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# Commentary on Georges Roque's "What Is Visual in Visual Argumentation?"

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In a thought provoking and incisive critique of Fleming and Johnson, Georges Roque rejects 'linguistic imperialism' and proposes that "argumentation be dissociated from the verbal." He accepts that oral and written argumentation have been the key tools that have allowed us to develop the theory of argumentation, but wants to distinguish between "words that help us to name and to conceptualize the different stages of the argumentative process, and words that we use as a channel in order to utter an argument verbally or in a written form." In the later case words are, he argues, "only one channel that can be used to convey an argument. Seen this way, the verbal loses its prerogative of being the paradigm of all argumentation. It is just the most frequent and by far the most studied of the different channels that can be used to express an argument."

I agree with most of what Roque has to say. In commenting on his paper I will try to explain why, though I will push the discussion further in one respect. I think the key issues raised by his discussion can be summarized in the questions "How are we to understand the relationship between the realm of images and the realm of words?" and "Should they be understood in a way that makes sense of, or possibly undermines, the notion that there can be visual arguments?" In responding to these questions I will propose one way to unify our understanding of visual and verbal argumentation.

## 2. ROQUE ON LINGUISTIC 'IMPERIALISM'

Let me begin by enthusiastically endorsing Roque's rejection of any linguistic 'imperialism' which assumes that meaning is possible only through language, and that the visual world can, in view of this, only have meaning in this way. In discussions of the visual, such a view is, as he points out, often combined with common prejudices about the visual and the verbal. The most persistent maintain that words provide a more precise and better way of conveying meaning, or that images are too ambiguous, emotional or vague to play a key role in the argumentative process.

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Like Roque, I think that many instances of images show that such views are mistaken. Many drawings, charts, tables, schemes, plates, diagrams, graphs, etc. demonstrate that there are clear cases where images are a better and more precise way of conveying information than words. Photographs of Michelangelo's David—or, even better, the exact marble reproduction of the statue that Ripley's "Believe it or Not" displays in St. Augustine, Florida—can provide a much more accurate and detailed description of it than any verbal description. Contemporary work on visual deductions (see, e.g., Barwise and Etchmendy 1996) has shown that non-verbal visual proofs of geometric relationships are, in comparison with verbal proofs, a significantly more effective form of reasoning.

Such views do not deny that the world of the visual and the verbal have strengths and tendencies that are notable and significant. It is true that many images are notable for the emotional impact that they make—not surprisingly given that they may graphically recreate human situations they depict. This aspect of the visual being granted, it does not show that images are, as a rule, more emotionally potent than words. We stereotype images when we treat them as vehicles used solely for this purpose. A potent speech or poem from Shakespeare may move us more than many images. A diagram in a science book is unlikely to be included because of its emotional impact.

As Roque points out, the power of words is particularly evident in the construction and discussion of abstract and complex theories. This does not mean that there is no role for images—diagrams, illustrations, etc.—in this context. There is no reason to accept the fallacy of 'purity': the notion that there can be visual arguments only if there are arguments which are purely, i.e. exclusively, visual. Such a view unreasonably assumes two separate and distinct worlds of images and words. It ignores the fact that "Words and images are strongly intertwined." In ordinary communication, we use them alone, together, and interchangeably in whatever way helps us make the points we want to make.

### 3. WORDS AS IMAGES

In the context of visual argumentation, the fundamental issue Roque raises is the relationship between the worlds of words and images. He situates himself in a middle ground between the ad hoc "argument by definition" which begs the question by assuming that arguments must be verbal, and the attempt to "stretch" a definition of verbal argument so that it encompasses a visual analogue.

[I]nstead of taking as a starting point one of the many definitions of verbal argument [...] what we need is rather to start from the level of the visual world and examine how a visual argument works before trying to propose a definition that might later be compared to one of verbal argumentation. (p. 4)

It is here I want to push the conversation further. If we are to make sense of a typology of argument that includes verbal and visual argument, then there must be something that they share in common. They cannot both be kinds of argument unless they are two subspecies of the more basic species we call 'argument.' One way to isolate this basic species is by studying one of the subspecies. Looked at from this point of view, the attempt to understand visual arguments by considering them in the context of our

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understanding of verbal argument is not an attempt to “stretch” our notion of verbal arguments but an attempt to isolate its core contents in a manner that allows us to understand how they might give rise to visual argument. I think that Roque himself implies some such view of visual and verbal argument when he describes them as two channels for argument.

I have argued elsewhere that the principles of communication that pragma-dialectics proposes as the foundation of communication—the principles that acts of communication must be comprehensible, sincere, appropriately connected to other speech acts and neither superfluous or futile—underlie attempts to communicate with images as well as words. One might describe the act of reading is a kind of visual decoding which allows us to distil meaning from stylized visual images. Written words are images with a particular grammar, syntax, semiotics, etc. that we must process when we read. Understanding other visual images in different kinds of contexts (in the use of Venn diagrams, in looking at political cartoons, in reading a map, etc.) requires a different kind of decoding, one that assumes a different syntax and semantics, but not one that makes it a completely different exercise. It makes more sense to see reading and the making sense of attempts at visual communication as two variants of a broader category that uses visual markers to communicate.

### 4. CONCLUSION

As Roque points out, argumentation theory contains competing accounts of argument. The one that I prefer sees argument as, at its core, the attempt to provide evidence for some standpoint or conclusion. Many of the core aspects of this account of argument can be applied to visual argument, and it is not difficult to find examples where the attempt to provide evidence is accomplished in a way that depends on images. Roque is surely right when he points out that argument from sign (in the use of fingerprints and bloodstains, e.g.) and argument from authority are paradigm examples.

[Link to reply](#)

[Link to paper](#)

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