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A Francisca Snoeck Henkemans

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Commentary on Patrick Clauss: “*Prolepsis*: Dealing with Multiple Viewpoints in Argument”

A. FRANCISCA SNOECK HENKEMANS

*Department of Speech Communication,
Argumentation Theory and Rhetoric
University of Amsterdam
Amsterdam
The Netherlands
a.f.snoeckhenkemans@uva.nl*

1. INTRODUCTION

I must admit that it is with some hesitation that I present my comments on Patrick Clauss’s paper. It seems to be a hazardous undertaking to comment upon a paper of an author who writes in his conclusion:

With almost every sentence of this paper, I have asked myself, in one way or another, “What will my intended audience members likely think of this? What objections, questions, or assumptions might I be overlooking?” Anticipating all objections is not possible, of course. The key is anticipating the most important ones [...].

This does not make my task as a commentator any easier. The risk is now of either giving the impression that the author has not achieved his aim of anticipating the objections of his intended audience or, alternatively, of giving the impression that my own objections are not the most important ones. I am sure that the latter will be the case, but I will give you my comments nonetheless. They are, for the major part, suggestions for a more refined analysis of the techniques employed in the realization of *prolepsis*.

2. COMMENTS ON THE DEFINITIONS AND ANALYSES OF PROLEPSIS

A first comment concerns the definitions and characterizations of *prolepsis* provided throughout the paper. The problem is that it is not always clear to me what Clauss’s criterion is for deciding what the most important features are of *prolepsis*. For instance, when discussing the Toulminian rebuttal, Clauss wonders whether “it [is] primarily the anticipation of the counterargument, and not also the direct answering thereof, that makes a *prolepsis*. He subsequently concludes that “the anticipation is what matters most”. Similarly, Clauss considers it characteristic of *prolepsis* that it is the anticipation of an argument *before it has been made*. *Prolepsis* is therefore according to him not the same as responding to counterarguments that an opponent has put forward at some earlier stage: the anticipated counterarguments should be imaginary. What is not exactly clear to me is what Clauss aims for in providing these specifications of what the most important traits of *prolepsis* are. Is this done in an attempt to stay as close as possible to the traditional definitions of the term *prolepsis*? And if that is not the case, is it then an attempt to give an analysis of *prolepsis* that

makes it possible to give an explanation of the rhetorical effectiveness or persuasiveness of this figure? From a dialectical viewpoint, for instance, the difference between anticipating imaginary objections that an opponent might come up with and responding to criticisms that have been put forward earlier does not seem so relevant: in both cases the arguer will have to deal with these criticisms in order to fulfill the burden of proof for his claim. And if Clauss intends to emphasize those features of *prolepsis* that are crucial to the persuasiveness of this figure of thought, one would expect some reference to social psychological research in which the persuasiveness of anticipating imaginary counterarguments as opposed to responding to counterarguments that have been advanced earlier is investigated and in which the effectiveness of just acknowledging a counterargument as compared to refuting the anticipated counterargument as well is measured.

A second comment concerns the distinction that Patrick Clauss makes between two types of *prolepsis*: a type “where an arguer explicitly recognizes weaknesses to his own position” and a type of *prolepsis* “where the arguer recognizes strengths to the ‘other side’ ”. First of all, I do not find this distinction very clear, since if an arguer admits that his own position has some weaknesses, this also means that he thereby concedes that the other party might rightfully criticize his position and thus recognizes strengths to the other side. After having taken a closer look at the examples Clauss gives of the two types of cases, I think that these cases can better be distinguished from each other by using a different criterion. The main difference between the cases concerned seems to be that in the case which Clauss analyses as recognizing strengths to the other side, a *counter position* or *counter standpoint* is mentioned, and subsequently refuted, whereas in the case that Clauss calls recognizing weaknesses in one’s own position, a *counterargument* is mentioned and conceded. It is then subsequently shown that the counterargument, though true, has no force as a counterargument since it is not relevant or too weak to support the conclusion.

The two cases concerned can be schematized as follows:

Case A: refuting a counter position

My standpoint is X

It may be argued not-X/Other people believe that not-X [because of Z]

But this is a mistake/They are mistaken [because Z is not true/relevant]

Case B: conceding and subsequently dealing with a counterargument

My standpoint is X, since Y is the case.

One could put forward counterargument Z/ It is true that Z

But Z is not relevant or has insufficient weight.

In my dissertation *Analysing Complex Argumentation* (1992: 145-146), I have made a similar distinction between these two possible acknowledgments of objections. I regard case A as a way of introducing an opposing view in the confrontation stage of a discussion, and case B as a way of acknowledging a counterargument against one’s own argument in the argumentation stage of a discussion. In fact, in case A the only thing that is recognized or acknowledged is that other people might hold a different view, and not the counter position itself, since this is subsequently attacked. In that sense, labeling this type of *prolepsis* “recognizing strengths to the other side” might even be somewhat misleading.

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My third and final comment pertains to the technique of framing. As Patrick Clauss points out in his conclusion, with prolepsis a language user is not simply anticipating and responding to a counterargument before it has been offered, but there are often several other important language acts taking place at the same time, one of which is the act of framing the issue for the audience. In order to get a better idea of what framing amounts to, I have analyzed the examples given of this technique. From this analysis it emerged that in the examples of framing specific types of refutational strategies are being used. In some of the examples the criticism is refuted by means of a *dissociation*. In others by means of a *conciliatio*.

Let me first take a closer look at the cases where the arguer makes use of a Perelmanian *dissociation*. According to the analysis of dissociation given by Agnès van Rees, it can be seen as an argumentative technique

that serves to resolve the contradictions that a notion that originally was covered by a single term, and up till then was considered as a unity, gives rise to. The speaker using a dissociation resolves these contradictions by distinguishing various aspects within that notion, some of which are subsumed under a new denominator. The now reduced old notion and the new notion that has been split off are not equally valued, one is considered more important or more essential than the other; therein lies the source of the argumentative potential of the technique (2003: 887).

According to van Rees, the purpose of dissociation is to decide the discussion to the advantage of the speaker (2003: 887). This technique can be particularly helpful when a speaker is being accused of behaving inconsistently, which is explained by van Rees as follows: “The contradictions that arose from the original concept are now resolved because a statement containing a proposition in which the reduced concept occurs can now be denied, while a statement containing a proposition in which the split off concept occurs can now be asserted [...] without running into a contradiction”. (2003: 887-888)

Two examples from King’s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* which are given by Clauss as examples of framing an issue seem to me to be dissociations. In response to the possible accusation of inconsistency that King advocates breaking some laws and obeying others, King dissociates between just and unjust laws, thereby refuting the accusation. And in a second example King makes a distinction between violent tension and constructive, non-violent tension in order to deal with the anticipated objection that his position as an advocate of non-violent action is inconsistent with his plea for the creation of tension.

Clauss also cites an example by King in which the framing takes place by means of the technique of *conciliatio*. *Conciliatio* is a figure in which an arguer uses an argument of the opponent to support his own standpoint. This figure occurs in the example from King’s text in which he attempts to parry the objection against his support for direct action that it would also be possible to negotiate. While his opponents see direct action as irreconcilable with negotiation, King presents direct action by contrast as a way of achieving negotiation, thereby using the argument of the opponent that negotiation is a better path as a means to defend his own position that direct action is necessary.

3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I think that the choice for a particular definition of *prolepsis* could have been better motivated and more attention could have been paid to the role the different characteristic features of *prolepsis* play in the persuasiveness of this figure. What is, for instance, the contribution of the anticipatory aspect of *prolepsis* to this persuasiveness and what the contribution of the refutation of the anticipated counterargument? Apart from this lack of clarity, I think that an alternative analysis of the distinction between the different types of *prolepsis* proposed by the author is to be preferred. And finally, by analysing some examples of framing the issue for the audience I hope to have made clear that it is possible to give a more refined analysis of the types of techniques that are used which are now all subsumed under the general heading of framing. Also, I have argued that it is not so much the case that the framing takes place concurrently with the responding to or refuting of counterarguments, but that the framing techniques themselves are a way of responding to or refuting counterarguments and thus refutational strategies.

[link to paper](#)

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