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Commentary on “Compassion, Authority and Baby Talk: Prosody and Objectivity”

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1. Introduction

In “Compassion, Authority and Baby Talk: Prosody and Objectivity,” Groarke and Kišiček make a case for incorporating prosody into analyses and assessments of argument. I agree that prosody is argumentatively relevant and that it ought to be assessed for its rationality. But I argue that because not all prosody is the strategy of making an argument, we ought to use methods of analysis and evaluation that fit the actual message design in order to explain strategic uses of prosody.

2. Prosody is argumentatively relevant

The authors hold that prosody is “argumentatively relevant” or, in other words, “information that needs to be considered when seriously assessing the acceptability of a standpoint” (p. 2). Because the roles prosody plays in actual arguing “are easily lost and overlooked when audible voices are ‘translated’ into written words and language” (p. 4), we ought to analyze message designs of actual communication; and Groarke and Kišiček do just that. Presumably social actors who argue routinely bring to bear tacit and explicit knowledge about how to address ordinary communicative challenges, such as getting auditors’ attention or inducing them to feel a particular emotion, and prosody is one resource for addressing the challenges.

Groarke and Kišiček assert that they are using the term “argument” as “traditionally conceived: as collections of premises and conclusions” (p. 4). I will use the term in that sense as well—as what O’Keefe (1982) has described as argument₁. Following O’Keefe (1982), I will also use the term “argument₁-making”; arguments₁ are conveyed in acts of argument₁-making. In a paradigm case of argument₁-making, both the claim and overtly expressed reason must be linguistically explicable (we must be able to say what the claim and reason are). The overtly expressed reason must be explicit but need not be verbal and may be prosodic.

3. Not all prosody is argument

Although prosody is argumentatively relevant, I submit that not all uses of prosody are best characterized as “prosodic argument” (e.g., pp. 5, 8). It is possible and desirable to distinguish the strategy of argument₁-making from other kinds of communication strategies. Groarke and Kišiček suggest that grounds exist for distinguishing prosody-as-argument₁ from prosody-as-

strategy when they contrast their interest “in the ways that prosody can be a core element of arguments traditionally conceived” with the role prosody may play “in speech delivery” (p. 4).

I submit that prosody is best analyzed as argument₁-making when it serves a demonstration function. The authors illustrate that role by noting that prosody can serve as evidence for a claim to be able to speak in a Russian accent. The authors spend the least amount of time on the demonstration function, probably because it is the clearest, most straightforward way that prosody fits the analytical method of reconstruction in terms of premises and conclusions.

But in other instances prosody is better analyzed and assessed as a strategy designed to work differently from the strategy of argument₁-making. Groarke and Kišiček suggest the difference when they observe, “We hear someone on a radio and perceive him/her as deceptive, irritating, appealing etc. without being aware of the reasons why we feel this way. Often the reason is not *what* someone says but *how* they say it” (p. 11)—i.e., not reasons someone gives but strategies designed to cue inferences. In contrast to the inferring from premises to conclusions made possible by argument₁-making, inferences cued by prosody “often rely on stereotypes and frequently work on a subconscious level” (p. 11). In those cases prosody is not designed to “manifest rationality” (Johnson 2000) in the same way that argument₁-making is. Some social scientific researchers describe the difference in terms of a spectrum of cognitive processing (the Elaboration Likelihood Model). At one end is peripheral processing, which is quick, involves less cognitive effort, and is often described as using “shortcuts” or “heuristics.” At the other end is central processing, which is slower and involves the cognitive effort of thinking “about issue-relevant arguments contained in persuasive messages” (Eagly and Chaiken 1993, p. 306). Of course argument₁-making can be processed centrally as listeners scrutinize arguments₁. Argument₁-making can also be processed peripherally. For example, in a case where a speaker advocates for a proposal, listeners may assume “that the more arguments, the more carefully researched the proposal must be” (Petty and Cacioppo 1984, p. 78), and warrant their attitude by that simple rule rather than thinking carefully about the merits of the arguments₁. Moreover, strategies processed peripherally may be rational (O’Keefe 1995). There is nothing inherently irrational about strategies processed subconsciously or using heuristics.

4. Assessing argumentatively relevant prosodic strategies that are not arguments₁

I agree with Groarke and Kišiček that critics ought to assess the rationality of strategies such as prosody, but assessing the rationality of subconscious inferences from cues is different from assessing the rationality of arguments₁, or the relationships among premises and conclusions. Consider a case where a speaker advocates a policy change. The speaker may make special efforts to sound confident, so she designs prosody to cue listeners to infer that she feels confident. Prosody is a fallible sign of confidence, and listeners may take into account any number of factors (e.g., steady hands, posture) to decide whether the inference that the speaker feels confident is warranted. But the strategies a speaker deploys to cue inferences about her level of confidence are different from the strategy of argument₁-making she deploys to show that her conclusions about, say, the practicality and justice of the policy are rationally warranted. Prosody is argumentatively relevant. Listeners may discount the speaker’s arguments₁ because she does not sound confident, even in cases where the arguments₁ merit scrutiny. Or listeners may not make the effort to scrutinize arguments₁ just because they are delivered in confident tones. In both cases prosody licenses inferences that may be assessed for rationality

independently of the rationality of the inferential structure of arguments₁ that she presents to advocate for the policy.

Scott Jacobs' work shows a way to assess prosodic strategies that are not demonstrations. For example, we can ask if strategies put listeners "in a position to decide if claims should be reasonably accepted or rejected" (Jacobs 2000, p. 274). Strategies may be designed "to encourage mutual, voluntary, free, comprehensive, open, fair, impartial, considered, reasoned, informed, reflective, and involved engagement" (Jacobs 2000, p. 274)—a significant role given that "the conditions for argumentation are always in some ways limiting" (Jacobs 2006, p. 430) and social actors must try to make do.

Consider the Ram truck advertisement featuring Paul Harvey's voice that aired during the Super Bowl and was "directed at American farmers" (p. 6) and probably other segments of the heavy-duty truck market such as residential and commercial construction workers since the line at the end of the ad reads, "To the farmer in all of us." Groarke and Kišiček use the ad to illustrate that prosody can be used as a flag to get attention (p. 8) and as an implicit conclusion reconstructed as: "What Harvey speaks about (farming) should be revered" (p. 7). But I submit that reconstructing the ad as if it were deploying the strategy of argument₁-making—by rewriting it in terms of premises and conclusions—does not explain how its actual design is argumentatively relevant. The ad does not make the kinds of arguments₁ that someone buying a work truck considers, such as arguments₁ about towing capabilities, suspension, durability, and fuel economy. Chrysler could have chosen to use argument₁-making strategies. Some truck ads show images of trucks hauling heavy loads off-road or at a construction site, and talk about the power and fuel economy of engines. But in the Super Bowl ad Chrysler mostly shows images of farmers, their families, and farmed landscapes; and the images and voiceover invoke broad values such as hard work, love of family, care for animals, civic engagement, religion. The main design strategy is not argument₁-making (showing or displaying reasons for buying a Ram truck). The prosody, images, and other message features are designed to cue inferences that Chrysler understands and admires farmers and shares broad values that farmers and other heavy-duty truck owners may hold.

It is an open question whether the prosody and other strategies ought to be assessed as rationally acceptable, that is, whether they put viewers in a position to reasonably decide whether to buy a Ram truck. For the sake of illustration, I suggest that they are rationally acceptable because they create good reasons (i.e., license a reasonable presumption) to consider buying a Ram truck. Chrysler counts on viewers to presume that, because the maker of Ram trucks understand them and their values, Ram trucks deserve some consideration from truck buyers. The presumption that a speaker who understands our situation and shares our values deserves some of our attention seems reasonable. Prudent people do not attend to every effort to attract their attention, so message sources routinely make special efforts to show their messages deserve attention. The Ram truck ad cues inferences that serve as rational grounds for viewers to seek further information about Ram trucks, perhaps by paying attention to Ram truck ads that do make arguments₁, searching for online videos that demonstrate trucks' towing capabilities, weighing the performances and costs of a Hemi engine versus an EcoBoost engine, and more.

5. Conclusion

A full analysis and assessment of the ad would need to say much more. Here I only intend to sketch an analysis and assessment that maintains fidelity to the authors' goals of analyzing

prosody as an argumentatively relevant strategy and assessing its rationality. I agree that prosody may be usefully analyzed as argument₁ when it is deployed in the role of demonstration. But when it is not an argument₁, then we ought to analyze it as a strategy that may or may not enhance conditions for scrutinizing arguments or achieving warranted assent.

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