Fahnestock's work adds to the impressive amount of studies on the rhetoric of science. Yet, most of it is concerned with the questions of how scientists use language, how they argue, and in what way the structure of language leads them into certain ways of thinking and arguing. A rhetorical analysis of a specific case, author, text, movement, is used to evaluate its cultural or historical value and to reveal the generative power of language. It looks at both formal elements and historical circumstances.

Fahnestock has set a different goal to her work: she wants to explore the influence of the rhetorical structures that constitute widely applicable lines of argument. The only structure that has received much attention is metaphor, but far less work has been done on the conceptual and inventive power of other figures of speech, like *antithesis*, *gradatio*, *incrementum*, *antimetabole*, *ploche*, and *polyptoton*. "Thus rhetoric is used in this study to illuminate scientific arguments, but, more important here, scientific arguments are used to illuminate rhetoric" (Fahnestock 1999, p. vii). Work on rhetorical theory can draw from an exceptionally rich tradition:

Rhetoric is still a term so elided from general educated awareness that it retains only a pejorative connotation as verbal deceit. But it represents the discipline that constituted higher learning in antiquity, and it remained a major portion of the university curriculum from the Middle Ages through the eighteenth century. The rhetorical tradition in classical and early modern texts is based on the conviction that there are generic skills of argument, regardless of subject matter. Rhetoric has also been valued as a teachable art, at once general and generative, which has advice to offer on everything from phrasing and premise formation to methods of behaviour and action in the world. The rhetorical tradition is, furthermore, highly coherent across its 2500-year history, so that it is possible to trace similar terms across the centuries and put texts from widely different eras into conversation with each other (Fahnestock 1999, p. viii).

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All along, writers in the rhetorical tradition have provided important “taxonomies of naturally occurring verbal devices and of lines and methods of argument, and, more important, of the connection between or even identity of these two” (Fahnestock 1999, p. vii).

Especially the heuristic function of rhetoric apparently has lost its former importance, and that’s another reason for Fahnestock’s interest in earlier theories concerning style and argument. The figures of speech hold a central position in rhetorical theory, she claims. It’s her point to study the constitutive power of figures and see how they are epitomized in various lines of argument. Metaphor is widely seen as basic to linguistic and cognitive processes by now, but this point hasn’t been made yet for the other figures of speech. They are still considered to be some decoration on the plain cloth of language, but not the fabric itself (Fahnestock 1999, p. xii).

One of her goals is “to weaken the old misconception that the domain of rhetoric does not extend to the sciences since rhetorical invention presumably prescribes only the reassembly of conventional truths, while scientific invention involves the discovery of new truths” (Fahnestock 1999, p. xi). The promotion of inquiry was the so-called reason why 17th-century scientists deliberately exaggerated their break with the prevailing intellectual and pedagogical tradition, i.e. rhetoric. Yet, the interactions between writing, thought, and operations in creative scientific activity are far more subtle than that. “But language does do much of our thinking for us, even in the sciences, and rather than being an unfortunate contamination, its influence has been productive historically, helping individual thinkers generate concepts and theories that can then be put to the test” (Fahnestock 1999, p. xi).

It is also hoped that this study, like others in the rhetoric of science, will help to chip away at the profound division in our culture between science and the humanities. We have so divided these two enterprises that we sort texts, disciplines, thinking styles, types of mind, and even children according to whether they belong in one domain or the other. Science students often believe they can dispense with the verbal arts, and humanities students avoid science. The polemics of the scientific revolution in the seventeenth century, debasing rhetoric to elevate science, have been too successful. Yet if the thinking styles and language habits of the two are essentially similar, as a demonstration of the figural patterning necessary to many scientific arguments suggests, there is little point in such division. We might pursue instead a ‘one mind’ hypothesis, that the same cognitive/verbal skills serve any subject of inquiry. What matters is that these generic skills be strengthened. The consequences for our educational system could be profound (Fahnestock 1999, p. xii).

Fahnestock sees different reasons for the dominance of metaphor in language analysis and in studies of the mind that build on studies of language³. She mentions the disciplines of literary studies, linguistics, psychology, philosophy, education, and work on metaphor by historians, theologians, sociologists, legal theorists, and even scientists. According to Fahnestock, work on metaphor is so popular because it allows scholars and researchers to believe they have a window on a fundamental, generative cognitive process. In science studies, hidden metaphors are supposed to count for scientific creativity, and scientific revolutions are considered to be metaphoric revolutions. Reasons for this fascination might be that metaphoric creativity supports the “romantic” vision of inspiration, genius and innovation, and the idea that poets

³ “As a fundamental mechanism in language and thinking, metaphor has been championed by the Belgian structuralists of Group μ ; nominated by historian Hayden White as master of the four master tropes; and identified by the cognitive linguists and philosophers, George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, and Mark Turner, as the principle underlying all conceptual systems” (Fahnestock 1999, p. 4).

and scientists are in a way united by metaphor. But more importantly, metaphor as an epistemological construct is an identifiable, formal device. It can be pointed out and pinned down. And moreover, examples of the role of metaphor in science are numerous. “Despite these compelling cases, the fixation on metaphor [...] overemphasizes the role of analogy in human reasoning and begs the question of whether all or even most scientific cases can be “explained” by a core metaphor” (Fahnestock 1999, p. 5-6). The obsession with metaphor narrows down the much richer rhetorical tradition that provides for other possible conceptual and heuristic resources that are formally identifiable as well⁴.

Any attempt to track down the history of the figures of speech immediately reveals another reason why the relatively small and clear category of tropes has been so popular until now: it is impossible to define or categorize all the material that has been brought together over the ages. Maybe the only thing all such devices have in common is that they have been listed as a figure in rhetoric. In the twentieth century, the ancient category of figures of thought is barely noticed, and rhetoricians only work on the categories of tropes and schemes. Yet, “It would be misleading to suggest that these earliest treatments represent precise theoretical distinctions on the basis of a linguistic rationale that has since been lost. A neat division among the tropes as semantic, the schemes as syntactic, and the figures of thought as pragmatic holds only roughly when it is compared with the actual lists in the manuals” (Fahnestock 1999, p. 11).

Renaissance rhetoricians offer a wide variety of categories. According to Fahnestock, the only thing they have in common is their struggle with the matching of verbal forms on the one hand and discourse functions or speech acts on the other (Fahnestock 1999, p. 14). Theories of figuration in the first place try to explain and categorize individual figures. But when it comes to figuration in general and the notion that figures form a departure from normal language, we find a long history of theories. Indeed, what could that norm be? Even Aristotle sees figures as normal, in the sense that they are accepted, not abnormal language. And what does it mean to claim that figures are not typical? Fahnestock is sceptic about the possibility of providing statistic evidence of typical (literal) versus not typical (figurative) language without taking its context into consideration. In the nineteenth century, Fontanier seems to find a solution for this problem in his claim that figurative language is a departure from the simple “degree zero” language.

Yet, these definitions all carry an implicit division of language in them: literal language on the one hand, and figurative language on the other hand, as if one can switch back and forth between two levels of reading and understanding. This either/or - state theory doesn't lead us very far⁵. Fahnestock then changes the focus to the more relevant question what the substitutions really are for.

It cannot be answered from a formal perspective according to what syntactic or semantic substitutions have presumably been made; it has to be investigated on the functional side of the connection, by asking what speakers or writers may be accomplishing by using figures, even when unaware, and by what effect figures apparently have on listeners or readers (Fahnestock 1999, p. 17).

⁴ “As Gérard Genette complained in ‘Rhetoric Restrained’, the tendency among commentators on rhetoric (especially French commentators) from the eighteenth century on has been to reduce the whole art to the figures, the figures to the tropes, and the tropes to metaphor” (Fahnestock 1999, p. 6).

⁵ It can even be considered to be a reduction from the simultaneous fourfold senses of ancient Biblical hermeneutics (Fahnestock 1999, p.20).

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As a whole, value-added theories of the figures have dominated in the rhetorical tradition⁶. The figures are considered to be sources of emotion, charm, vividness, force, vivacity or elegance⁷. This supposed difference between unmarked and marked language has pushed the figures to the exclusive field of markers of the literary text, and forgot about any possible other function (Fahnestock 1999, p. 20).

Also, it is impossible to set an exclusive figure/emotion connection, not only because emotion is very much a function of the larger rhetorical situation of an utterance, but also because it is unlikely that anything at all could be said or heard without involving (any) more or (maybe) less remarkable emotion. “The analysis undertaken so far resists the assumption that an emotional dimension can be factored out of an expression leaving a ‘content’ behind. Although the profound division in the Western tradition between emotion and reason is not easily challenged, the assumption of separability is worth some probing” (Fahnestock 1999, p. 21-22). How could in the *aposiopesis* figure, for instance, where the speaker stops in mid-sentence, the emotional and argumentative value be separated? The suggested inexpressibility works both on the emotional and material level.

The overall problem with value-added theories is that they impose a distinction between figurative and non-figurative language. All the work on added values reveals important functions of the figures, but none of them is exclusively constitutive of a text’s many meanings. Rather, Fahnestock proposes, figure functions can be considered to exist within a continuum of expressive possibilities.

Figures can also be understood as epitomes of lines of reasoning, as the formal embodiments of certain ideational or persuasive functions. They can be studied not for what they are but for what they do well: to express iconically. “Associating certain verbal figures with general lines of reasoning, called ‘topics’ in the rhetorical tradition, also assumes that it is possible to define these lines or arguments in the first place, a notion that for contemporary readers with no exposure to rhetoric may seem as odd as the figures themselves” (Fahnestock 1999, p. 23). A traditional lexicon for lines of argument disappeared together with the cognate notion of the figures as epitomes of those lines. This notion of the generic skills of rhetoric conflicts with our ideas of spontaneity of invention based on complicated cognitive processes, and with the confinement of procedures of method and argument to the specific disciplines or professions. But the popularity of the metaphor to generate analogical reasoning could be a starting point for the assumption that human reasoning can follow many more lines than analogy alone.

What does it mean to say that a verbal figure epitomizes a line of reasoning? An epitome, from the Greek verb meaning “to cut short or cut upon” is in one sense a summary, an abstract containing all the essential parts of a larger work or text, and, in a slightly different sense, it is a representative or exemplary selection from and then substitution for something longer. The figure, then, is a verbal summary that epitomizes a line of reasoning. It is a condensed or even diagram-like rendering of the relationship among a set of terms, a relationship that constitutes the argument and that could be expressed at greater length (Fahnestock 1999, p. 24).

⁶ Fahnestock also refers to the discussion about the Latin *ornamentum*, that also means furniture, equipment, which would bring *ornament* closer to the notion of essential gear and *armament* than it is to *adornment*. Both interpretations keep the figures on the surface of language, though, as if they could easily be removed.

⁷ See also the traditional medieval icon for rhetoric as a woman whose dress is decorated with flowers. Language is supposed to be the dress of thought, and the figures are the added embroidery (Fahnestock 1999, p. 18).

Arguments that link form and function of the figures can be found all the way back to Aristotle, who in *Rhetoric*, Book III, nowhere claims the figures to be emotional, ornamental, or epiphenomenal in any other way. On the contrary, he “suggests that certain devices are compelling because they map function onto form or perfectly epitomize certain patterns of thought or argument” (Fahnestock 1999, p. 26). In his comments on the function of *asyndeton* and *polysyndeton*, both adding meaning to a text, but also on *metaphor*, *antithesis* and *energeia* he points out the functionality of those devices, as they are perfect embodiments of the speaker’s intentions.

Fahnestock finds more support for her thesis of the constitutive power of the figures even in Cicero’s work⁸. She also sees evidence for a functional approach in Hermogenes, Melanchthon, and in work on the enthymeme⁹ by Thomas Conley¹⁰, who found that enthymemes were often described as expressions that function as “stylistic cappers”. According to Fahnestock, the reasons for the gradual separation of the two functions is the confusion caused by the sequences of the rhetorical system, as if the different aspects of speech construction represented chronological steps in composition. Other reasons are simply the accidents of history, where important treatises on rhetoric have been lost forever, and where methods and systems of teaching also caused certain subject matters to grow more and more apart.

Fahnestock mentions more scholarly restorations that took place in the twentieth century. Kenneth Burke “saw to the heart of the ability of the figures to express a particular line of argument and simultaneously to induce an audience to participate in that argument simply by virtue of their form” (Fahnestock 1999, p. 34). Also Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca claimed the argumentative role of figures and re-established the link between the figures and argumentation by dispersing the figures among the techniques of argumentation (Fahnestock 1999, p. 36), thus confirming a view of the figures as the epitomes of certain durable lines of argument.

3. ANTITHESIS AND CONTROVERSY

Antithesis

All societies value reason and engage in logical arguments, Kennedy (1998) claims in his *Comparative Rhetoric*, yet the Greek language is strongly antithetical. Greek art and mythology abound with contrasting figures such as Prometheus and Epimetheus. Binary thinking has been essential in Greek philosophy in concentrating on issues like being and non-being, permanence and change. The development of formal logic, with the concern for logical contradictions is an important aspect of western society.

It would doubtless be an exaggeration to say that speakers in other cultures do not understand logical contradiction, but it is perhaps true that Western contentiousness tends to identify and sharpen contradictions. In other cultures, and now in poststructural thought in the west, there is a greater inclination to entertain the possibility that two seemingly contradictory statements may both be true in some sense; for example, if a term is used metaphorically in one of the statements. Yang and yin in Chinese thought are complementaries, not opposites; Mencius’ doctrine of multiple definitions is a Chinese example of a different form of reasoning. Western

⁸ While he characterizes the functions of figures to be illuminating (‘lumina / illuminare’), translations give the lighter term ‘embellishment’.

⁹ “A stylistic enthymeme is thus that moment in a text when the argument is most directly and emphatically expressed by the syntax and word choice” (Fahnestock 1999, p. 30).

¹⁰ Thomas Conley (1984) The enthymeme in perspective. *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70 : 168-187.

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thinking, beginning with the Greeks, has tended to polarize truth and fiction, good and bad, body and soul, conservative and liberal, and other such concepts, for the sake of clarity but often unnecessarily (Kennedy 1998, p. 206).

Maybe the preference of the media for contradictions is inevitably just a part of our culture? Inherent to our language, our way of thinking, not only metaphorically in the argument-is-war idea, but also figuratively in the way we like to see things in opposition? It's time to move on now from an exploration of the heuristic possibilities of figures in general, to the more specific topic of controversy. It seems appropriate to take a closer look at the figure antithesis, for the obvious reason that it carries the idea of opposition within its very name.

Following Fahnestock's work on antithesis, I start with Aristotle, who sees antithesis as one of the basic figures to form a polished prose style, the other two being metaphor and *energeia*. Fahnestock develops the argument that in Aristotelian stylistics, dialectic, and rhetoric, "antithesis is a consistent, and consistently important, concept, at once a verbal, analytical, and persuasive device" (Fahnestock 1999, p. 53).

Aristotle's antithesis¹¹ is "a verbal structure that places contrasted or opposed terms in parallel or balanced cola or phrases. Parallel phrasing without opposed terms does not produce an antithesis, nor do opposed terms alone without strategic positioning in symmetrical phrasing. Instead, the figure antithesis, according to Aristotle, must meet both syntactic and semantic requirements" (Fahnestock 1999, p. 46-47). Furthermore, two types of antithesis are suggested: one based on a single pair of opposed terms, and one with two pairs, eg. *the wise fail / and the foolish succeed*¹².

An important aspect of antithesis seems to be the effect on the audience. "An antithesis as a figure of speech at the sentence level builds on these powerful natural pairs, the use of one in the first half of the figure creating the expectation of its verbal partner in the second half" (Fahnestock 1999, p. 47). Some opposites Fahnestock calls "natural", this means that they are a commonly used pair of opposites in a language; some pairs can be more local, and some also temporary, but all of these degrees of opposition, can form the *semantic* base of the figure.

Antitheses are typically built on *contraries*¹³ like good and evil, love and hatred, further divided by Aristotle in those that admit intermediates and those that don't. Another way of forming antitheses is by means of *contradictions*, pairs of words that form exhaustive *either/or* alternatives. It is important to notice that the choice of *contrary* versus *contradiction* in an antithesis can influence premise-building as well as potential refutation. A third type of "natural" opposed lexis that can be the source for an antithesis are the *correlatives*: they designate reciprocal or complementary relationships, like *cause/effect*, or *sell/buy*¹⁴. Fahnestock mentions the preference of logicians of contradictions over contraries:

¹¹ Fahnestock's definition is based both on Aristotle's commentary and examples in Book III of *Rhetoric* (Fahnestock 1999, p. 46).

¹² In cola built on contrasted lexis (*antikemenei*) "opposite lies with opposite or the same is yoked with its opposites".

¹³ In the *Categories*, Aristotle shows how opposition pairs can be formed in four ways: contraries, privation/possession, relatives, affirmation/negation (Fahnestock 1999, p. 48). He did not distinguish among those four types as he discussed antithesis in *Rhetoric* (Book III). According to Fahnestock, "distinctions among the three major sources of antithesis – contraries, contradictories, and correlatives – are important in identifying how the antithesis epitomizes different lines of argument described in Book II of the *Rhetoric*, and they are crucial to the anatomy of dialectical arguments in his *Topics*" (Fahnestock 1999, p. 49).

¹⁴ Aristotle, in one of his examples of antithesis does use the buy/sell correlatives. Aristotle's fourth type of opposition pairs, privation/possession, can easily fall back into one of the other categories.

Logicians prefer contradictions over contraries when they talk of opposition, because contradictions cancel each other in a way that contraries cannot. [...] Contradictions belong to this certain world of A and not A. Contraries, on the other hand, can both be true of an object if one is looking at it from different perspectives, or at different times, or in different relations [...]; the same person can be judged short or tall according to the height of the observer. Or, even worse from a logician's point of view, both of a pair of contrary terms can be avoided entirely; a listener can deny that a sound is either loud or soft but maintain instead that it is in some unnamed middle between those extremes (Fahnestock 1999, p. 48-49).

Moreover, contradictions form antitheses easily because they invite repetition that leads to the construction of parallel or even identical phrases¹⁵. The parallel syntax of antithesis supports the contrast not only in a visual but also in an aural way. This way, antithesis functions both to delight the ear and deliver an argument.

One of the 28 lines of argument in *Rhetoric* Book II explains how one topos of demonstrative [enthymemes] is that from opposites (ek toon enantioon). Aristotle doesn't use the term antithesis, here, but the characterization of this topos sounds familiar enough¹⁶. In *Topics*, Aristotle explains how speakers can lean on 'reputable' opinions, and how contrasted lexis can be useful in building premise/conclusion pairs (Book I, chapter 10). Almost evidently, his examples are constructed antithetically. In Book II, chapter 7, Aristotle discusses how pairs of semantic opposites can be combined to create either single or double antitheses, and how arguers can use them to test a position. Fahnestock concludes: "Once the verbal form, the figure antithesis, is recognized as the epitome of an underlying topical reasoning, it becomes possible to use the figure itself as a stylistic prompt or frame for invention, though nothing perhaps illustrates the difference between the Classical and Renaissance versus the contemporary mind-set more than the discomfort that any such notion of purely verbal invention produces" (Fahnestock 1999: 51-52).

Gradually, the double nature of antithesis as the verbal phrasing of a topical device gets lost, and its syntactic and semantic components fall apart. Antithesis is split up into stylistic aspects, where it is a figure of diction¹⁷, and probative aspects, where it forms a figure of thought¹⁸. Also in the Renaissance tradition and later, antithesis continues to lead a double life: the semantics of opposition becomes the rationale, and features of the original antithesis are distributed among other figures. Fahnestock concludes: "Across the centuries, in texts whose purpose is to explain the potential communicative effects of verbal choices, the antithesis gradually loses its identity as a frame for premises built on opposed concepts. It metamorphoses into other verbal devices that juxtapose semantic oppositions like the oxymoron and, by the eighteenth century, the term antithesis also becomes a generalized descriptor for a compositional style of balanced phrases, paired against each other but not necessarily driven by semantic contrast" (Fahnestock 1999, p. 58). As a whole, definitions of

¹⁵ The well known aphorism by Oscar Wilde is a figure from a single pair of contradictions: "There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about" [...] Wilde could have constructed this antithesis from contraries rather than contradictories, but "the only thing worse than being talked about is being ignored" doesn't sound all that catchy (Fahnestock 1999, p. 49).

¹⁶ "one should look to see if the opposite [predicate] is true of the opposite [subject], [thus] refuting the argument if it is not, confirming it if it is" (Kennedy, quoted by Fahnestock 1999, p. 51).

¹⁷ Often accompanied by the warning that its predictability destroys its persuasive effect.

¹⁸ first mentioned in the *Ad Alexandrum*, repeated in the *Ad Herennium*, and persisting through the centuries.

antithesis have lost the Aristotelian concept that an argument can be invented through stylistic choices, only to feed the contempt for “mere rhetoric”.

Antithesis in science

Yet, the Aristotelian antithesis, like metaphor, is a powerful conceptual tool in the framing of arguments. Fahnestock makes a distinction between antithesis in scientific argumentation where the opposites employed are already accepted as opposites, and argumentation where one pair is pushed into opposition by the other pair within the syntactic structure. Francis Bacon was an exemplary user of antithesis in the first sense, in using the frame of the figure as a prompt to invent or construct arguments. But an arguer can also construct an argument to set terms in a new opposition, so that he can make nonce contraries out of terms that were not opposed before to the audience. Finally, the nature of an existing opposition can be changed by antitheses; this means that an antithesis is shifted to a new one, either with the terms pushed further apart so that they mutually exclude each other, or with the terms set as the two poles on a connecting continuum.

The interesting point about this is the function of the audience. The way the antithesis is constructed depends on the status the opposed terms have. Already accepted contraries can use the antithesis figure as an inventional prompt, as the first colon determines the second, and the audience will recognise the contrasts¹⁹. But antithesis based on accepted contraries can induce a stronger effect, Fahnestock claims. Audiences that are familiar both with the figure and with the opposed terms can, within the right context, easily understand the whole antithesis when only the first half is expressed. “The speaker who says simply, ‘I am tired of words’ inevitably calls for deeds without saying so in a culture that lives with a *words/deeds* and a *giving up/turning to dichotomy*” (Fahnestock 1999, p. 59).

The power of antitheses using accepted oppositions as inventional prompts can be illustrated by Bacon’s use of the figure in *Novum Organum*. In the *Advancement*, he explicitly claimed that the method of topical invention in rhetoric can be transformed into a method of empirical investigation for science²⁰. In his analysis of the nature of heat in a series of tables or lists of observations, Bacon extensively illustrates the fact that he is arguing from a figure. When one of the terms in a cola has different opposites, he is actively looking for possible contraries, contradictions or correlatives, or even for switches to single or double antitheses (Fahnestock 1999, p. 62). “Thus it is possible to say that Bacon’s empirical method of inquiry is in a sense figure-driven, and that given his epistemological commitment to the aphorism, he was predisposed to package both his arguments and his observations in epitomes such as the antithesis. Far from turning his back on the rhetorical tradition, he in fact tapped its conceptual resources epitomized in the figures” (Fahnestock 1999, p. 65).

Also Charles Darwin frequently used antithesis as a figure and as a conceptual pattern, but in *The expression of the emotions in man and animals* (1872), he promoted antithesis into a basic theory. Most gestures he managed to explain by their

¹⁹ “the very first of the 28 lines of argument in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, based on the system in the *Topics* outlined earlier, is a blueprint for creating an antithesis from such already accepted contrasts: It advises the rhetor to consider whether a subject has an opposite (that is an opposite already available in the minds of the audience), and if it does, to consider whether an opposite can be claimed of that opposite. ...” (Fahnestock 1999, p. 59).

²⁰ About the topical invention in the traditional parts of rhetoric, Bacon writes: “Neither may these places serve only to apprompt our invention, but also direct our inquiry” (Fahnestock 1999, p. 60).

adaptive usefulness, but some could only be explained as the result of a tendency to perform movements of a directly opposite nature. This involuntary tendency he called “the principle of antithesis”: some actions are so firmly connected to certain emotions, that in a reaction to an opposite emotion, the opposite reaction unconsciously is performed. Darwin’s invention, that matches antithetical emotions with antithetical gestures, has been prompted by established semantic pairs defining opposite emotions (Fahnestock 1999, p. 68).

Trompe l’oeuil

All experienced users of a language have the ability to perceive antithesis patterns and to fulfil its predictions. As such, the form can take on a life of its own: only one set of opposed terms can create another set of semantic opposites. This way, language users can use this stylistic tool in order to force or fake a double antithesis by combining two words that aren’t established antonyms into the right strategic position (Fahnestock 1999, p. 69).

Pascal distrusted this potential in the figure, and compared it to architectural *trompe l’oeil*. Also Aristotle noticed these false antitheses, as they generate the possibility to construct other entities such as peoples or nations into opposition. A famous example is Thucydides’ reconstruction of the Corinthian’s speech inciting the Spartans to go to war with Athens. Existing semantic oppositions are being used as wedges, followed by successive predications, thus creating new oppositions between the Athenians and the Spartans (Fahnestock 1999, p. 70).

Indeed, antithesis has often been used in scientific arguments to construct terms into a new opposition. It is interesting to see how the debate whether the fossil ‘bird’ archaeopteryx was a bird or a dinosaur developed by tracing how different antitheses were put into play by different authors (Fahnestock 1999, p. 71-72).

Finally, antitheses can have the more modest goal of reconfiguring the kind of opposition represented by a pair of terms, so as to achieve an antithesis of a different kind. Fahnestock refers here to the work of the natural language philosopher C.K. Ogden, who uses the metaphors *scale* and *cut* for Aristotle’s distinction between “mediated” and “unmediated” opposition²¹. Aristotle claimed that only certain pairs of contraries (like *odd* and *even*), as well as all contradictions of the form *A / not A*, actually excluded intermediates. The classical scholar G.E.R. Lloyd mentioned the often neglected fundamental difference, in the earliest fragments of Greek philosophy, between pairs of opposed terms that exclude intermediates and those that admit them (Fahnestock 1999, p. 72).

Ogden built on Aristotle’s distinctions by looking for possibilities to combine *scales* and *cuts* in antitheses in various ways: “It is possible, for example, to think of a pair of opposed terms as representing two scales placed end-to-end, meeting at a cut. Furthermore, these two scales can acquire direction, moving toward or away from each other” (Fahnestock 1999, p. 73). Ogden realized that some opposites were culturally established and should be analysed as a very complex network of interacting scales, and he was troubled by the fact that non-perceptive adjectives could be used to push objects into opposition, causing controversy and distraction. Although Ogden mentioned the importance of his work in the whole field of verbal controversy,

²¹ Later semanticists have adopted this distinction, using the terms ‘gradable’ versus ‘ungraded’ for these two kinds of opposition (Fahnestock 1999, p. 72).

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he stayed away from what he considered too messy a topic. His aim was to establish fixed pairs and solid oppositions as language features.

For from a rhetorical point of view, pairs of terms cannot always be fixed as either excluding or allowing intermediates. In the stress and play of position-forming, arguers may work to turn antitheses based on cuts into those based on scales – which are inherently easier to undo – or to turn scalar oppositions into either/or cuts to keep terms separated. Furthermore, the potential for adding direction to scales, for moving the position of a cut on a scale, and for combining cuts and scales becomes especially fertile ground for the arguer manipulating types of opposition. As a semanticist, Ogden wanted to freeze the cut or scale nature paired terms as fixed features in a language. To rhetoricians, however, changing or reinforcing the cut/scale difference, with all its potential permutations, can be the goal of an argument that works to change an audience's conception of a particular antithetical pair. [...] The possibilities of arguing a scale into place on one side of a cut or of undoing a cut entirely and replacing it with a continuous scale or of rupturing a continuous scale with an unbridgeable chasm – all of these may be the result of argument as well as, in Ogden's view, the starting point of demonstration (Fahnestock 1999, p. 74).

Historical and actual debates that have sometimes been characterized by competing metaphors can also be described as competition between kinds of antithesis, starting from the question whether a particular pair of terms represents a mediated or unmediated opposition. The *human/ape* distinction, for instance, involving metaphors like *primitive/civilized* can also be studied from the perspective of the *cut/scale* opposition. One can look for the kind of evidence (like *language/no language*) that is stressed in the discussion, and in what kind of antithesis it is put.

Historically, arguments that excluded women from university education were categorical, based on anatomical difference between the sexes. Fahnestock examines how currently, researchers in brain anatomy and physiology are once again constructing the male/female antithesis as an *either/or* cut rather than as a difference in degree on a connected scale (Fahnestock 1999, p. 80). She notices that in publications both for experts and for wider audiences, striking antitheses are pushing *male/female* apart. The absolute differences in reproductive organs don't show in brain anatomy, where the differences are based on differences in degree. Original researchers often do point out the overlaps²², but secondary reports to wider audiences tell a different story.

What the *New York Times* reported to be “the first clear evidence that men and women can use their brains differently while they are thinking” shows that “the popularity of these arguments, the ease with which they move into the mass media, comes in part from the fact that they can be epitomized with such striking oppositions” (Fahnestock 1999: 81). Where the author of a study of activity differences based on PET scans concludes that ‘the brains of men and women are fundamentally more similar than different’, the *New York Times* reports about this in a nice antithetical construction where *women/recent/symbolic action* are opposed to *men/ancient and primitive/direct action* (Fahnestock 1999, p. 85).

²² But also reporting in an introductory article in the more prestigious *Nature* shows how the male/female dichotomy is stabilized as opposed to a continuum by using a one/both split. Also in *Science*, articles on similar research show this tendency to work towards unmediated antitheses between the pair spatial/verbal as it is connected to the pair male/female and the left/right hemispheres of the brain; “the results of these correspondences are mutually reinforcing sets of opposites across interconnected arguments, female/verbal/left and male/spatial/right” (Fahnestock 1999, p. 84).

4. MEDIA AND CONTROVERSY

How can we adapt Fahnestock's work on antithesis to the field of media and how can her insights direct our study of the construction of controversies in media texts? Certainly, it can contribute to a careful articulation of general claims about polarizing media.

Fahnestock's study shows a very widespread choice of texts from many spheres and historical periods. Yet, she has chosen the scientific domain as a central field of study. This choice for scientific texts to illustrate the devices is motivated by different arguments. One of them concerns visual persuasion. Scientists abundantly make use of visual figures to make their point, which is all the more interesting for rhetoricians, as they can study how those visual figures relate to figures of speech. "This consistency between the visual and verbal helps to underscore the fundamental conceptual processes expressed by the figures" (Fahnestock, p. xi). This claim opens up analysis possibilities where visual illustrations in science and in mass media are looked at. Visual arguments both in science and in the media can be compared from the many perspectives of controversy: how is the controversy in the text constructed vis à vis the visual controversy, and how are textual and visual pairs pushed into more, less, or a different opposition?

The claim on invention and understanding by direct observation that has been made by sciences, has been too successful, Fahnestock argues, and it has caused that other invention to get neglected. In showing mutual aspects of science and rhetoric, she wants to help chip away at the profound division in our culture between science and the humanities. In general, media often cherish the so-called scientific position: looking for truth and understanding happens by means of objective observation, and facts and stories can be reported in neutral language. The idea that style can construct argumentation makes it possible to reconsider once more the so-called unbridgeable gap between objectivity and subjectivity, so important an issue in media studies. The idea that invention is an activity where language and figures can play a constitutive role in developing an argument can help to direct the media away from their obsession with objectivity, hopefully towards a more reasonable form of neutrality. At the same time it can play down prejudices about language and rhetoric.

Finally, we should mention this other basic concern of rhetoricians: context and argumentative situation. More contextual factors are to be brought into play, like the kind and amount of agreement that is needed to construct controversy in the first place, and the arguer's position. Scientists and journalists use antithesis in different argumentative situations. The role of outsider that is taken by news reporters is to be understood in the strive for neutrality. But at the same time, reporting on controversy is also some argumentative move by the journalist: she's implicitly arguing for the relevance of the news she's reporting.

Rhetoricians can study how controversy is constructed in a text and how competing choices of oppositions are put to work, or how oppositions are changed into new ones, how cut/scale positions are manoeuvred with to reinforce or diminish them, and how false antitheses are constructed. We should put this in its specific context and evaluate the use and kind of controversies in relation to the situation, and especially the position and authority of the narrator/reporter.

The notion that style argues opens up possibilities for a careful study of controversies. It can be useful in a reconsidering of the fact that conflicts are presented in an all too simple way, often justified by the argument that simplicity is a service to the public. Conflicts are not "just there", nor can controversies be

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considered to be harmless style adornments in order to raise their appeal. They are at the same time delivering arguments for decisions about social and political issues.

[link to commentary](#)

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