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Andrew Francisca Snoeck Henkemans  
*University of Amsterdam*

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# Manoeuvring Strategically with *Praeteritio*: An Analysis of Manifestations and Effects of Pseudo-Omissions

A. FRANCISCA SNOECK HENKEMANS

*Department of Speech Communication,  
Argumentation Theory and Rhetoric  
University of Amsterdam  
Amsterdam  
The Netherlands  
a.f.snoeckhenkemans@uva.nl*

**ABSTRACT:** In order to gain more insight into the possibilities for strategic manoeuvring with *praeteritio*, in this paper attention will be paid to the ways in which *praeteritio* can be realized in discourse and to the effects the use of *praeteritio* may have as a result of the presentation techniques that are typically employed. The analysis of manifestations and effects will be used as a starting point for establishing how *praeteritio* may be instrumental in the realisation of arguers' rhetorical aims.

**KEY WORDS:** *antiphrasis, occultatio, omission, paralipsis, praeteritio, reticentia*, strategic manoeuvring

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The research I report on in this paper forms part of a larger project in which I explore the possibilities for strategic manoeuvring with specific presentational means. To this end, for each stage of an argumentative discussion, I examine which role stylistic devices such as *metonymy*, rhetorical questions and *praeteritio* can play in arguers' attempts to achieve both their rhetorical and their dialectical aims. The approach taken in this research is as follows: in order to obtain more insight into the strategic potential of certain tropes and figures of thought, an analysis is given of the communicative and interactional effects these devices may have according to classical and modern stylistics; these effects are then analysed from the perspective of strategic manoeuvring.

The subject of this paper is the stylistic device of *praeteritio*. *Praeteritio* is a figure of thought by which, according to the *Oxford Dictionary of English* (2005), "attention is drawn to something by professing to omit it". The figure is also known as *paralipsis*, *antiphrasis*, *occultatio* and *omissio*. The *Ad Herennium* gives the following description of *praeteritio*:

Paralipsis [*praeteritio*] occurs when we say that we are passing by, or do not know, or refuse to say that which precisely now we are saying, as follows: "Your boyhood, indeed, which you dedicated to intemperance of all kinds, I would discuss, if I thought this the right time. But at present I advisedly leave that aside. This too I pass by, that the tribunes have reported you as irregular in military service. [...] Of these things I say nothing, but return to the issue in this trial. (IV, 27.37)

As a preliminary step to gaining more insight into the possibilities for strategic manoeuvring with *praeteritio*, I shall first pay attention to the ways in which *praeteritio* can be realized in discourse. Next, I shall give an analysis of the effects the use of *praeteritio* may have due to the presentational means that are employed. This analysis will subsequently serve as a starting point for establishing the role *praeteritio* may play in the realisation of arguers' rhetorical aims.

## 2. MANIFESTATIONS OF PRAETERITIO

The principle characteristic of *praeteritio* is that the speaker announces that he will omit something, but mentions it nonetheless. This is different in the case of a related figure, *reticentia*, or genuine omission (also called *aposiopesis* or *praecisio*) where a speaker fulfils his or her stated intention to omit (Usher 1969: 177). According to Usher, *reticentia* “can create rhetorical effect by suggesting the availability of a great mass of relevant evidence upon which the speaker does not intend to draw” (177). With *praeteritio*, speakers or writers both make clear that they are not going to give certain information and in doing so convey this information all the same. For this reason, this figure is sometimes called ‘false reticence’ (Dupriez 1991: 186). In order to gain more insight into the possible manifestations of *praeteritio*, I shall in this section try to answer the following two questions: 1) By what means can speakers or writers make it clear that they will not convey certain information?; and 2) How do they manage to convey this information all the same?

A first way for speakers or writers to make it clear that they will not speak about something is to explicitly announce this or to propose not to talk about something. In examples (1) to (2) such a direct approach is chosen:

- (1) Let's not talk about Communism. Communism was just an idea, just pie in the sky.  
(Boris Yeltsin)
- (2) I will not tell you how my mother made coffee for my father every morning.  
([www.stanfordspokenword.com/poems/](http://www.stanfordspokenword.com/poems/))

There are also more indirect ways to make it clear that one will not say something or talk about something. A speaker or writer can for instance point out that one or more of the felicity conditions for performing an assertive speech act are not fulfilled and thereby imply that performing the speech act in question is not possible.

Assertive speech acts have the following felicity conditions.<sup>1</sup>

- S believes that the proposition expressed in the assertive is true or correct (*Sincerity condition*)
- S believes that he can present evidence for the expressed proposition (*Preparatory condition 1*)
- S believes that the information contained by the proposition is in the listener's interest (new, important, etcetera) (*Preparatory condition 2*)
- S believes he is entitled or in a position to express his commitment to the correctness of the proposition (i.e. there are no moral, legal or practical reasons or social conventions that prevent S from doing so) (*Preparatory condition 3*)

By denying that one of these felicity conditions is fulfilled, speakers can indirectly make it clear that they are not prepared to commit themselves to the proposition expressed in the assertion for which they claim the conditions are not fulfilled. I will give some examples of how this may be done in the case of each of these four felicity conditions.

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<sup>1</sup> My analysis of the felicity conditions for assertives is based on Peter Houtlosser's (1995, 103-106) analysis of the basic type of assertives, which in turn is based on the felicity conditions formulated by Searle and Vanderveken (1985).

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*Denying that the Sincerity condition (S believes that the proposition expressed in the assertive is true or correct) is fulfilled:*

- (3) Bush [...] warned Congress against limiting funding for the war [...]: “I do not believe that someone is unpatriotic if they don't agree with my point of view. On the other hand, I think it's important for people to understand the consequences of not giving our troops the resources necessary to do the job.” ([www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2007-02-26-democrats-iraq](http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2007-02-26-democrats-iraq))
- (4) I would be exaggerating if I said my husband's decision to marry me was contingent on my having this last book but I seriously suspect it was one of the top ten reasons. ([joyblogging.typepad.com/joyousknits/me\\_me/index.html](http://joyblogging.typepad.com/joyousknits/me_me/index.html))

In example (3), Bush makes it clear that he is not willing to commit himself to the proposition that someone is unpatriotic if they don't agree with his point of view on limiting funding for the Iraq war by claiming that the sincerity condition -- that he believes this proposition to be true -- is not fulfilled. Nevertheless, his follow up makes it clear that he thinks this is the case. In example (4), a wife indicates that it would be an exaggeration and thus not something she really believes to be true to say that her husband married her because she was in the possession of a certain book. She subsequently proceeds by saying that it was at least an important reason.

*Denying that Preparatory condition 1 (S believes that he can present evidence for the expressed proposition) is fulfilled:*

- (5) I have no reason to accuse CERT of doing this systematically, but its handling of the Stanford paper does raise questions. ([www.freedom-to-tinker.com](http://www.freedom-to-tinker.com))
- (6) Let us make no judgment on the events of Chappaquiddick, since the facts are not yet all in. (A political opponent of Senator Edward Kennedy)

In both the examples (5) and (6) the speakers or writers indicate that there is not sufficient evidence to put forward a certain claim or accusation, but still suggest that it can be made.

*Denying that Preparatory condition 2 (S believes that the information contained by the proposition is in the listener's interest (new, important, etcetera)) is fulfilled:*

- (7) That part of our history detailing the military achievements which gave us our several possessions ... is a theme too familiar to my listeners for me to dilate on, and I shall therefore pass it by. (Thucydides, *Funeral Oration*)
- (8) For valid reasons, in this page, the Daisy Institute chooses to be brief. For the time being, it is of no importance to elaborate and go into details in reference to how this organization has come to communicate with these advanced, compassionate, and gifted otherworldly Cosmic Ambassadors of splendour, generosity and good will, especially in this case it is not necessary to expatiate how they transmit ample short-term predictions of what they foresee in matters pertaining to discoveries and other matters with which to repeatedly surprise even the most complex or simplest of minds. ([www.daisyinstitute.com/predictions.htm](http://www.daisyinstitute.com/predictions.htm))

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In (7) and (8), it is claimed that there is good reason not to provide certain information (which is conveyed anyway): the information is in the one case already known to the audience and in the other of no importance.

*Denying that Preparatory condition 3 (S believes he is entitled or in a position to express his commitment to the correctness of the proposition (i.e. there are no moral, legal or practical reasons or social conventions that prevent S from doing so)) is fulfilled:*

- (9) It would be unseemly for me to brag about their grades, so instead I shall just tell you that nobody brought home any consonants ([bonald3.blogspot.com/2006\\_03\\_01\\_archive.html](http://bonald3.blogspot.com/2006_03_01_archive.html))
- (10) I would not dare to suggest that he was unmusical - not in this country, I wouldn't - but he preferred bagpipes ([www.daw.dk/drusbio.htm](http://www.daw.dk/drusbio.htm))
- (11) You have copies of the indictment and you can see for yourselves the serious charges against Slobodan Milosevic. This is not the time or the place for me to discuss the case against him. (29 June 2001, *Carla Del Ponte*)
- (12) In the still of the night air an odd sound is carried to me, if I had been a little more sober, I would have been able to tell you that it was the sound of a crowd. ([www.demolitionmag.com/demolitionporter.htm](http://www.demolitionmag.com/demolitionporter.htm))

In (9) a parent supposedly refrains from mentioning her children's grades for reasons of politeness. In (10) a writer does not want to offend his hosts, and finds a way to implicate the unfavourable judgement nonetheless. In (11), Carla del Ponte, prosecutor in the trial of ex-Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic indicates that it is not the right time or the right place for her to discuss the charges against Milosevic. Apparently, these charges speak for themselves in the copies of the indictment. Finally, the writer of (12) is supposedly too drunk to tell his or her readers that it is the sound of a crowd he or she hears.

There are even more indirect ways of indicating that one is not going to talk about something. Speakers or writers can also do this by making it clear in an indirect way that they consider a certain correctness condition for making an assertion not to be fulfilled. This can for instance be done by asking a rhetorical question, as in (13):

- (13) I guess I could go on and on everyday about how amazing the skating was, and how we didn't get kicked out of any spots today, and how it's summer here and there are beautiful girls everywhere and I MEAN EVERYWHERE!!! But why would I bore you with that?  
([www.robfrankel.com/kiss.html](http://www.robfrankel.com/kiss.html))

By asking "Why would I bore you with that" the writer indirectly says that there is no good reason to bore his reader with this information and thereby makes it clear that the second preparatory condition for asserting is not fulfilled. This, in turn, is an indirect way of conveying that one is not going to speak of something.

As we have seen, it is characteristic of *praeteritio* that while speakers or writers announce that they will pass something over, they mention it all the same. What sorts of techniques are employed to present the information they claim they will not communicate without drawing too much attention to this inconsistency?

One way of achieving this effect is to avoid using an all-or-nothing formulation, such as saying that one will not *speak* of something, but instead use a formulation that allows for

more gradation such as: ‘I will not go into details’ or ‘I will not elaborate’. Since the criteria for considering something as detailed or not are to a large degree a relative and subjective matter, it is hard to accuse someone of being too detailed when he claims he is not. In example (14) this technique has been used:

- (14) I will not detail my very public argument with the guy who Valet parked my car and stole all the quarters from the ash tray who said something like, “No I didn’t take your quarters there were no quarters in there when you gave me the car,” and I said something like, “Yeah, right what you don’t know is that I checked before I dropped it off with you and there was like two bucks in quarters in there and now they’re gone and boy I wonder who took them,” and how he responded with something like, “You are insane and I hate your car so go away and never come back,” and then as he walked away a bunch of quarters dropped from his pocket. ([www.pauldavidson.net/2004/03/11/today-i-have-nothing-to-say/](http://www.pauldavidson.net/2004/03/11/today-i-have-nothing-to-say/))<sup>2</sup>

A second possibility consists in using a construction like ‘I will not tell you how’. (15) is an example:

- (15) I will not tell you how the aircraft dipped and plunged through clouds for the good part of an hour while I sat whimpering in my seat, completely sober, wondering what heaven was like. ([www.knotmag.com/?article=532-27k](http://www.knotmag.com/?article=532-27k))

This way of introducing the information may be effective due to the potential ambiguity of ‘how’ as a subordinating conjunction: it can either refer to the way in which something is done or be used to introduce a statement of fact (*Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary 1987*). To take an example: a sentence like

- (16) I will not tell you how I lost all my money at the Casino.

may have two readings, (16a) and 16b):

- (16a) I will not tell you in what way exactly I lost all my money at the Casino.  
 (16b) I will not tell you that I lost all my money at the Casino.

In the latter reading this is a clear case of *praeteritio* of the self-defeating type, since the information the speaker claims not to give is exactly the information that he does get across. But this may go unnoticed because of the ambiguity of the ‘how-construction’. If the reader or listener interprets the construction as an announcement that the other party is not going to talk about the details of the way in which something happened, he might overlook the fact that the speaker or writer has conveyed the information he denied he was going to give.

A third way of realizing a *praeteritio* without being overtly inconsistent is to use a construction that can also be used in the case of a genuine omission, such as: ‘We will not talk about X today’ where X is a noun or noun phrase, and not a full statement. (17) and (18) are examples of such genuine omissions:

- (17) We will not talk about the conference today.

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, the amount of detail provided in this example makes this an extreme kind of *praeteritio* in which the full details of that which one is claiming to omit are provided. This extreme kind of *praeteritio* is sometimes called *prolepsis*.

- (18) I will not bring up the matter of the selection procedure here, since I think we had better discuss that at the staff meeting.

If the same construction is used with a noun or noun phrase that has negative or positive connotations, however, it can be used to convey exactly the information one wants to convey under the pretence of not doing so, as in example (19) and (20):<sup>3</sup>

- (19) We will not bring up the matter of the budget deficit here. (<http://www.virtualsalt.com/rhetoric.htm>)  
(20) I do not concern myself with your having despoiled the cities. (*Ad Herennium*, IV, 37.27)

If it was the speaker's intention to provide information that might be damaging to his opponent, such as that there is a budget deficit or that his opponent has despoiled cities, then he has achieved this aim while the audience may still have the impression that the speaker is genuinely withholding something.

A fourth example of how speakers or writers can make a statement or accusation while claiming that they will not make this statement without seeming inconsistent is by making use of a past conditional. They thereby make it clear that the non-fulfilment of a specific condition prevents them from making the statement. The statement is made nonetheless, as in example (21), but it no longer seems to be addressed to the person in question, so that the speaker can deny having called his friend a liar.

- (21) If you were not my friend, I would say you are a liar.

### 3. POTENTIAL EFFECTS OF PRAETERITIO

According to the *Ad Herennium*, an important reason for using *praeteritio* is to get some information across without drawing attention to the fact that one is giving this information:

This figure is useful if employed in a matter which it is not pertinent to call specifically to the attention of others, because there is advantage in making only an indirect reference to it, or because the direct reference would be tedious or undignified, or cannot be made clear, or can easily be refuted. As a result, it is of greater advantage to create a suspicion by *Paralipsis [praeteritio]* than to insist directly on a statement that is refutable. (IV, 27.37).

Usher gives a similar analysis of the function of this figure of thought and claims that "it is being used as a medium for presenting evidence in such a way that it may be accepted by the audience in spite of its doubtful veracity or value." (1965: 175). He gives the following description of how *praeteritio* might work:

*Occultatio [praeteritio]* is thus used to present material which would, if critically examined by an alert jury, be found false or refutable. It enables a statement to be made and mentally noted by the jury in the speaker's favour; but because he seems to regard it as unnecessary for his argument or irrelevant, they do not examine

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<sup>3</sup> Usher (1965: 180) considers cases like (19) to occupy an intermediate position between *occultatio* (or *praeteritio*) and *reticentia*, because on the one hand there is no full statement, but on the other hand there is still an attempt to influence the audience's view of what is being said by means of the favourable or unfavourable connotations of the noun phrase. He also admits that this intermediate type differs from *praeteritio* only in degree. Since cases like this can be a means of conveying precisely the information one wants to convey while claiming one refrains from doing so, I think that the use of this technique can indeed be seen as a case of *praeteritio*.

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it too closely. By this means, weak arguments and false evidence could be introduced with confidence under the pretence of omitting them. (176)

In this view, *praeteritio* is used to say things in such a way that they do not receive too much attention, but reach the audience nonetheless. Other authors however, see *praeteritio* as a way of emphasising the allegedly omitted material. Lanham, for instance, defines *praeteritio* as a way of “emphasizing something by pointedly passing it over” (1991: 104). And Dupriez makes a distinction between “semi-preteritions which hardly emphasize an utterance” and “true preterition” which “is a form of pseudo-simulation, concealing the better to display” (1991: 354).

I think that *praeteritio* may indeed be a combination of emphasizing and hiding. Instead of just keeping silent about something or refraining from performing a specific speech act, speakers or writers who use *praeteritio* explicitly deny that they will speak of something. By doing so, they draw attention to the speech act they claim not to perform. Normally you don’t explicitly announce that you are not going to perform a certain speech act, unless you are in a situation where people can rightfully expect you to perform this act, and there is nonetheless a valid reason not to live up to this expectation. For instance, a speaker who is giving an opening speech to a group of new students might say: “I am not going to talk about the details of the programme, since you will hear all about this from our next speaker.”

As we have seen, however, the information speakers or writers claim not to provide is often presented in such a way that the contradiction between what they claim they will do and what they do in reality is camouflaged. It is in this way that *praeteritio*, when combined with specific presentation techniques, can be seen both as a form of emphasizing and of hiding. By announcing that they will not go into details or by suggesting this with the help of an ambiguous ‘I will not tell you how’-construction, speakers or writers make it seem as if they are acting in line with their stated intention even when they subsequently provide rather detailed information. And by using noun phrases with negative connotations, for instance, speakers or writers can introduce information that is damaging to their opponent while giving the impression that they refrain from speaking on the matter that they bring up. An added advantage of the latter type of construction is that the information is introduced as if it were already an accepted fact, something that belongs to the common ground. Examples like (22) to (24) all have in common that they present the information as inescapable facts, the acceptability of which is presupposed:

(22) I will not concern myself here with Johns drinking problem.

(23) I will not speak about your having embezzled money from the company.

(24) I will not even mention the fact that he never handed in his paper.

Schmid (2001) discusses comparable constructions with an abstract noun such as ‘The fact is that’ or ‘The trouble is that’ by means of which speakers or writers can manipulate the hearer or reader. He claims that this type of construction “triggers the presupposition that what is stated in the *that*-clauses is necessarily true” (1529). Presuppositions are often bluffs, according to Schmid, by means of which speakers “trick their hearers into the unfounded belief that certain pieces of information do not require particular attention or even reflection, since they represent mutually shared, familiar ground anyway” (1548). It is by this means, I think, that *praeteritio* can be effective as an instrument to inform the audience in such a way that the information given will not be examined too closely.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

As we have seen, using *praeteritio* enables speakers or writers to focus the attention on the fact that they are not going to perform a certain speech act and meanwhile smuggle in the information they allegedly are going to omit. The fact that they are not going to tell something is presented as new information, whereas the information they provide under the pretense of omitting it is presented as if it had already been accepted by the audience, and therefore requires no particular attention.

As a next step, I intend to use the analysis presented here as a basis for establishing how *praeteritio* can be instrumental in arguers' strategic manoeuvres. According to Van Eemeren and Houtlosser, arguers make use of the opportunities available in a certain dialectical situation to handle that situation in the way that is the most favourable to them (2002: 138). By manoeuvring strategically, arguers try both to uphold a reasonable discussion attitude and to further their own case (2002: 142). In order to achieve both the dialectical and the rhetorical objectives that are associated with each of the different discussion stages, each party will aim to make the allowable moves in every stage in such a way that these moves influence the result of the discussion as much as possible in its own favour. Until now, as we have seen, *praeteritio* has mainly been described as a useful technique for presenting arguments in such a way that they are less likely to raise particular criticisms. *Praeteritio* has thus been considered a device that can be used in the argumentation stage. It is likely, however, that *praeteritio* may also be functional in other stages of an argumentative discussion. But let us not talk about those other stages today!

[link to commentary](#)

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