

Book reviews

Emotive Words, Discursive Tools and Argumentation

Fabrizio Macagno, Douglas Walton, *Emotive Language in Argumentation*
(Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014)

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Emotive Language in Argumentation offers us the possibility to embark on a 301 pages journey dedicated to the study of the mechanisms and impact of emotive words in the argumentative structures. Published in February 2014, this book touches a variety of subjects in logic, rhetoric, semantics or pragmatics, in the quest for an up-to-date explanation of a known fact: there are words in every language that are powerful enough to go beyond the direct, cognitive aspect of their functioning, namely to trigger our emotions. The authors – Fabrizio Macagno (postdoctoral researcher and auxiliary professor at the Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Portugal) and Douglas Walton (currently Distinguished Research Fellow of the Centre for Research in Reasoning, Argumentation and Rhetoric at the University of Windsor, Canada, and also professor) – use this theme in order to re-visit many other key subjects in the field, from the rules of definition to the status of presuppositions. Also, they do not forget to include classical works in their analysis (Aristotle and Quintilian, for instance), being careful to stay close to tradition.

When we face such words, the authors argue, we do not simply decode the message sent by the sender, we do not just make an effort of interpreting his or her utterances. In many cases, we actually feel the emotion that corresponds to the situation described by that very word. For example, when someone utters the word “hate” (as in “I hate you with a burning passion”) or the word “traitor” (as in “We all knew from the start that he was nothing but a traitor”) or the word “terrorist” (as in “A terrorist has been seen in this building”), at least two things happen. First, like in any other message, we get a piece of information that could or could not modify our beliefs. Second, the depiction of the reality done by the speaker through the means of those special words makes us feel hate, resentment and fear. A simple phrase like the third one totally changes our mood, our behaviors and our physiological traits: some of us may freeze, some of us may try to run as fast as possible, but, nevertheless, we are not in the same state of affairs as before the utterance was made. As anticipated, emotive words are also useful means for action: “the emotive power of these words can make them extremely effective instruments to direct and encourage certain attitudes and choices. But at the same time, the very emotions that they evoke make them subtle tools to manipulate the other’s decisions and feelings. Names can be used to conceal reality instead of representing it, to distort the facts instead of describing them, and to omit qualities and particulars instead of depicting them. Names have meanings that can be changed or modified, so that they can be used to classify what they otherwise could not mean” (p. 5). If we want to put things

differently, emotive words “can elicit an immediate response, a swift judgment that can be followed by an appropriate decision to act” (p. 261). The same word, on the other hand, can trigger different reactions from different people: “I admire your latest work” can make an author happy if it comes from a neutral reader, and circumspect if it comes from a known enemy. In the latter case, the author might interpret the malicious smile as the nonverbal foundation of a future attack. For Macagno and Walton, the technical device that allows this passing from one aspect of the meaning to another is the definition. That is exactly the reason why they offer so much space to this problem in their book. Any definition, the authors argue, carries a certain amount of argumentative force – Macagno and Walton think that these emotive words are “forms of implicit arguments” (p. 260) – and creates a meaningful area that may drive the receiver of a message towards certain feelings. Moreover, “every definition, in this view, leaves the interlocutor a wider or narrower field of refutation, a limited range of possible countermoves. Therefore, even if it is not possible to state that a definition is ‘true’ or ‘false’, it is still possible to assess it, accept it and hold it as a proposed hypothesis until the contrary is proven” (p. 262).

Along the usual process of defining a term, the authors point to mechanisms such as redefinition (as in 1. “He only scored 5 out of 100” and 2. “He didn’t miss all the shots. He made progress from the last time”) or lack of definition (sometimes people or institutions leave terms undefined on purpose, in order to obstruct knowledge or to hide facts, as it is the case with “torture”). The authors call this maneuver “the dark side of defining” (p. 262), and it usually leads to an improper use of emotive words. This type of behavior calls for speculation and for interpretation of presuppositions. When a person takes a presupposition for granted, he or she becomes vulnerable to the persuasive intention of the speaker. On the other hand, the study of presuppositions ensures a better understanding of the dialogical effects of the use of emotive words.

A few critical remarks are necessary at this point. First, even if almost every speaker is fully aware of the fact that some words seem more emotionally loaded than others, it is not clear what the factors which trigger the respective emotions are. For instance, “The start of the war is only a matter of days now” has a horrific effect on me, while “She fell in love with *War and Peace*” is merely informational. Sometimes the context of communication is the decisive aspect that unleashes the illocutionary power of a word or of an expression, so we must talk about a combination between meaning and context of utterance. Other times, trivial, non-emotive terms like “screwdriver”, “a bottle of water” or “a pile of wood” can trigger our emotions better than the usual candidates (as in “She regretted Ananda’s death. They were together for only three years, so she never got a chance to really know him. He was older. But he was, after all, her husband. Looking out of the window, she barely noticed that those men had already prepared the pile of wood”). So, intention and context are two essential features of the emotional effect, and sometimes regardless of the usual nucleus of meaning. Second, I personally expected a more consistent presence of the

cognitive sciences in the explanation of the functioning of emotive words. I am aware of the fact that we read a book of logic and argumentation, but I fail to see how these aspects can be left aside. The danger here is to work only with the input and the output, without having too many clues about throughput. And, again, how should we explain the links created between cognitive, emotional and behavioral elements?

The exceptionally vast experience which Walton has (with a career of more than fifty years of teaching and writing in logic, argumentation and rhetoric, and with more than forty books published) meets Macagno's insightful analysis and expertise in the field of law and judicial reasoning, and the result is a valuable work, with a fine grained structure and suitable examples. The elegant style of writing and the delightful erudition of authors constitute an important gain for the reader. The book is evidently addressed to students and scholars of the aforementioned field, but it can be a useful resource for the general public, also.

The Critical Discourse Analysis Approach to National Identity

Ruth Wodak, Rudolf de Cillia, Martin Reisigl and Karin Liebhart,
The Discursive Construction of National Identity
(Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2009)

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The Discursive Construction of National Identity has been regarded as a groundbreaking moment for critical discourse analysis (CDA) history. Shortly after the publication of its first edition, in 1999, the book has become a standard reference on the topic of discursive national identity. The second and extended edition, much acclaimed by world renowned experts, focuses on a new theoretical and methodological paradigm of CDA, breaking with tradition of the quantitative and qualitative content analysis classical patterns.

As far as the theoretical and conceptual framework is concerned, the book advances a new approach to discursive national identity. The starting point lies in understanding the discourse as a social practice which has a major impact for the political legitimacy process. The theoretical background of the research has its roots in the classical works of B. Anderson, S. Hall, A. Smith or Teun A. van Dijk as well as within the philosophical and sociological tradition of Critical Theory but emphasizes the “discourse-historical” approach developed by The Vienna School of Discourse Analysis which transcends to some extent the traditional instruments of sociolinguistics.

“Critical Discourse Analysis regards both written and spoken ‘discourse’ as a form of social practice. [...]. It assumes a dialectical relationship between particular discursive acts and the situations, institutions and social structures in which they are embedded: the situational, institutional and social contexts shape and affect discourse, and, in turn, discourses influence social and political reality. In other words, discourse constitutes social practice and is at the same time constituted by it.” (p.8)

From the point of view of the methodological framework, the research highlights the necessity of the hermeneutic approach to the data collected from 1995 to 2008 (political speeches of the Austrian authorities, posters, brochures, newspaper articles, interviews and focus groups). This approach goes beyond the traditional quantitative and qualitative content analysis and focuses – though in an unbalanced manner – on the rhetoric, thematic and argumentative dimensions of the discourse.

Discursive national identity is the key concept of the book and its construction reveals the classical theories of B. Anderson (nation as imagined

community) and S. Hall (national culture as discourse) as well as the CDA vision:

”If a nation is an imagined community and at the same time a mental construct, an imaginary complex of ideas containing at least the defining elements of collective unity and equality, of boundaries and autonomy, then this image is real to the extent that one is convinced of it, believes in it and identifies with it emotionally. The question of how this imaginary community reaches the minds of those who are convinced of it is easy to answer: it is constructed and conveyed in discourse, predominantly in narratives of national culture. National identity is thus the product of discourse.” (p. 22).

The Vienna School of DA regards the national identity as a process under construction which is disseminated by discourse and for a given public and depending on a specific social and political context. This perspective reminds us of the Aristotelian Triad of ethos-pathos-logos:

”We assume that there is – in an essentialist sense – no such thing as *one* national identity. We believe rather that different identities are discursively constructed according to audience, setting, topic and substantive content. National identities are therefore malleable, fragile and, frequently, ambivalent and diffuse”. (p. 4).

Against this theoretical and methodological background the main objective of the research is to identify and analyze the macro-strategies employed in the construction of the Austrian national identity. These macro-strategies do not represent a priori categories which have been imposed on the collected data but rather have been derived following the data analysis. The four types of discursive macro-strategies employed in the construction of national identity (constructive strategies, strategies of perpetuation, strategies of transformation and destructive strategies) have been identified and analyzed taking into account five thematic areas: the linguistic construction of the *homo Austriacus*, the narration and confabulation of a common political past, the linguistic construction of a common culture, the linguistic construction of a common political present and future and the linguistic construction of a “national body” (p. 30).

The main question regarding the feasibility of The Vienna School of DA paradigm is to which extent the embedded theoretical and methodological perspectives could be applied in different social-linguistic areas. An answer would reveal some problematic aspects related to the theoretical diversity on the topic of national identity.

Secondly, the argumentative strategies of *The Discursive Construction of National Identity* lacks consistency. The Vienna School paradigm places too much emphasis on the discursive manipulation of rhetorical devices such as the synecdoche, metonymy, personification, metaphor and often fails to take a deep look at the argumentative dimensions of the discourse.

In spite of these weak points, the research provides a valuable insight concerning the commemorative speeches and the fundamental role they play in the discursive construction of national identity and history. The research findings could be seen as a reconfirmation of the classical contributions of C. Perelman and A. Staudinger revealing the unquestionable function of the commemorative speeches regarded as strategies which are employed in order to legitimate the past actions and to justify the present and future political objectives. From this point of view, the book could be useful for understanding the discursive construction of history and its manipulation by those in power.

All in all, *The Discursive Construction of National Identity* provides a fruitful working instrument for those researchers interested in the discursive national identity, although understanding the research outputs would require a solid background in CDA approach as well as Austrian politics and history. The increasing number of study reports and books which are being published all over the world based on the theory of The Vienna School of Discourse Analysis show that its feasibility lies within researchers' ability to make good use of it in different linguistic and social-political contexts.