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# Conveying argumentation through multimodal discourse

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**ABSTRACT:** In order to point out that arguments could be conveyed through multimodal discourse, the paper takes three different TV news items with the same topic as corpus to make analysis on the principles of relevance and cohesion, as well as the accountability of the rhetor/protagonist, and tries to find out how different modes in the same discourse function and interact with each other to convey specific arguments.

**KEYWORDS:** argumentation, multimodal discourse, television news

## 1. INTRODUCTION

There is a long theoretical tradition on the analysis of verbal argumentation, delivered orally or in writing. As a consequence, most definitions of argumentation characterize it as a speech act, to be delivered verbally. However, with the rapid development of communication technology, the world has changed dramatically in terms of how people express themselves and communicate with each other. Besides verbal language, images and other modes are more and more used in conveying meanings. The world of language-domain has already gone; instead, multimodal discourse is becoming the leading form of communication nowadays. Since argumentation is one of the most important communicative acts for human featured with rationality, it is undoubtedly influenced by the entire communicative environment.

In the realm of multimodal, often parallel communication, the verbal, propositional theoretical tradition for argumentation cannot answer many highly relevant questions. Elements of what is clearly meant as an overt, more or less rational appeal of a protagonist to convince an antagonist of his or her point of view are often presented by means of non verbal messages. In such circumstance, the necessity to broaden traditional argumentation emerges.<sup>1</sup> Whether the premises and conclusions are expressed in verbal mode should not be the key point for us to judge argumentation, the point is to find out how a protagonist convinces a

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<sup>1</sup> Actually, the possibility of other than verbal modalities to convey argumentation has been under discussion since late 1990s. Thus came the debate on 'visual argumentation'. For further information, see also: Alcolea-Banegas, 2009, Birdsell & Groarke, 1996, Blair, 1996, Chryslée c.s., 1996, Groarke, 2002, Groarke, 2007, Johnson, 2003, Tarnay, 2003, Aspeitia, 2012.

reasonable critic of the acceptability of a standpoint by putting forward information justifying or refuting this standpoint. In this sense, multimodal discourse, mixture of different modes (verbally or non-verbally) to deliver message should not be excluded from the groups of forms that can convey arguments. Though the propositions might not be presented in verbal language directly in the case of multimodal argument, there are indeed possibilities for a reasonable critic to reconstruct a plausible premise-and-conclusion combination intended by the protagonist from multimodal discourse which expresses propositions within its context.

It is undeniable that there is much more indeterminacy in the interpretation of multimodality than in verbal expression. As Blair (1996, p. 39) pointed out, “the great advantages of visual argument, namely its power and its suggestiveness are gained at the cost of a loss of clarity and precision”, this is much the same in multimodal argument. With different kinds of modes in the same discourse, meaning-making becomes more complicated, how different modes function interactively to produce meaning is a big problem for analyst to solve. What’s more, with the existence of non-verbal modes, which are more open in providing certain meanings than specific language, the problem of reconstruction accountability becomes much bigger than in verbal one. The unclarity in multimodal discourse by appearance may bring a protagonist more opportunity to escape from those responsibilities he/she should bear in making arguments.

Due to those problems and challenges, this article tries to find out how multimodal (public) discourse can convey arguments and how we, as analysts can systematically analyze such multimodal argument in a way that the resulting reconstruction of the rhetor’s accountability either obliges the rhetor to acknowledge the argumentative reconstruction as valid, or to refute its validity in a meta-discussion. With this aim, the article takes television news as a subgenre of multimodal public discourse for analysis and attempts to demonstrate convincingly that it is possible to reconstruct argumentative positions in public multimodal discourse in such a way that the method used can count as a *prima facie* argument for the validity of the reconstruction. During the analysis, we might also be able to see how different modes in the same discourse function and interact with each other to convey specific arguments.

## 2. “READING” TV NEWS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF MULTIMODAL ARGUMENTATION: GENERAL VIEW AND METHODOLOGY

The convention of objective news reporting always gives the public an impression that news is far from being an argument, and much more is the case of television news. With the thought of “Seeing is believing”, people are liable to believe that television news records “facts” rather than showing attitude or making judgements since it is featured with the “mimetic” images. But actually this is not exactly true, news is constructed by certain people (whether trained professional or not) in certain environment, there are always possibilities that it will be influenced by different factors like political, economic, social and other concerns during its process from selecting what to report to how to make it. As an ideological

representation of the world, there can be some hidden arguments (if not clearly stated) in it. As a mixture of spoken and written linguistic signs, still and moving images, music, and graphics, TV news items with certain attitude or position behind are considered good examples to “read” from a multimodal argumentative perspective.

In the following part, three news items with a same topic produced by different television networks are chosen for case analysis. They all report the island dispute erupted at the end of April, 2012 between China and the Philippines. One is from CNN (Cable News Network in America) with the title “China, Philippines feud over island” broadcasted on May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2012(US local time)<sup>2</sup>; the second one is from CCTV (China Central Television) titled “MOFA on Huangyan Island” on May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2012(Beijing Time)<sup>3</sup>; and the third one “Huangyan Island or Scarborough Shoal” is from BON-TV (Blue Ocean Network), broadcasted on May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2012(Beijing Time)<sup>4</sup>. For reasons of space, the article will mainly focus on the analysis and reconstruction of CNN item from the perspective of multimodal argument, while taking the other two as contrastingly framed discourses.

To do the reconstruction, the method developed in van den Hoven & Yang’s article “The argumentative reconstruction of multimodal discourse, taking the ABC coverage of President Hu Jintao’s visit to the USA as an example” is adopted.<sup>5</sup> It can be briefly described as constitute of five elements, namely (a) a perspective on argumentation, that is to approach the news item as if it were meant as a (complex) move in a critical discussion on one or more standpoints within the leading argument-theoretical paradigm, named pragma-dialectics (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004); (b) two discourse principles, namely the principle of coherence (Halliday & Hasan, 1985) and the principle of relevance (Sperber & Wilson, 1995); (c) immediacy principle for multimodality, which simply means the audience is expected to integrate the modes online and immediately in a mental representation; (d) an analysis of the rhetorical situation in which mimetic and diegetic relations together account for pragmatic intentions; (e) mode-specific theories that can be used for better understanding meaning constructions out of specific modalities. And specific for TV news analysis, the article will also explore how to combine the reconstruction with a typical phenomenon that is detectable here by applying the principles of coherence and relevance, namely strategic manoeuvring by means of contextual framing (Greco Morasso, 2012, pp. 197-216). Following Greco Morasso’s conceptualization of contextual framing as strategic manoeuvring, the paper claims that the implied argumentative positions should

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<sup>2</sup> By the day this paper is submitted, this news item can still be found on the webpage in YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=joGZCfwjq2A>

<sup>3</sup> This news item is available on CCTV website at <http://english.cntv.cn/program/asiatoday/20120511/104610.shtml>

<sup>4</sup> For this news, it has been uploaded by BON-TV(the first privately owned Chinese commercial TV network ) to YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YUUWY0As9zo>

<sup>5</sup> The article has already been accepted by the journal of “Argumentation” and will be published soon .For detailed description of this method, please refer to it.










indeed be acknowledged by the rhetor, the responsible producer of the discourse, unless convincingly refuted.





### 3. MULTIMODAL ARGUMENTATIVE RECONSTRUCTION: A CASE STUDY ON CNN NEWS NAMED “CHINA, PHILIPPINES FEUD OVER ISLAND”



#### 3.1 Corpus transcription of the entire news item

This could be seen as data collection. To make sure that the multimodal discourse will not be isolated, Table 1 makes a joint description of the modes as they develop in time and presents the visual design by means of stills; the main aspects of the cinematography; the spoken texts (voice-over and others), using a bold type to highlight elements that are prosodically stressed in verbal part. This brings out the fact that to a certain extent the choices made in the presentation of the data are pragmatic and interpretative already.

Table 1: Corpus transcription of CNN news “China, Philippines feud over island” (2’34”) (2012-05-10)

Scene	time	cinematography	screen shot	verbal
1	00:00	medium shot		(voice over) It is the <b>world's biggest</b> military
2	00:02	hard cut, medium shot		and China is <b>threatening</b> to <b>unleash</b> it.
3	00:05	hard cut, medium shot		(from the scene) 同志们好! (voice over) State-run media
4	00:07	hard cut full shot		is rapping out its rhetoric. The communist party's
5	00:10	hard cut		mouthpiece the Global Times says quote Peace will be a <b>miracle</b> . And it is
6	00:15	hard cut		all over this tiny island of <b>rocky space</b> , China calls " <b>Huangyan</b> ",
7	00:19	hard cut		known elsewhere <b>Scarborough Shoal</b> .
8	00:22	hard cut		It doesn't look like much for the <b>sea's</b> rich
9	00:24	hard cut		in fish and potential gas and oil <b>worth fighting for</b> .

10	00:29	hard cut		(from the scene, interview) There are dozen-plus boats right now, facing each other off in the shore and both sides are using the opportunity to <b>increase</b> the sort of <b>heated</b> domestic rhetoric, national's rhetoric, which is making it difficult to <b>de-escalate</b> . (inserted words) Stephanie Klein-Ahlbrandt INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP
11	00:41	hard cut		(voice over) Ancient maps show China claiming the island at the 13 <sup>th</sup> century, the Philippines says geographically it is on its side. The island sits about 200 kilometres 130 miles from Manila.
12	00:54	hard cut		(from the scene, interview) Actually both sides have very legitimate claims. Both of them claiming maps going back...very very far. So the Philippines are claiming a map going back to the 18 <sup>th</sup> century.
13	01:03	hard cut		(from the scene, reporting) The dispute flamed about a month ago when Philippines warships intercepted Chinese fishing vessels. For China, that was a provocation <b>too far</b> . (inserted words) Stan Grant BEIJING
14	01:12	hard cut		(from the scene) 当前黄岩岛的事态是由..... (voice over) The current situation in Huangyan Island is <b>unilaterally</b> caused by Philippines, and over the recent days, the Philippine side escalate the situation. (inserted words) Hong Lei CHINESE FOREIGN MINISTRY
15	01:25	hard cut, zoom in		Philippines president Benigno Aquino is <b>standing firm</b> . His message hands off the island.
16	01:31	soft cut close shot		(from the scene, interview) Well, we want to respect you while you should respect us. (inserted words) Benigno Aquino PHILIPPINES PRESIDENT
17	01:34	hard cut		(voice over) Chinese state media is stepping up preparations for potential conflict.
18	01:37	hard cut		Reporters moving into the location., this one symbolically claiming the island
19	01:44	hard cut flag (close up)		on the line——Chinese sovereignty. This dispute is just one of the many in the South China Sea. China was very firm
20	01:52	hard cut		of what it claims as its own.
21	01:55	hard cut		One state TV anchor going <b>even further</b> than beyond one island, claiming the entire country.(from the scene) 那我们都知道, 菲律宾是中国的一部分..... (voice over) We all know that Philippines is <b>always</b> being part of China's territory, she said, the Philippines is under Chinese sovereignty .This is an indisputable <b>fact</b> .
22	02:13	hard cut		She later called that a slip of the <b>tongue</b> .
23	02:16	hard cut		Others know a <b>far more</b> deliberate.

24	02: 19	hard cut		(from the scene) Are we going to war? Let me quote president Obama as saying all options are on the table, I'm Yangrui, goodbye, see you next time.
25	02: 30	hard cut		(voice over) Stan Grant, CNN, BEIJING

### 3.2 Presentation of argument through multimodal contextual framing

Due to the vital role that news beginning plays in news reporting, it conventionally consists of five basic elements namely *who* is/are involved in the news, *what* happened, *where*, *when* and *why*, in order to make sure that the audience could get the general and most important information about the news. Judging from this, the CNN news seems to be unusual. Nothing about the dispute between China and Philippines is mentioned at the very beginning. Instead, it begins with moving pictures showing a parade of Chinese army with the voice over “It is the world’s biggest military and China is threatening to unleash it.”

According to the rhetoric situation, the images of Chinese army’s parade play the mimetic function to present “what’s going on in China” to audience (especially in America), and the voice over, together with those words emphasized by prosodic stress, namely “world’s biggest”, “threatening” and “unleash”, helps to create a diegetic relation between this “real” situation presented in the discourse and the “reality” formed in audience’s mind (see Figure 1). Actually, after further discussion, we will find those images not just mimesis. Back to its original context, these medium shots of Chinese well-armed army’s parade are taken from the record material of China’s 60<sup>th</sup> National Day (Anniversary) parade in 2009. According to the principle of relevance, it should be closely connected to the rest of the news item, even more because of its important position in the item. But what does this celebration event, held in China 4 years ago, have to do with the diplomatic confrontation on the island? With coherence to the simultaneous verbal mode, it is reasonable to say that those images do not convey a parade that took place in China before, which would conflict with the principle of relevance. Interpreting according to the principles of coherence (with the voice-over) and relevance (with the continuation of the item, showing its topic in the yet diplomatic conflict) can result in an interpretation that the images convey a hidden military threat of China to the world. We even dare to say that this is a meaning and a function of the shot that the rhetor as a protagonist has to take responsibility for, it being an interpretation that is fully predictable from general discourse principles. Thus, the beginning seems to provide the entire news item with a contextual framing.

The concept of contextual framing introduced here refers to the background against which a certain event is presented as a piece of news. Actually, when we connect news reporting to argumentation, a choice of contextual framing is usually found as strategy adopted by news makers, it is usually taken by the arguers as an effective way of strategic manoeuvring to maintain the balance between the commitment to reasonableness and the attempt at being effective (Greco Morasso, 2012).

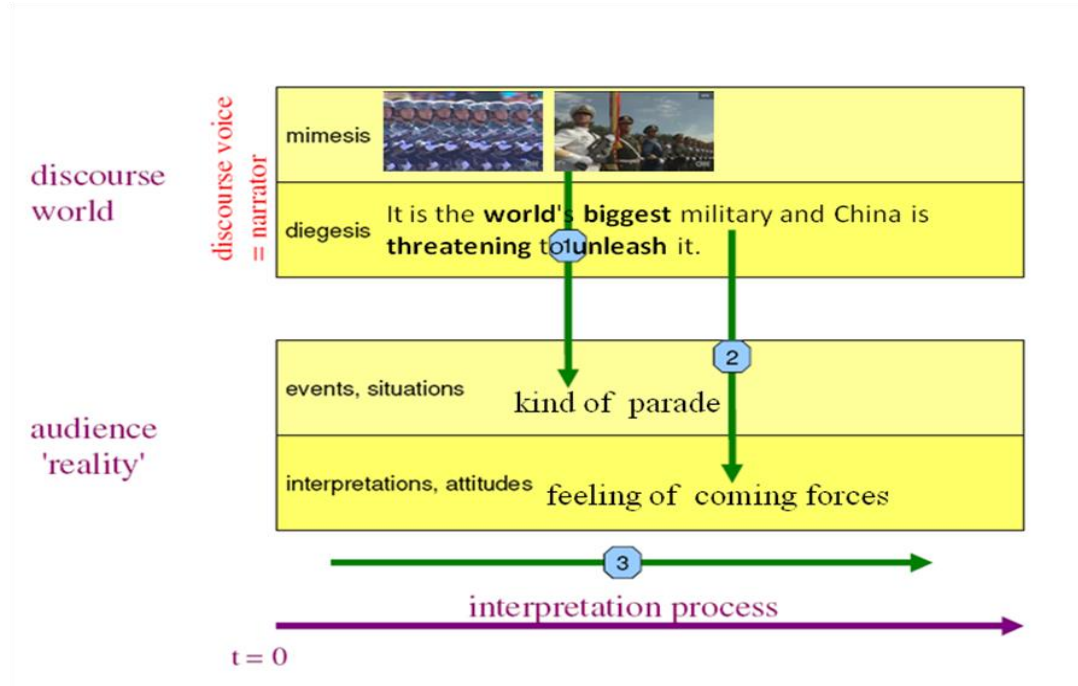


Figure 1: Rhetorical situation in the beginning scene of CNN news

In order to find out how the contextual framing is used to convey the (hidden) attitude and the arguments in the CNN news, we turn to the three aspects through which van Eemeren and Houtlosser consider strategic manoeuvring manifests itself in the discourse, namely the topical potential, the audience demand, and the presentational devices (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2009). In this news item, via the linguistic and pictorial choices (presentational devices), China is presented as the main and active character. Framing China's initiative position by means of multimodal devices as a military super power in the conflict with a comparatively weak country on a small island which seems to be of no profit in terms of economy has influence on the topical potential in the discourse. Within this contextual frame, the actions that China may take have become much more important than the conflict itself. Such framing is confirmed by the ending of the news, a quote taken directly from the concluding remarks in an English program named Dialogue, produced by CCTV news channel. With the embedded voice from the Chinese anchor of "Are we going to war? Let me quote president Obama as saying all options are on the table", it is again the attitude and the action from the Chinese side that has been emphasized. With such diegetic ending, CNN has a reasonable argument for a standpoint that China is prepared to have this conflict escalate into a military intervention (Though as a Chinese I am convinced that China will not and did not intend it at that time). As can be noticed from the entire discourse, the Philippines side as an actor (not to say an active one) in the conflict is far less mentioned than China.



3.3 *The reconstruction of argument from the multimodal discourse in CNN news*

Based on argumentative reasonableness, principle of relevance, coherence, immediacy and within rhetoric situation and contextual framing, the reconstruction can be made as in Figure 2. It certainly cannot be the only possible reconstruction, but we claim this as a reasonable reconstruction that CNN should bear certain responsibility, either to accept the validity of such reconstruction or refute it in a meta-discussion.

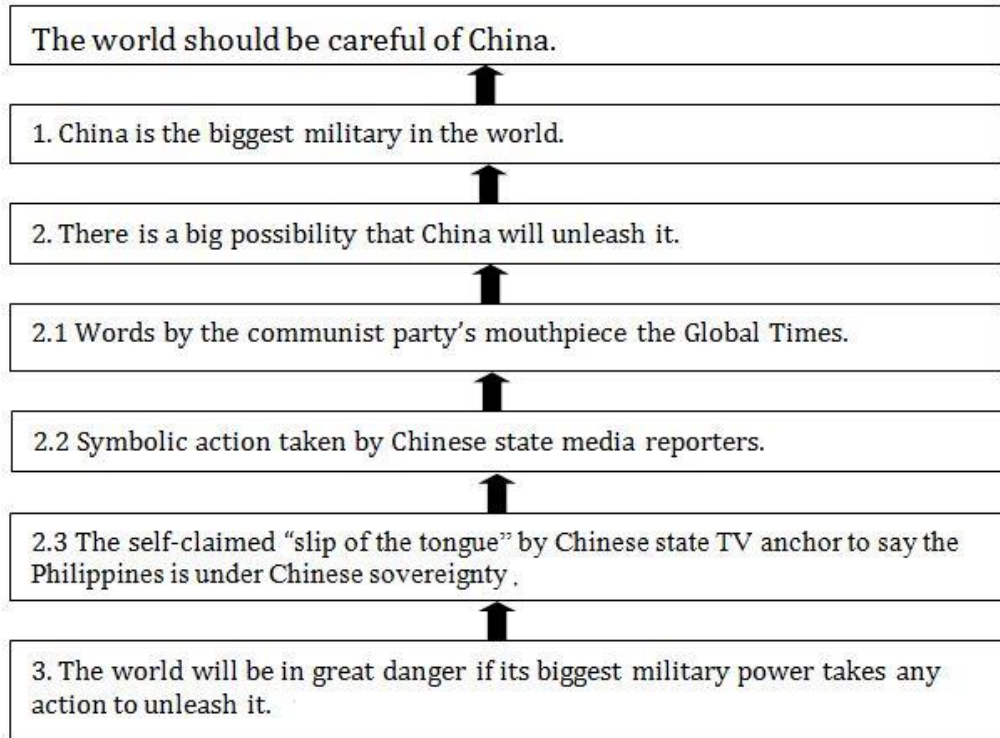


Figure 2: Reconstruction of the CNN news within the contextual framing

4. NEWS ITEMS FROM CCTV AND BON-TV AS CONTRASTINGLY FRAMED MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE


Compared with the CNN news item, the other two items from CCTV and BON-TV are much more differently framed in the context. For the CCTV one (see its Corpus transcription in Table 2), it is simply made up of two scenes; one is the scene of an anchor woman reporting in news room, the other is the scene with Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman speaking in a press conference. Though it is very short, it expresses certain attitude through different modes. The transition of the background from an empty one to a map of Huangyan Island covered by Chinese national flag, with coherence to the voice over claiming the changing attitude of Philippines in wish to resume new diplomatic with China clearly shows the stance of Chinese government. Besides that, compared with the CNN news, which focuses more on what China will do, this item is framed on the issue itself, on the latest development of it.

Table 2: Corpus transcription of CCTV news “MOF ON HUANGYAN ISLAND” (53”) (2012-05-11)

Scene	time	cinematography	screen shot	verbal
1	00:00			(reporting from the newsroom) The Chinese Foreign Ministry has confirmed that
		changing background		the Philippines Foreign Ministry resumed diplomatic contact with the Chinese embassy in Manila to ease tensions over Huangyan Island dispute. The Philippines said earlier that its diplomats “are endeavoring to undertake a new diplomatic initiative, in the hopes of diffusing the situation.” (inserted words) LIDONGNING
2	00:26	soft cut		(from the scene) 我们注意到菲方的有关表态.....(Voice over) China has taken note of the remarks and the action taken by the Philippine Foreign Ministry. China has <b>reaffirmed</b> its stance to the Philippine side and requested the country respect China’s sovereignty over Huangyan Island. We <b>urge</b> the Philippines to <b>refrain</b> from actions that will escalate and complicate the tensions. We will <b>closely follow</b> the situation and the actions taken by the Philippine side.” (inserted words) HONG LEI FOREIGN MINISTRY SPOKESMAN

Like the CCTV one, the contextual frame in the BON-TV news item is also on the dispute itself. At the beginning, the anchorman points out that this issue is starting to get a world-wide attention, which indicates the value of this news. And then the news reports the latest economic actions (including strict fruit examination and monitoring, as well as Chinese travel agencies’ cancelling trips to Philippines) China starts to take to put pressures on the Philippine side, what comes next is kind of background review, which informs the audience how this conflict occurs and develops. Finally the news ends with the anchorman commenting “it looks like the tension between China and the Philippines isn’t going anywhere anytime soon”. As is presented by the data in Table 3,<sup>6</sup>the diegetic voice over is a major mode that conveys meanings explicitly and implicitly in this multimodal discourse. Almost all of the pictorial modes are of no rhetoric functions. Here, the dispute itself and how it develops are the points that frame the item.

Table 3: Beginning part of Corpus transcription of BON-TV news “Huangyan Island or Scarborough Shoal” (2’32”) (2012-05-11)

Scene	time	cinematography	screen shot	verbal
1	00:00			Well in top topic, we take a look at one of the stories making headlines of China over the past 24 hours, and today’s topic <b>isn’t just</b> a topic here in China, but it’s now starting to get the attention <b>all</b> over the world, and that is escalating tensions between China and Philippines. (inserted words) TOP TOPIC HUANGYAN ISLAND OR SCARBOROUGH SHOAL

<sup>6</sup> For reason of space, the whole detailed corpus transcription won’t be done here.

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2	00:15	hard cut		While after <b>fair</b> deliberations,
3	00:18	hard cut		it looks like China is trying
4	00:19	hard cut		to hit the Philippines in the <b>warrant</b> to get them back down from the <b>stand off</b>
5	00:23	hard cut		that has lasted for about a month.
6	00:25	hard cut		Our report from China.com.cn
7	00:28	hard cut		has stated that
8	00:30	hard cut		the general administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine
9	00:33	hard cut,		has <b>suddenly</b> found insects,
10	00:34	hard cut		worm, bacteria
	00:35	hard cut		in pineapples and bananas and other fruits
11	00:36	hard cut		<b>imported</b> from the Philippines.
12	00:40	hard cut		The Chinese administration has urge local quality authorities to
13	00:43	hard cut		<b>increase</b> examinations and monitoring
14	01:12	hard cut, extreme zoom out		on fruit <b>imported</b> from the island nation.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we point out that:

- a. Multimodal discourse can coherently convey rhetor's standpoints and arguments. In conveying arguments, different modes within the same discourse are interactive and depend on each other. Of course some modes play important, even decisive roles in building up the arguments, but that could not always be the case in every discourse. So how the modes function with each other to create meaning and convey argument should be discussed individually in different texts.
- b. To convey arguments through multimodal discourse, contextual framing is considered to be an effective manoeuvring strategic within the argumentation scheme of pragma-dialectics.
- c. It is possible to present an argumentative reconstruction that shifts the burden of proof for the validity of a reconstruction from analyst to rhetor.
- d. The application of the method to reconstruct multimodal argument is systematic, overt, and controllable.

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