

May 18th, 9:00 AM - May 21st, 5:00 PM

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Mohammed, Dima, "Commentary on Harry Weger, Edward Hinck and John Seiter's Background nonverbal disagreement during televised political debates: A strategic maneuvering approach" (2016). *OSSA Conference Archive*. 172.
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Commentary on Harry Weger, Edward Hinck and John Seiter's "Background Nonverbal Disagreement during Televised Political Debates: A Strategic Maneuvering Approach"

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The paper of Harry Weger, Edward Hinck and John Seiter is a good example of argumentation scholarship developing so that it remains both empirically relevant and theoretically stimulating. The question that Weger et al. address is a very interesting one. Not only are they examining US presidential debates, an ever exciting endeavour. But they are also focusing on a particularly interesting and relatively new aspect in these debates, namely the split-screen mediated expression of disagreement by the presidential candidate who does not have the floor. It is indeed a "puzzle" that in these debates "some candidates can get away with frequent and impolite background disparaging behavior while others cannot get away with such behavior" (sec. 3). A puzzle that Weger et al. try to solve by combining insights from argumentation with findings of the rich bulk of psychology and persuasion research. Focusing on non-verbal display of disagreement is a particularly interesting choice. Argumentation scholars are not only more and more aware of the role that non-verbal elements play in argumentation, but they are also committed to developing the methodological tools needed in order to examine multi-modal argumentation adequately (see e.g., Dove, Groarke, Kjeldsen, Tseronis). The work of Weger et al. comes as a valuable contribution to this. In it, inter-disciplinary cross-pollination results in the use of argumentative concepts in an innovative way.

A particularly interesting use of argumentative concepts is related to the way Weger et al. use the concept of strategic manoeuvring to solve the puzzle that intrigues them. Weger et al. adopt the perspective of activity types (van Eemeren 2010) in examining their material. The perspective highlights the affordances and constraints that are available for arguers' strategic manoeuvring in televised US presidential debates by identifying preconditions typical of the practice. In the examination, two particular preconditions which are crucial for solving the puzzle, civility and visual presentation, are identified. Weger et al. tell us it's the way the arguers manoeuvre strategically between these preconditions that explains how some candidates can get away with frequent and impolite background disparaging behavior while others cannot get away with such behaviour. Under the civility precondition arguers can be expected to maintain "a level of decorum commensurate with the office of President of the United States of America" and under the visual presentation precondition they are made visible on the screen even when they do not have the floor, which allows them to display what Weger et al. refer to as "background disagreement" (sec. 3). Candidates' success involves balancing the two, they tell us:

Perhaps key to a candidate's successful debate performance involves balancing aggressively attacking an opponent's position (and sometimes character) while maintaining a likeable and poised persona consistent with the "presidential" image expected of the office. (Weger et al., sec. 3.3)

The way these two requirements are balanced is manifested in the candidates' facial expressions conveying disagreement, and it seems it's there where the difference lies: does the candidate express disagreement using positively valenced emotional display or a negatively valenced one. Weger et al. draw a link between the way a candidate balances civility with disagreement and the candidate's success in appearing likeable and dominant (positively valenced emotional display) or rather angry and anxious (negatively valenced emotional display). A link that appears intuitive but is also backed by empirical research about affiliation and dominance.

I find the analysis both revealing and convincing, so I am not going to challenge the links drawn. Instead, I am going to examine the use of the concept of strategic manoeuvring in the analysis. In their analysis, Weger et al. describe strategic manoeuvring as the candidates' attempt to balance displaying disagreement with civility:

[...] given the preconditions of civility and visual presentation, candidates need to balance civility with displaying disagreement when warranted in reaction shots. (Weger et al., sec. 5)

Seeing strategic manoeuvring as "balancing civility with disagreement" extends strategic manoeuvring beyond its basic meaning, envisaged by van Eemeren and Houtlosser as balancing (dialectical) reasonableness with (rhetorical) effectiveness (van Eemeren & Houtlosser 1999).

Seeing strategic manoeuvring as "balancing civility with disagreement" extends the term to cover cases of manoeuvring between different institutional considerations (civility and the visual display of disagreement). Obviously, nothing is wrong with that. Yet, maybe it'd be interesting to focus more on the argumentation by examining how the argumentative strategic manoeuvring (i.e., balancing reasonableness with effectiveness) is influenced and shaped by institutional considerations/preconditions. I mean, instead of seeing strategic manoeuvring as balancing civility with disagreement, we may try to see strategic manoeuvring as balancing reasonableness with effectiveness while visually displaying disagreement as well as while remaining civil.

What does this mean? In the case analysed by Weger et al. this means identifying (i) the particular argumentative move(s) conveyed by the facial expressions of the arguers, i.e. by John McCain and Joseph Biden in the cases analysed, (ii) the dialectical obligation related to the move in general: what counts as a reasonable instance of the move in general? (iii) the rhetorical possibilities available for the move in general: what counts as an effective instance of the move in general? (iv) what counts as both reasonable and effective instance of the move given the civility precondition and (v) what counts as both reasonable and effective instance of the move given the visual presentation precondition. Possibly, we may also need to consider (vi) what counts as both reasonable and effective instance of the move given both the civility and the visual presentation precondition. This is, I think, what Weger et al. have done in their analysis. So, in a way, I am suggesting we look (also) at (the preliminary) steps i-v. We will probably reach a solution to the puzzle which is quite similar to what Weger et al. have given. But we will have a more elaborate argumentative understanding of the situation.

What is the argumentative move conveyed by the facial expressions of John McCain and Joseph Biden when they do not have the floor but are visible to the audience through the split screen? I guess facial expressions in this situation may convey their reaction to the standpoints and arguments advanced by their opponents (Barack Obama and Paul Ryan, respectively). We may understand that they are disagreeing with what they hear, which means we can reconstruct their

facial expressions as the argumentative move of casting doubt or advancing the opposite standpoints (or sub-standpoints, in the case they disagree with arguments). This is a move in the confrontation stage, where the goal of arguers is to define their disagreement. A dialectically reasonable instance of it is one which does not silence the opponent or exclude him from the discussion. A rhetorically effective instance of it is one which defines the disagreement in such a way that its arguer is in an advantageous position. In the case of the televised presidential debates, this means placing oneself closer to the audience and one's opponent more distant (remember, candidates are not trying to convince each other, but rather their audiences).

The next step is to consider the affordances and constraints that result from the two preconditions. The point is to answer two questions. First, in view of the civility precondition, what counts as both reasonable and effective instance of the move of casting doubt or advancing the opposite standpoint? Second, in view of the visual presentation precondition, what counts as both reasonable and effective instance of the move of casting doubt or advancing the opposite standpoint? Here for example, we may consider the constraint imposed by the civility precondition which makes inappropriate high intensity disagreement – a constraint that is considered crucial as Weger et al. show. Also relevant is the affordance offered by the visual presentation precondition which allows the candidate to remain vague about the degree of disagreement expressed. Thanks to the split screen setting, the candidate can remain vague whether he is casting doubt on the position of the opponent or is assuming the opposite of it (which is obviously advantageous). There are more affordances and constraints. These can be derived in general from the rules and conventions of televised debates or may be identified by observing the particular moves analysed.

The next step would be to incorporate the above in the analysis of the different facial expressions as strategic manoeuvres. Not as balancing civility with displaying disagreement directly, but rather as balancing reasonableness with effectiveness while dealing with the affordances and constraints imposed by the televised debate setting. I am curious about the result. My intuition is that we will be able to solve the puzzle with which we started along lines similar to the one proposed by Weger et al., namely that successful non-verbal displays of disagreement are reasonable and effective strategic manoeuvres and non-successful ones are cases of derailed manoeuvres. I think we would also be able to distinguish between different types of derailments on the basis of what norms are being violated: is the failure the result of violating dialectical norms, i.e. is the manoeuvre dialectically unreasonable? is the failure the result of violating rhetorical norms, i.e. is the manoeuvre rhetorically ineffective? or a result of violating institutional norms and conventions, i.e. is the manoeuvre institutionally defective? This will hopefully take us to an extra depth of analysis and help us better understand the complexities of the situation.

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