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Commentary on: A. F. Snoeck Henkemans' "The use of hyperbole in the argumentation stage"

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Snoeck Henkemans has given us a welcome treatment of hyperbole that situates it within the field of argumentation. We have been taught, perhaps most pointedly by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) and Fahnstock (1999), that figurative language has an argumentative nature. To move beyond generalizations as amorphous as that one, however, we need to have detailed analyses of specific tropes. Snoeck Henkemans is engaged in such a project, having previously studied rhetorical questions, *praeteritio*, and metonymy for us. She has now expertly added hyperbole to the list of tropes to be analyzed for their argumentative character.

For this sort of work, the central issue in our community is presently captured by the phrase 'strategic maneuvering.' This refers to the process by which people move rhetorically through a discourse space that might otherwise be described only dialectically (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 1999). Strategic maneuvering is a fairly clear and uncontroversial idea for some members of our community (those hailing from rhetoric and communication) but is a little delicate for others (the informal logicians and other philosophers). The reason for this mild difference in perspective is that the rhetoricians see a critical discussion as an exhibition of rhetorical action that might be disciplined by dialectical norms, whereas the philosophers see the same exchange as a dialogue whose nature is sometimes obscured by unnecessarily imprecise or otherwise objectionable phrasing. We all see the same things going on, but groups of us are trained to see different things first and essentially.

Rhetorical and dialectical action have a means-end relationship. For a very few people, awkwardly including many in this room, the primary motive for entering into a critical discussion might be to find out the truth. For most people, however, the controlling motive would be rhetorical: to prevail or dominate. To see how few people argue to seek truth, try wandering through a shopping mall, approaching strangers, and saying, "I'm having trouble deciding which is more important, truth or justice. Will you help me figure it out?" See how many takers you get. van Eemeren and Houtlosser (1999, p. 481) understood clearly which was the means and which the end, in their early explanation of strategic maneuvering:

The balancing of a resolution-minded dialectical objective with the rhetorical objective of having one's own position accepted is occasion for strategic manoeuvring in which the parties seek to meet their dialectical obligations without sacrificing their rhetorical aims.

In this phrasing, I believe that van Eemeren and Houtlosser are acknowledging that people argue order to pursue their personal aims (not their epistemological ones) and that dialectical discipline is accepted so long as it does not endanger rhetorical aims. In other words, dialectical action is a means to the achievement of a rhetorical goal.

Our problem, summed up in the phrase strategic maneuvering, is that dialectical action is not the only possible means. Threats, violence, bribery, sexual blackmail, lying – these could bring home forced cooperation or some other personal objective. Notice that all these things can be done with words. All of them could appear in a face-to-face disagreement. Our community's problem is to figure out when various maneuvers are tolerable and when they must be rejected as fallacies and derailments.

Finally, this brings me back to hyperbole. Snoeck Henkemans gives us a number of examples in which the hyperbole was expressive and not obscuring, charming and not unfair, emphatic and not threatening. But she also gives us other instances in which the hyperbole tried to move the burden of proof unfairly or made an emotionally forceful claim that could not be traced down to a proposition to which the speaker was committed. The linguistic form is neither guilty nor innocent by itself. Snoeck Henkemans insists therefore on the importance of context in interpreting hyperbole. I think that she means semantic or topical context in these remarks.

I was struck by a different clue in Snoeck Henkemans' paper. Her first sentence defines hyperbole as "a rhetorical trope by means of which statements are made that are obviously exaggerated and thus untrue or unwarranted." Most of her paper is about the idea of exaggeration. I'd like to take a moment to think about "obviously." Obvious to whom? It could be the speaker, the hearer, or the external analyst, but I think the real answer is that 'hyperbole's exaggeration is obvious to anyone who actually understands the hyperbole.' Some people may not understand hyperbole very well because they don't work well with figurative language (e.g., Douglas & Peel 1979), and some may be uncertain about a particular example. I myself wasn't sure whether Snoeck Henkeman's 6th example (the one that claimed "hundreds of thousands of people can confirm this") was a literal claim or not. We can all see that when something is intended as hyperbole but isn't understood as such, trouble is brewing, and the same can be said when a statement is intended literally but is treated as an exaggeration. Confusions and derailments, at least temporary ones, are likely in these circumstances because of a failure in obviousness.

But what happens when the hyperbole *is* obvious, when everyone understands what is happening? Is derailment possible then? I am not sure it is, at least for people who are participating dialectically. If I say at dinner tonight, "Michael Gilbert is the prince of philosophy, the duke of dialectic, and the great lord of logic," I doubt that any of you would be taken in by my apparent claims of his royal heritage. These descriptions are so obviously exaggerated that you would tone them down to a plausible expression of my appreciation for his work. You would hold me responsible for defending that judgment if necessary, and I would be

committed to do so – just as pragma-dialectical norms would wish. Even if there were some momentary confusion about how literal I was being – maybe you think Michael Gilbert bears some resemblance to the English royal family – we could quickly clarify things. But as I quietly specified, this is only the case “for people who are participating dialectically.”

Sometimes people only participate rhetorically, without any dialectical interests. They take cheap shots, they make accusations that are so odd that they are difficult to disprove, they leap toward slippery slopes, and they use hyperbole to get on the evening news. Thus Snoeck Henkemans’ 7th example when one televised politician insists that “nobody” believes his opponent and “everyone” knows his leadership is flawed. Remember that we have seen that dialectical action is only a means to rhetorical aims, and is not even the only means. Sometimes people use the appearance of reasoned exchanges as no more than a cover, just as a little girl might put on her mother’s dress so she can pretend to be grown up. *There is no derailment here because there was no dialectical engagement in the first place.* Obviousness doesn’t help because simply pointing out the exaggeration doesn’t get the statement discarded or rephrased, as ought to happen in a critical discussion.

I am not sure how far to press this reasoning. Is obviousness always a protection against derailment for people who are dialectically engaged? I am a little worried that obviousness might be smuggling in the idea of perfect mutual understanding, which isn’t very realistic. On the other hand, if a hyperbole is obvious it seems as though it can be set aside just as easily as a little jest between friends, with no damage at all to the character of their joint reasoning. In any event, I think we should contemplate “obviously” just as carefully as “exaggerated” in thinking about hyperbole.

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