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Commentary on Harry Weger and John Seiter’s “Exploring Gendered Nonverbal Behavior in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Debates”

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1. Introduction

Harry Weger and John Seiter provide us with a detailed and insightful empirical study of one of the most divisive presidential campaigns in recent history. In particular, we are presented with an analysis of nonverbal behaviour in the 2016 presidential debates that uses strategic maneuvering as the theoretical model of argumentation to assess the quality and propriety of the debates. Specifically, the gender double bind, identified by Barbara Boxer in 1972 and apparently little changed by 2016 (several of the more recent references support this): competent women are judged unfeminine, and feminine women are judged incompetent.

The authors produce some interesting results: One thing we learn is that Hilary Clinton’s 2016 response to the gendered double bind was both reasonable and effective when judged by the standards of strategic maneuvering. This is generally set in contrast to the public and media perceptions of her performance. Thus, it is shown that even with the best of efforts, the prejudices driving the gendered double bind would seem to prevail, unless we are to understand that her performance somehow contributed to her success at winning the popular vote. In these brief comments, I would like to focus on the elements of argumentation theory that support the study.

2. The choice of strategic maneuvering

Is strategic maneuvering the best choice for the analysis here? Yes, it does bring rhetorical considerations into the pragma-dialectical account. But beyond bringing them in under the governance of dialectic, it explicitly restricts the range of rhetorical features considered. In particular, it marginalizes consideration of *pathos* (explicitly) and *ethos* (implicitly). It is the latter that has most bearing on the discussion, but the former also comes into play. After all, and as the authors note, the pragma-dialectical rules “prohibit behaviours that threaten to disrupt the orderly progression of an argumentative discussion.” Appealing to emotion is such a behaviour.

Moreover, the goal of strategic maneuvering, as it was for the standard account of pragma-dialectics, is the resolution of a critical discussion on the merits. It is a model of argumentation that aims at consensus (a goal that sets it at odds with other models which aim at other outcomes like, say, truth). The analysis of the presidential debates here is not obviously one that shows who has a difference of opinion resolved in their favour, but rather who acts appropriately according to certain criteria.

I think the references to emotional aspects towards the end of the paper could be problematic for a pragma-dialectical account. It is suggested, for example, that Clinton’s background smiling during Trump’s attacks might have been counter to her interests “as facial displays of anger, contempt, or maintaining a neutral expression in response to such attacks would

better fit the emotional tone of the situation.” But would the pragma-dialectical theorist have judged such a recourse to anger as reasonable? And one judgment of Clinton that identifies a shortcoming in her response because she “betrayed little feeling” seems to meet the authors’ agreement, even though had she done so she would have again acted outside the prama-dialectical rules.

Of course, there is value in discussing the double bind problem through the lens of the three “aspects” of strategic maneuvering. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) provided a similar triad, with communion serving the role of audience demand, but their account lacks the detail and wider application that van Eemeren is able to give his own triad.

Still, it may strike many who reflect on the issue at the heart of this paper that the rhetorical feature most at stake is neither *logos* nor *pathos*, but *ethos*. Clinton is judged to reflect on and adopt non-verbal strategies that will present her (and what she says) in a positive light. On these terms, the appeal to *ethos* extends far beyond the Aristotelian focus on how character is conveyed through what is said, but it fits squarely into the larger discussions of *ethos* (of arguers, of audiences, of debate partners, and so forth) that have developed since. So, the question arises whether strategic maneuvering is the best account to manage questions of *ethos*? I am of two minds here.

Ostensibly, this is not something foregrounded in pragma-dialectics (although some of the analyses of some activity types do involve it). Yet although the program of strategic maneuvering is presented as selective in what it adopts from the history of rhetoric, some of the remarks in van Eemeren (2010) suggest otherwise. While questions of *ethos* were explicitly marginalized in the standard account, they arise indirectly here. One example will suffice: In the midst of Chapter 4’s discussion of the triad, we find the following apparently favourable comment on Jeanne Fahnestock’s review of audience demand: “In Fahnestock’s view, the first two aspects of strategic maneuvering, topical selection and adaptation to audience demand, link to *logos* and *pathos*; the second aspect “could be expanded to include how rhetors construct themselves as well as their language choices, thereby projecting an *ethos* appropriate to the occasion and their goals” (van Eemeren 2010: 96n4). This is an acknowledgement that would serve Weger & Seiter well. In the midst of the multiple ad hominem attacks of the 2016 presidential debates (indeed, of any recent political debates) the need to convey herself as competent and trustworthy, to build the appropriate *ethos*, is the real issue, it seems to me. Burying it in an analysis that is framed in terms of resolving differences of opinions may risk masking the very thing that the paper is keen to investigate.

3. Ethotic schemes

It behooves me, then, to suggest an alternative or, at least complementary analysis that might serve the interests here. And I would suggest Scheme Theory might do the job. At least, those argumentation schemes that are particularly rhetorical in nature and explicitly deal with ethotic issues of trust. Walton, Reed, and Macagno (2008), for example, include several argumentation schemes that bear on *ethos* and that open up examples of reasoning of this type to explore the nature of trustworthiness that is involved.

The scheme for Ethotic Argument is the obvious one to introduce briefly here (although several of the schemes that involve the way values are judged in social contexts are relevant: see Macagno & Walton 2014, p. 50-54). The major premise of this scheme presents the conditional statement that ties the reliability of a person’s utterances to the character of the person, and the minor premise asserts a statement about the person’s character (good or bad). The conclusion

follows defeasibly, based on the evidence available in the context (Walton, et al., 2008: 336). Such contexts in the discussion under review would be the specific debates that are being judged.

The evaluation of argumentation schemes is assisted by using a set of critical questions for each scheme that identify the key ideas in the reasoning and bring the contextual details to bear on the reasoning. For the scheme for Ethotic Argument, Walton and his co-authors ask about the grounds for any judgment of character and whether this is relevant in the context. We would be asking *how* trustworthiness is conveyed through the multimodal scenario. Such critical questions are a work in progress, with scholars continuing to add to them insofar as they are derived from the ground up and are case-based in their justification. The kinds of cases that interest Weger and Seiter would bring non-propositional factors into consideration with traditional Aristotelian principles of *ethos* like good will, virtue and practical reasoning (but particularly good will).

My point here is that approaching such cases using scheme theory is to adopt an account that already recognizes the value of *ethos* and accommodates it in its features. Within such a framework, the three features of strategic maneuvering discussed in the paper may well provide the details for the depth of contextual analysis that a responsible application of the critical questions requires. Here, two theories of argumentation can work in tandem to bring insight to discussions.

4. Conclusion

It remains to be observed, though, that neither of the theories discussed sheds much light on the failure of Clinton to escape the gender double bind in her performances during the 2016 debates. Perhaps this is because neither theory fares particularly well when exposed to the larger demands of multimodal (or multi-modal) argumentation, which shift attention far beyond the propositions (or the reduction to propositions) that argumentation theorists still favour. Gestures like smiles and grimaces and choices of attire, while continuing to impact the audience reception of propositions that are uttered, themselves resist the reduction to mere utterances.

Studies like that which is the subject of this paper offer value on many fronts, but one of them must be that they serve to remind us of the richness that goes into argumentative situations and the variety of features that contribute to the persuasiveness (or non-persuasiveness) of performances. Argumentation theorists in general would benefit from the example of this paper and the shift in focus it encourages.

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