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The Persuasive Effects of (Un-)Fair and Aesthetic Contributions in Argumentations: An Empirical Study¹

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1. Introduction

In the following contribution we are concerned with the persuasive effects of argumentation depending upon the integrity and the aesthetic quality of argumentational contributions. With regard to the relation between integrity and aesthetics three prototypical or „ideal“ possibilities can be distinguished which are anchored in the history of philosophy and rhetorics:

(a) Aesthetics is considered to be the decisive factor in producing persuasive effects, the moral component can be neglected. This means: Whether participants in an argumentative discussion make false assertions, distort the original meaning of facts, devaluate the opponent's self-respect or discredit the opponent in one way or the other is secondary. The only thing that counts is „having fun“, „pleasure“, „enjoyment“. And an argumentation is fun, if the arguments presented are rhetorically and linguistically nothing but brilliant.

(b) Integrity is considered to be a necessary condition for any aesthetic component becoming effective. According to this position the moral component is the relevant factor for persuasive force; the aesthetic component is regarded as an additional ornament of speech.

(c) The relation between aesthetics and integrity is a compensatory one: aesthetic quality is able to compensate unfairness, integrity is able to compensate a lack of aesthetic quality.

On a more abstract level these three possible relations correspond to controversial theoretical positions advocated in the literature of philosophy and rhetorics where they have been discussed under the broader label of „aesthetics and moral“ (Früchtl 1996). We treat them as a kind of exploratory hypotheses, that is, our interest is to find out which of the three possibilities is empirically valid. Thus, we have conducted a study in which we collected data on the persuasive effects of argumentational contributions varied systematically with regard to integrity and aesthetics of speech. In the following we would like to report on this study. First we will introduce you to our conceptualization of „argumentational integrity“ and „aesthetics of speech“. Next we will present our empirical research approach and some first results.

2. The construct of argumentational integrity

The construct of argumentational integrity describes criteria for the evaluation of contributions to argumentative discussions under an ethical perspective. These criteria have been put forward in the form of conditions, defining characteristics and standards of (un-)fair argumentation. In deriving the construct of argumentational integrity, we started from a prescriptive use of „argumentation“, which relies on rationality and cooperation as the goal characteristics of the argumentative procedure. Thus we have defined „argumentation“ as follows:

In an argumentation, the participants attempt to find a solution / to a controversial issue (requirement) / by means of a partner-/listener-oriented exchange of views (process)/that is based on (good) reasons (goal) / and made acceptable to all participants (in a cooperative manner) (goal). In order to potentially reach the goal characteristics of rationality and cooperation, contributions to an argumentation should conform to the four conditions of (I) formal validity, (II) sincerity/truth, (III) justice on the content level and (IV) procedural justice/communicativity (Groeben/Schreier/Christmann 1993; Schreier/Groeben/Christmann 1995).

We have defined the *keeping to these conditions as 'fair', their conscious violation as 'unfair' argumentation*. Next we have specified four characteristics of unfair argumentation, which can be regarded as the „negative“ of the four argumentative conditions. These characteristics constitute classes of argumentative rule violations on a high level of abstraction. In a further step, we have specified *standards of argumentational integrity* which were derived on the basis of an empirical classification of 35 unethical strategies selected (representatively) from popular rhetorical texts. A cluster analysis of these classifications yielded 11 standards of fair argumentation, which again constitute classes of rule violations on a medium level of abstraction (Schreier/Groeben 1996).

Since 1988 we have demonstrated in a series of empirical studies the psychological validity of our specification of the construct 'argumentational integrity' (e.g. Christmann/Groeben 1995; Christmann/Schreier/Groeben 1996; Schreier/Groeben/Blickle 1995; Groeben/Nüse/Gauler 1992). In the present context, it is important to note that it could be shown that violations of the standards of integrity are conspicuous, are recognized on a reactive level of response and are negatively evaluated (Schreier/Groeben/Blickle 1995). The negative evaluation of unfair argumentation is the starting point for our research question on the relation between integrity and aesthetic quality of argumentational contributions.

3. The concept of aesthetic quality and its operationalization

First we have to operationalize the aesthetic quality of argumentational contributions. Since the time of classical rhetoric, a number of rhetorical and stylistic figures have been proposed as ornaments of good speech (like alliteration, metaphor, metonymy and so on) which are still valid today. In recent years, researchers in the field have tried to systematize and classify these rhetoric figures (e.g. Leech 1966 and the Lüttich group μ ; Plett 1977). According to Plett, rhetoric-stylistic figures can be classified as syntactic, semantic and pragmatic deviations with regard to

„normal“, that is conventional or standard language usage. In terms of gestalt psychology, the characteristic feature of semiotic deviations (that is the potentially aesthetic quality) can be described as a figure (or ‚foregrounding‘) which contrasts against the background of conventional language usage (van Peer 1986).

But apart from linguistic features of speech, the context (e.g. occasion and recipients), too, must be considered for the evaluation of the aesthetic quality, an issue pointed out as early as in classical rhetoric theories. This implies that we turn away from approaches, which regard only features immanent to the linguistic product as aesthetically being relevant. Accordingly, we consider the effects of linguistic features on the recipients as part of the aesthetic quality of the product (that is of an utterance) and thereby take into account the recipient's cognitive constructivity. Let us give you an example: Grammatical deviations in a literary context may be thought of as being aesthetic (like Claire's language usage in Tucholsky's ‚Rheinsberg‘: ‚Glaubsu, daß es hier Bärens gibt?‘), whereas the same deviations in an educational context at school are simply evaluated as „incorrect“. This phenomenon shows clearly, that situational context plays an important role in evaluating aesthetic quality. Individual-centered psychological interpretations of ‚foregrounding‘ and ‚backgrounding‘ as well take into account the actual situational context: Only those features are experienced as deviant (and potentially aesthetic), which stand out against an individual's expectations and reference norms. In other situations, different expectations and norms can be relevant and thus, other features of an utterance can be experienced as being aesthetic. At this point, similarities to psychological theories of motivation are obvious, but cannot be discussed in detail here.

The previous example of evaluating grammatical deviations in a literary vs. an educational setting suggests that apart from the situational setting as such, the presumed ability and intention of the speaker may affect the reactions and evaluations constructed by the listener in a given context. Parallel to the evaluation of unfair speech acts in this case, too, we consider the attribution of the speaker's intention as relevant for evaluating the aesthetic quality of utterances. The effect on the recipient is in itself a complex multilevel reaction. Apart from the aesthetic evaluation in a more narrow sense, we are also interested in some further aspects of this reaction, which we discuss later.

To summarize, we have developed a theoretical model, which allows us to describe and explain the effects of rhetoric-aesthetic speech. We conceptualize ‚aesthetic quality‘ as a multi-relational construct, consisting of the following components: the semiotic (that is the syntactic, semantic or pragmatic) deviation of an utterance, the situational context and the speaker's presumed intention. We consider these features to be empirically testable.

4. Empirical testing and validation

The goal of our empirical testing is twofold: On the one hand, we want to validate the concept of aesthetics that we have just presented, on the other hand we want to test the relation between

aesthetics and argumentational integrity (see above chap. 1). For that purpose, we have established the following exploratory hypotheses:

(1) *Validation of the concept of aesthetics (dependent variable: aesthetic evaluation)*

Argumentational contributions including semiotic deviations are evaluated more positively than contributions, that do not include semiotic deviations. The speaker's presumed intention plays an important role in the evaluation of aesthetic quality.

(2) *Relation between aesthetics and (un-)fairness (dependent variable: persuasive effects)*

(2a) *Superiority of aesthetics*

Semiotically deviant utterances have a larger persuasive effect than non-deviant utterances. The dimension of integrity has no effects.

(2b) *Fairness as a necessary condition of aesthetic effects*

Only in case of fair arguments, semiotically deviant utterances are more effective than non-deviant contributions.

(2c) *Compensation of missing aesthetics by fairness and vice versa*

Unfair, but semiotically deviant contributions are as effective as fair and non-deviant contributions. Unfair and semiotically deviant contributions are more effective than unfair and semiotically non-deviant utterances. Conversely semiotically non-deviant, but fair contributions are more effective than semiotically non-deviant, but unfair contributions.

The empirical testing of these hypotheses request an operationalization of the independent variables ('fairness' and 'aesthetics') and the dependent variable ('persuasive effect').

With regard to the independent variable of aesthetics, we first had to check, which rhetoric figures can count as ornaments of speech. After the study of the relevant literature, we established a list of rhetoric figures and asked experts (psychologists and/or linguists competent in the field of rhetoric) to rank these (10) rhetoric figures in an order of relevance and importance. On the basis of this expert rating we selected the most prominent types of rhetoric figures and classified them according to Plett's model of semiotic deviation. The following classification rules were applied:

Figures are classified as *syntactically* deviant, if their structure on the phonological, morphological or sentence-level deviates from the normal or conventional corresponding structure (e.g. the anaphora „Television makes children become violent. Television makes children use violence“ or the alliteration „Media make meanings“).

Figures are classified as *semantic* deviations, if the relation between utterance meaning and conventional meaning is one of similarity, contrast or contiguity. An example for a relation of similarity is the metaphor „bacillus of violence“, for a relation of contrast the ironic comment on a heavy crime movie: „That was really neat“, for a relation of contiguity the metonymy „Television kills people“ (the cause is used in place of effect).

We classified utterances as *pragmatic* deviations if a speech act (that is the illocutionary act) deviates form the illocutionary act normally associated with that contribution (for example rhetorical questions like „Who will deny that?“).

Certain ironic speech acts can be classified as *semantic and pragmatic* deviations, because the meaning of the utterance deviates from the substituted normal language usage and the illocutionary act deviates from the norm (e.g. „Shouldn't we parents buy each kid three televisions?“).

The independent variable '(un-)fairness' was manipulated by use of the 11 standards of argumentational integrity (see note² below), which describe classes of argumentational rule violations and which have been validated in several empirical studies (e.g. Schreier/Groebe 1990, Schreier 1992). The rhetoric figures and the standards and strategies of argumentational integrity were used to modify contributions in argumentational episodes. These episodes are short versions of a fictitious dialogue between two people on the causes of violence. While maintaining the basic meaning, we varied certain parts of the utterances, so that they represented combinations of fair or unfair and semiotically deviant or non-deviant speech acts. The appropriateness and success of our variations was guaranteed by an expert-rating. We created 5 different episodes, with each episode containing 10 different variations of (un-)fair and (non-)deviant utterances. Altogether we constructed 50 different episodes. Table 1 (see below) gives an overview of the combinations of our two factors 'aesthetics' and '(un-)fairness'. To give an example, we filled out two cells of this scheme. (For the relevant passages of the corresponding episodes see note.³)

		Semiotic deviations				
		non-deviant	deviant			
			syntactic	semantic	pragmatic	semantic and pragmatic
(Un-)fairness	fair	(e.g. 1st variant)				
	unfair	characteristic I (faulty arguments)				
		characteristic II (insincere contributions)				
		characteristic III (unjust arguments)				e.g. distortion of meaning, discrediting of others, realized in an ironic speech act (e.g. 2nd variant)
	characteristic IV (unjust interactions)					
	combination of characteristics					

Table 1: Combinations of the two factors 'aesthetics' and '(un-)fairness'

For the validation of the aesthetic model, the main dependent variable is the aesthetic evaluation of contributions (in a narrow sense). With regard to the relation between 'aesthetics' and '(un-)fairness', we are primarily interested in persuasive effects. Concerning this variable, we differentiate between emotional-conative aspects of agreement to an argument on the one hand, and cognitive effects in the sense of correct representation of the given reasons on the other hand. To measure these two aspects, we have formulated a number of statements about possible effects. The subjects were asked to indicate the degree of agreement to these statements on five-point rating scales. Table 2 shows the independent and the dependent variables differentiated in our study.

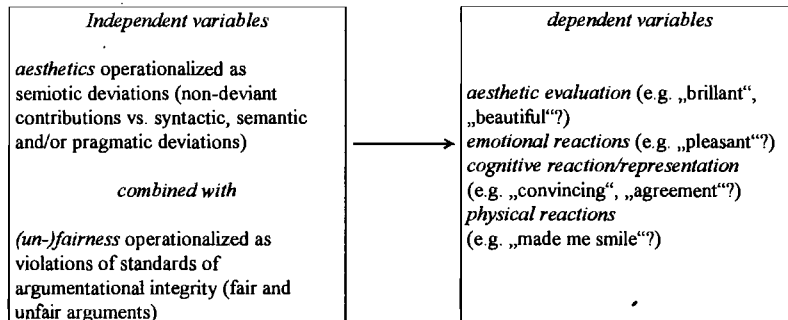


Table 2: Independent and dependent variables of the study

5. Procedure and first results

The study was carried out at the University of Heidelberg. 160 subjects participated in the study. Data were collected by questionnaire. Each subject was asked to evaluate 5 argumentational episodes. 90 subjects received the episodes in a written, 70 subjects in an acustic form (Mischo/Groeben/Christmann 1996; Mischo/Christmann/Groeben 1996). With regard to these latter subjects, data were collected in individual sessions. We have not yet finished our data analysis, but we can present some first results, regarding the presentation of the *written* episodes. The empirical tests were based on „objective“ (classified by experts) as well as on subjectively identified semiotic deviations and (un-)fair arguments.

Concerning *the concept of aesthetics*, „objective“ as well as subjective data seem to validate our conceptualization: Semiotic deviant utterances scored higher on items indicating the aesthetic quality than did non-deviant utterances. Semantic deviations (like metaphors and metonymies) received the highest values in aesthetic quality. Differences in „objectively“ and subjectively identified ironic speech acts (as semantic and pragmatic deviations) with regard to aesthetic effects emphasize the role of the speaker's presumed intentions.

With regard to the *relation between aesthetics and (un-)fairness*, both types of data strongly support the second of our prototypical cases (b) „fairness as a necessary condition for aesthetic effects“. The data clearly show that in the case of fair contributions, semiotic deviations in particular were considered convincing, whereas in the case of unfair contributions, semiotic deviations could not compensate for the negative effects of unfairness.

Notes

1. This paper is based on the research conducted in the project C1 'Argumentational Integrity in Everyday Communication' which is part of the SFB 'Language and Situation' (Heidelberg/Mannheim). We would like to thank the German Research Association for supporting our work.
2. *Standards of Argumentational Integrity*
 - I. Faulty arguments
 1. Violation of stringency: Do not intentionally present your arguments in a non-stringent fashion (e.g.: „proof by inconsequent argument“).
 2. Refusal of justification: Do not intentionally avoid giving any or intentionally give insufficient reasons in support of your assertions (e.g.: „appeal to mere authority“).
 - II. Insincere contributions
 3. Pretence of truth: Do not make such assertions out to be objectively true which you know to be either false or merely subjective (e.g.: „making false statements“).
 4. Shifting of responsibility: Do not intentionally deny, claim, or transfer responsibility to others (persons or institutions) without justification (e.g.: „shifting one's competence onto someone else“).
 5. Pretence of consistency: Do not consciously present any arguments which are not or are only seemingly congruent with what you otherwise do or say (e.g.: „discrepancy between words and actions“).
 - III. Unjust arguments
 6. Distortion of meaning: Do not repeat contributions made by others, your own contributions, or facts in such a way as to intentionally distort their original meaning (e.g.: „changing the meaning of a term during an argument“).
 7. Impossibility of compliance: Do not, and be it only by negligence, demand anything of others which you know they will not be able to do (e.g.: „making two mutually exclusive demands“).
 8. Discrediting of others: Do not, and be it only by negligence, discredit other participants (e.g.: „changing the opponent's competence to argue the issue“).
 - IV. Unjust interactions
 9. Expression of hostility: Do not intentionally act towards your adversary in the matter at hand as though he were your personal enemy (e.g.: „attempt to intimidation by being rude“).
 10. Hindrance of participation: Do not intentionally interact with others in such a way as to impede their participation (e.g.: „pressuring the others to act“).
 11. Breaking off: Do not break off the argumentation without justification (e.g.: „pretending that the issue is really irrelevant“).
3. Example: part of an experimental episode
 In one episode, a scientist (A) and a social worker (B) are arguing on a congress about the appropriate methods to find out the relationship between television and violence. Person A does not think that it is *impossible* to find out the relationships by interviews with young people on the street, but strongly supports questionnaire-surveys with students. Person B has a different point of view.
First variant (fair and semiotically non-deviant)
 Person B: „I know that it's difficult to carry out a study with young people on the street, but it would be worthwhile because on the streets you can find young people, watching TV 6 hours a day and being aggressive, neither of which applies to your students, I suppose. Apart from that, I think that there are a number of approved interview-methods, so that it would be quite possible to carry out a good study on the street.“
Second variant (unfair (unjust arguments: distortion of meaning, discrediting of others), semantic and pragmatic deviant (ironic)).

Person B: „Your objections against interviews are very encouraging! But it's simply not true, that it is absolutely impossible to carry out a good survey with the interview method. But probably, you are right: Never carry out a study with young people on the street, because there you can neither find violence, nor people watching TV frequently. Whereas your students obviously are watching TV 6 hours a day and starting to become violent every evening. I've got the impression, that most objections are raised by people, who don't have any idea about interview methods.“

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Dialoganalyse VI

Referate der 6. Arbeitstagung
Prag 1996

Dialogue Analysis VI

Proceedings of the 6th Conference
Prague 1996

Herausgegeben von
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Olga Müllerová und Jindra Světlá

Teil 1

Sonderdruck

aus Beiträge zur Dialogforschung
Band 16

Max Niemeyer Verlag
Tübingen 1998

