Commentary on Andone

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Commentary on Corina Andone’s “The Analysis of Confrontational Strategic Manoeuvres in a Political Interview”

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1. INTRODUCTION

This is a nicely written paper with clear ideas that helps to show how the strategic manoeuvring project can be applied to what van Eemeren and Houtlosser have called different argumentative activity types. These are distinguished, among other things, by their different goals, and we can agree that political arguments fit here. To summarize, we have an explanation of the van Eemeren and Houtlosser model; a review of the rules and conventions in the argument type (and particularly those that govern BBC interviewers); and a further discussion of the pre-conditions for confrontational stage strategic manoeuvring in a political interview. Then this is applied to the case of the November 2006 interview between Sopel and Hague. The goal of the paper is to show how identifying the argumentative activity type plays a role in the analysis of confrontational stage strategic manoeuvres.

The paper is largely successful in showing that the argumentative activity type of a political interview sets contextual pre-conditions for the performance of confrontational moves. In the following, I want to discuss some of the ideas raised and suggest a fuller treatment of the Sopel/Hague exchange.

2. SOME QUESTIONS

As explained in the paper, the analysis of confrontational stage strategic manoeuvres will depend in part on how the argumentative activity type is characterized in each of the four stages. We are interested in the confrontation stage. But the goal of the activity type is also important, and that of the political interview is identified as “holding a politician to account.” One thing to note here is that the goal seems understood in terms of the interviewer. He or she has this specific task in mind and organizes (or manoeuvres) accordingly. The goal is not, for example, extracting information from the person being interviewed (as in ‘what are your views on X?’), something in which an audience would also be interested. So we might wonder at the outset whether the description of the activity type (political interview) in terms of this goal is too restrictive. One further point here: strictly speaking, the activity type is more specific than ‘political interview’ in


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general, since the rules and conventions governing it are distinctly British (as noted with references to the BBC rules); North American political interviews, for example, may not be constrained by the same rules, with interviewers being more openly confrontational far beyond what could be interpreted as “due impartiality” in the British model.

However, that the activity type, which captures the rhetorical specificity of the argumentative reality (van Eemeren & Houtlosser 2005, p. 80), conforms to a set of rules and conventions, is an important contribution to the pragma-dialectical model because this set gives us some standard of reasonableness outside of the agreements of the parties involved in the disagreement. While they still must agree on how they will proceed, they are constrained by the conventions of the activity type. This is an important insight into the way in which augmentation should balance the pursuit of success with the maintenance of reasonableness.

Strategic manoeuvring, as it operates in this argumentative activity type, favours the choices of the interviewee, to whom the politician must respond. Even though attention is given to the topical choices and presentational devices that the politician adopts, still these are reactive moves. The interviewer, in the non-mixed case (that the Sopel/Hague example illustrates) is in control (p. 4), deciding when the politician’s answers are satisfactory (in accordance with the expected standard of a third-party audience) and thus when to move on. But does the politician only respond to what is said, and not also to who is saying it and when? That is, does the activity type and choices of strategic manoeuvring account for all that is rhetorically interesting here? I want to return to the example and look at it further.

3. THE SOPEL/HAGUE EXAMPLE

There is, for instance, more background here than the rules and conventions noted. There is a history between the interviewer and interviewee prior to the November 12, 2006 date of this interview. They have an ‘argumentative history’. Sopel has interviewed Hague earlier in the year (January 29, 2006) and just prior to then as well (December 11, 2005). These earlier examples need to be reviewed to appreciate the dynamics between the parties. Sopel’s concerns with the consistency of the Conservative party and Hague’s own satisfaction with certain members of his party is a thread that runs through that relationship. (A later interview on the same show between the same participants is far less conciliatory, for example. In it, Sopel accuses Hague of speaking in code. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/politics_show/7452293.stm.) Granted, on the strategic manoeuvring model the interviewer and politician will make choices according to the current circumstances of their debate. But should we expect that past choices between the same parties (and the success or non-success of those choices) will not be a factor in what is chosen now? Moreover, the context of the current exchange involves the U.K. response to terrorism and the appropriate period of detention for those suspected in terrorist activities. The issue is what the Conservatives can do to help the government with this larger issue. Hence, the move then to the issue of identity cards. So, this piece of the exchange arises out of the earlier questions and responses. Does that history play no role in later choices, or can we take a segment of developed argumentation and isolate it in analysis in this way, as many informal logicians are fond of doing with ‘argument products’?
The goal of holding the politician accountable is undisputedly high on the agenda of the interviewer. But is this the only goal that should interest us in this argumentative activity type? The question is rhetorical. Political interviews involve politicians, and politicians have interests. Strategic manoeuvring recognizes the interests of both parties, as both strive to achieve the goals of the argument in their own terms. “The other party always has certain interests that are unrelated to one’s own and might even be compatible” (van Eemeren & Houtlosser 2005, p. 82). Van Eemeren and Houtlosser are speaking here of the activity type ‘negotiation’, but the same should also hold for other types, including the political interview. As it is presented in the example, Sopel’s goal is to hold Hague to account; and Hague’s goal (if it is clear) is to give a good account of himself, to meet the demands of his interlocutor in a satisfactory way. Elsewhere, van Eemeren and Houtlosser tell us that arguers are not only resolving differences of opinion; they want them resolved in their own favour, and it is this self-interest that motivates them in their rhetorical choices (2003, p. 2). It is not sufficient for Hague to simply fend off Sopel’s questions; he must do so in a way that gives weight to his own character in the exchange (and over a course of such exchanges, which maintains that weight). This is what Aristotle has in mind when he insists that there is persuasion “through character whenever the speech is spoken in such a way as to make the speaker worthy of credence; for we believe fair-minded people” (Rhet.1.2,4). With this in mind, let’s return to Hague’s contributions.

Sopel’s opening question is a polar question, phrased rhetorically:” It’s fair to say that this is an issue that your party has rather flip flopped on isn’t it?” This does a little more than say that Hague’s Conservatives have been inconsistent; Sople chooses to use a slang term, ‘flip flop’, which carries a connotation of flippancy and irresponsibility. The person (or party) accused is indecisive, and unable to make up their mind. This is not a label that any politician can afford to wear and would be particularly unwelcome before a television audience. Hague must immediately neutralize the term, which he proceeds to do:

Well it’s… I think it’s become clearer over time where we stand on this, let’s put it that way, because we’ve got the government adopting an identity card scheme, but one that is so bureaucratic […]

Hague’s party was not being indecisive; it was taking its time to deliberate on the question; rather than acting irresponsibly, it was acting responsibly by weighing the issue. He redefines his party’s response as ‘achieving clarity over time’, rather than ‘flip flopping’. “[L]et’s put it that way,” he says to emphasize that he has corrected the language and hence the concept involved. In doing this, I think, Hague doesn’t just express an opposite standpoint (no inconsistency) and defend himself; he deflects Sopel’s accusation in a way that allows him to maintain ethotic control and even build it. In dismissing an implicit attack on his character, he strengthens that character through what he says.

Similarly, in his second contribution Hague builds on this in responding to Sopel’s repetition of the inconsistency charge. Sopel indeed exploits the “shared knowledge” of what Hague’s party did and is now doing, but Hague controls how that should be understood through the dissociation of the issue of identity cards, distinguishing between the principle and the practice. This dissociation allows him to
explain apparently contradictory stands on the issue. He “and Michael Howard supported
the principle of [cards],” but not the practice (van Rees, 2008, p. 64)

At the end of this part of the longer exchange, Sopel is satisfied that he has
discharged his obligation to hold Hague to account; but Hague is satisfied that he has
given a good account of himself, and this latter point is an important outcome of the
political interview that the reflects the success of Hague’s strategic manoeuvring.

4. CONCLUSION

We are presented in this paper, then, with a very useful piece of analysis that contributes
both to our understanding of how argumentative activity types can be understood and
employed, and to our further appreciation of the nature of strategic manoeuvring. But as
always when working with rhetorical analyses of argumentative texts there are other
aspects of background and reaction that might be emphasized to achieve additional
understanding of the parties and their goals.

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