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Discussing discourse modalities in argument theory: Reconsidering a paradigm

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Abstract: This article analyzes a statement by Blair that the conditions of interpretation of visual expression are indeterminate to a much greater degree than is the case with verbal expression. We argue that this proposition reveals a somewhat hidden paradigm about what argument theory is or should be. This currently dominant paradigm takes as its object a prototypical verbal discourse from which arguments can be “reconstructed” in a fairly straightforward way. In this article, we argue that accepting multimodal discourse as a means to convey argumentation implies the necessity of a serious amendment of this paradigm. The problem of modeling the protagonist’s commitments inevitably requires our having to deal more with indeterminate, “raw” discourse formats, not to be replaced by verbal reconstructions. It requires our incorporating multimodal semiotics as an integrated element of argumentation theory; and it requires our accepting that argumentative commitments are deliberately underspecified and negotiable.

Keywords: cognitive semiotics, argumentation theory

1 Introduction

At the beginning of this century Antony Blair participates in a discussion about the possibility of conveying argumentation by means of “visual” discourse. Blair is ready to accept this possibility (Blair 2004, reprinted as Blair 2012). However, he observes a relevant difference between visual expression and verbal expression. Discussing the general question whether images can convey arguments, Blair claims: “ ... the conditions of interpretation of visual expression are indeterminate to a much greater degree than is the case with verbal expression” (Blair 2012: 210).

In this article, we take this statement by one of the most distinguished, amiable and rightfully admired contemporary argument theorists as our point of departure, in an attempt to reveal a paradigm that underlies currently dominant

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argument theoretical approaches. According to this paradigm, a specific type of verbal expression is prototypical to convey argumentation: prototypical argumentative discourse brought forward during the argumentation stage in a discussion consists of sets of verbal expressions with a well-delineated propositional content, ordered in a specific, (informal) logical structure. This prototypically formatted discourse is taken as a reference point for other discourse formats. In order to understand the “real” argument, non-prototypical discourse formats first need to be prototypically *reconstructed* (Van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004; Van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2009), or *standardized* (Govier 2010), or *dressed* (Woods 1995; Groarke and Tindale 2013). It is assumed that this verbal reconstruction is possible, can replace the original discourse¹ and, more importantly, that this process of reconstruction does not interfere with successive analyses and evaluations of the reasonableness of the reconstructed argumentation.

Within this paradigm, a discourse can be evaluated as strategically smart in the way it presents arguments, or as unclear or indeterminate because it makes the reconstruction difficult, or as manipulative if it blurs the argumentative commitments of the rhetor by deliberately “frustrating” a straightforward reconstruction. These evaluations, however, are considered to be evaluations of *presentational choices* the rhetor made, distinct from the assessment of reasonability of the argumentation as reconstructed.²

1 It can replace the original discourse as far as the argumentative appeal to reason is concerned because the argumentation as reconstructed represents this appeal; other aspects of the original discourse are then presentational choices (see below).

2 It is not easy to determine whether the extended pragma-dialectical theory, developing the concept of *strategic maneuvering*, still follows this paradigm (compare Van den Hoven 2012c). A rhetor maneuvering strategically tries to reconcile both dialectical goals (resolving a difference of opinion in a reasonable way) and rhetorical goals (maximizing effectiveness by choosing and performing dialectically relevant moves in a way that may convince the prospective audience best; Van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2006, 2009; Van Eemeren 2010). Van Eemeren distinguishes three aspects of strategic maneuvering: *choices made from the topical potential*, *adaptation to the audience*, and *presentational choices* (2010: 93–127). The third aspect, *presentational choices*, is at the heart of the problem discussed in this paper. According to the paradigm sketched above, *presentational choices* can merely affect the *effectiveness* of the argumentation, because they regard variations of one and the same argument (the one as reconstructed in the prototypical format). In this paradigm, it seems inconsistent to model different *presentational choices* as the presentation of different arguments, with potentially different impact on dialectical commitments. Therefore Van Eemeren indeed seems to challenge the paradigm when he writes: “[R]ecognizing the unbreakable connection between expression and content observed already in antiquity ... my starting point is that whenever something is at one time expressed differently than it was expressed at another time it is pragmatically no longer ‘the same thing’” (2010: 119). Taken to its consequences, this would indeed mean reconsidering the paradigm. It means that

We claim that Blair's statement reflects this paradigm. His expression seems acceptable as long as one assumes that he compares visual expressions with these prototypical verbal expressions only, and that "interpretation" in this context means the analytical act of transforming the discursive expressions into the prototypical format. It is evidently incorrect, however, as soon as one compares visual expressions with verbal discourse formats that seriously deviate from this prototype (Section 2).

In Section 3 we will argue that this somewhat hidden paradigm is challenged when one seriously acknowledges that multimodal, partly pictorial discourse formats (drawings, photos, moving images with sound, music, creative camera work, including digital animations) can convey argumentation. We claim that the paradigm is challenged as soon as one acknowledges any discourse format as one that a serious rhetor can consider *most apt to express his appeal to reason*, even if it deviates substantially from the prototypical format.³ This includes discourse modalities that may even be conveyed entirely verbally such as storytelling and metaphor. The currently dominant paradigm takes the prototypical format as its reference point and considers other formats "indeterminate to a much greater degree"; we intend to take as our reference point formats that are frequently used in the context of serious argumentative discussions and intend to show how atypical the prototypical format is and how far-reaching and certainly not neutral towards the appeal to reason is its process of standardization, reconstruction, or dressing.

the two Nixon-Kennedy discourses mentioned in Section 2 convey, in Van Eemeren's view, also different arguments and should therefore appear as different arguments in a dialectical reconstruction, potentially influencing the assessment of dialectical reasonableness. There are, however, some hedging elements in his expression. Further, when we look at the practice of strategic maneuvering analyses within the pragma-dialectical framework, we observe that analysts actually make dialectical reconstructions first, apart from the presentational choices, modelling the argumentative (dialectical) commitments; presentational choices are thus considered independent of these commitments (with one major exception: when the presentation renders a reconstruction problematic, this is considered a [dialectical] derailment [Van Eemeren 2010: 187–209]). See for example Feteris 2009; first we get a reconstruction on 100–102, then reflections on presentational choices follow, apart from this reconstruction on 104 and 106–107.

³ Compare the way Max Black formulated his view on the metaphor in 1979: "Somebody seriously making a metaphorical statement ... might reasonably claim that he meant just what he said, having chosen the words most apt to express his thought, attitudes, and feelings" (reprinted in Black 1994: 22). Here we encounter a problem similar to the one we have to deal with; can a metaphorical discourse be "reconstructed" as a set of propositions representing the tenor of the metaphor in a way that reduces the metaphorical discourse as such to a presentational device?

In Section 4 we reflect on the implications of our theoretical argument for argument theory. If one accepts multimodal discourse formats as apt ways to convey argumentation (which is no necessity but a theoretical and even paradigmatic choice), the problem of modeling the protagonist's commitments inevitably requires our having to deal more with indeterminate, "raw" discourse formats, not to be replaced by verbal reconstructions. It requires our incorporating multimodal semiotics as an integrated element of argumentation theory; and it requires our accepting, as an element of a reasonable discussion, that argumentative commitments are deliberately underspecified and negotiable.

2 Blair's statement conveys a hidden paradigm

We take Blair's statement as a point of departure because, taken out of context, it is obviously incorrect. Qualifying a statement by Blair as obviously incorrect and subsequently leave it at that would rightly be considered a violation of Grice's cooperative principle. We therefore need to search for a meaning in which Blair's statement does make sense. This can be done by assuming that Blair is not comparing *all* verbal expressions with *all* visual expressions,⁴ but that he had in mind a certain class of verbal expressions to be compared with "visual" expressions, namely, verbal expressions that meet the prototypical format. "Indeterminate to a greater degree" means that more radical decisions are required to reconstruct the multimodal discourse into the prototypical format.

Interpreted as a general claim, Blair's statement is incorrect, because it is easy to come up with rhetorical situations in which an argumentatively relevant element is conveyed by means of pictures or multimodal discourse in a much more determinate way than could be conveyed by a functionally equivalent element, even including the words of a professional language user such as a top journalist. The pictorial discourse modality leaves the interpreter with less freedom than does the equivalent verbal discourse modality.⁵

⁴ We prefer to speak about pictorial elements in the discourse as all written verbal discourse is visual; but we will use visual if the context makes clear what is meant.

⁵ The concept of *functional equivalency* is introduced in Van den Hoven 2012a. We are aware of the fact that functional equivalency is a rather intuitive concept. Sometimes it is easy to argue that two elements are functionally equivalent; more often than not, it depends on interpretation. However, as long as we stick to rather clear-cut cases, we think it is the best way to discuss statements like Blair's in which comparisons between modalities are made.

For example, in conveying a premise that physical appearance is an important factor in explaining the impact of the first Nixon-Kennedy debate on September 26, 1960, one can of course use a verbal formulation like the following: “Nixon, pale and underweight from a recent hospitalization, appeared sickly and sweaty, while Kennedy appeared calm and confident.”⁶ One can also try to reinforce the standpoint that physical appearance explains a substantial proportion of the impact the camera registration of the debate had on the viewers by showing footages of the event or pictures taken on the spot during the debate. It seems obvious that here, a pictorial expression leaves the interpreter less freedom than is the case with the quoted verbal expression of a trained journalist in constructing the mimetics that allow a judgment on the physical appearance of the two candidates.

The same can be said of the use of a graph as compared with a verbal presentation to present a summary and basic interpretation of a large set of data. Also stating verbally that it is complex though possible to go from A to B, or that a complex object A fits into space B, or that a complex future scenario will develop in a certain way, will leave the interpreter more freedom of interpretation than would multimodal discourse formats featuring (respectively) a map with a line drawn on it and a verbal comment, a little clip in which you see both A and B depicted at the same scale, and an animated simulation that visualizes the essence of computer simulations of the scenario. In sum, many specific arguments as part of an argumentative discourse can be conveyed by means of multimodal discourse that incorporates pictorial elements leaving the interpreter less freedom than when conveyed by verbal means only.

It is fair to note that Blair’s statement is used with reference to “purely” visual discourse as compared with “purely” verbal discourse. We, however, are talking about multimodal discourse as compared to purely verbal discourse. One could retort that pictorial elements always need verbal anchoring, but are in themselves less determinate and that therefore Blair is right. This has been the position taken by Roland Barthes (1964), developing the concept of “anchorage.” We are ready to admit that, following the general principles of relevance and coherence, modalities in multimodal discourse constrain each other’s interpretation. But because this is not specific for verbal elements constraining pictorial elements, one cannot consider pictorial elements in general more indeterminate. The way verbal elements can constrain pictorial elements is similar to the way in which, for example, a narrative example constrains the interpretation of a verbally conveyed legal rule, or, conversely, how the legal rule clarifies the

⁶ How the Nixon-Kennedy Debate Changed the World by Kayla Webley, in *Time*, Thursday, Sept. 23, 2010.

relevance of the example. Both constrain each other's relevant interpretation, in different respects. Quite often pictorial elements constrain the interpretation of verbal elements. Even in professional contexts in which a lot of well-defined, specialist descriptive verbal terms are available, a picture or drawing will nevertheless be added that is meant to clarify the description, for example in technical discourse concerning the construction and workings of complicated machines and installations. Depending on context, the verbal mode may constrain the pictorial mode, and vice versa. Entirely decontextualized, most discourse formats raise interpretation problems for most audiences because of a lack of constraining additional information or foreknowledge.

Notice that so far we have given Blair's statement the benefit of the doubt, comparing multimodal discourse with what we imagine might be conceived of in ideal circumstances as being *the best possible verbal counterpart*. One should, however, remember that this is not a limitation expressed in Blair's statement as such. Blair's statement, unless interpreted in the specific way that we are proposing, is used with reference to all verbal discourse. What is also relevant therefore is what we experience when reconstructing "raw" verbal discourse into the prototypical argument structures. Mostly, there are numerous interpretative decisions that need to be taken by the analyst, who more often than not experiences "too much interpretative freedom." In practice, in the overwhelming majority of cases, verbal discourse formats intended to convey argumentation, tend to be rather indeterminate. This is not merely due to sloppiness on the part of those constructing the discourse. It is also due to the fact that verbal expressions are far removed from expressing straightforwardly easily identifiable "propositions." Thus, in "raw" verbal discourse one frequently encounters expressions with a strongly ideographic content, to use a term coined by McGee (1980). Here is an example of this type of argumentatively relevant discourse: "Our experiences with 9/11 teach us that we need to accept a certain surveillance of our private sphere by the government." It is up to the interpreter to decide what experiences in particular are referred to here. It is the contextualization given by the standpoint part that should help us to determine this. We can easily imagine a multimodal discourse, with this verbal expression being conveyed by a voice-over, in which the pictorials supply, in a more determinate way, what experiences exactly the rhetor considers relevant here. In such a case, the pictorials "anchor" the verbal expression, instead of the other way around.

The examples so far should sufficiently illustrate (1) that in order to compare modalities one has to specify the argumentative elements a discourse intends to convey and compare discourse expressions of different modalities that are – more or less – functionally equivalent to determine their relative degree of indeterminateness, (2) that pictorial discourse, certainly when verbally anchored, is often

more determinate than its “purely” verbal counterpart, and (3) that verbal expressions, even taken from carefully formulated discourse, can be rather indeterminate and require a context to be assigned their proper meaning.

To make sense of Blair’s statement, we need to assume that as a point of reference for the determinateness of images, he did not have in mind all “raw” verbal argumentative discourse, but rather, discourse that can be straightforwardly reconstructed as orderly sets of expressions that convey propositions. By this we mean expressions conveying clear instructions as to the procedures of assessing their acceptability, and the relations between the expressions fitting into (informal) logical schemata and dialogue formats. If we place Blair’s statement back in its original context, we get an indication that Blair must indeed have been thinking of argumentation as orderly sets of propositions. He states in an article titled “The possibility and actuality of visual arguments,” Section 3, that visual arguments are possible because the visual expression of propositions is familiar and relatively unproblematic (2012: 209).

If we assume this prototypical structure as a point of reference, we can conclude that the phrase “Our experiences with 9/11 teach us” does not meet the requirement of straightforwardly conveying propositional content. We are assuming therefore that Blair did not have these types of expressions in mind. The Nixon-Kennedy example is closer to the prototypical structure. Although, “Nixon appeared sickly and sweaty; Kennedy appeared calm and confident” are two somewhat indeterminate expressions, not fulfilling clear acceptability criteria; the pictorial counterpart may in this respect still leave less freedom of interpretation.

So far, an undiscussed complication when comparing the determinateness of expressions that are part of an argumentation is that a rather determinate expression can very well go along with a far less determinate element that appears in a prototypical reconstruction as the implied argument. In the Nixon-Kennedy example, the implied argument is easy to reconstruct in the verbal mode and clearly more determined than the implied argument in a multimodal mode, showing a clip of the debate. In the verbal mode, the implied argument is: “If in a television debate the one candidate looks sickly and sweaty, and the other appears calm and confident, then it is plausible that a significant proportion of the impact of the debate has to be explained in terms of the difference in physical appearance.” This is more determinate than: “If you see what you are seeing in the clip, then it is plausible that a significant proportion of the impact of the debate has to be explained in terms of the difference in physical appearance.” Indeed, we can go along with Blair’s statement on the issue here, and agree that seldom will we have non-verbal elements in multimodal discourse that are as straightforward in their reconstruction of at least the implied argument as the prototypical paradigmatic verbal format is.

Summing up, we have to assume that in the statement cited, Blair is not hinting at complex verbal mimetic descriptions, ideographic expressions, anecdotes, parables, or metaphors, but instead has in mind a type of verbal expression that straightforwardly conveys an orderly set of propositions that fit smoothly into the slots of a structure with a standpoint supported by subordinated or coordinated arguments. Most of the time, if not always, the reconstruction of multimodal discourse as well as of many forms of “raw” verbal discourse requires serious interpretative decisions (and in that sense such formats are indeterminate to a high degree); meanwhile it may require hardly any or at least significantly less interpretative decisions when the discourse consists of verbal expressions that are already close to the prototypical format (and in that sense such formats are less indeterminate).

Analyzed this way, Blair’s statement in fact communicates a paradigm of what argument theory is or should be: a theory about (quasi-)logical relations between sets of propositions. Informal logic has broadened the discourse formats that are taken into consideration as well as the collection of schemes and practices that govern their uses. But still, reconstruction in terms of (quasi-)logical relations between sets of propositions is conceptualized as a necessary requirement. As a result of this hidden paradigmatic point of reference, discourse formats that require less effort to meet this requirement are considered “less indeterminate” than discourse formats that require more effort to do so or even resist such formatting. Reconstruction (or standardization or dressing) is required because further analyses and evaluations on argumentative reasonableness of the discourse take the reconstructed argument as their object.

It is not our intention to criticize and subsequently reject this paradigm. Exploring the paradigm has turned out to be very productive and insightful. Argumentative practice, however, shows that determinateness is not part and parcel of even professional, carefully designed verbal discourse. We intend to explore the position that a serious rhetor can consider ‘less determinate formats most apt to express his *appeal to reason*. We explore this position by identifying how multimodal discourse as a move in a reasonable discussion differs from a move performed by means of the prototypical format.

3 Indeterminateness of multimodal discourse formats

Acknowledging multimodal discourse formats (and other non-prototypical verbal discourse formats) as apt means to convey argumentation forces an analyst

to deal with higher degrees of indeterminateness than is the case with discourse prototypically formatted according to the norms of the dominant paradigm. We will specify three points on which this higher degree of indeterminateness becomes manifest. Compared to discourse in the paradigmatic formats, we are seeing that in the division of labor between rhetor and audience, there is a shift towards the audience in determining the meaning of a discourse (Section 3.1). Also some argument schemes employed can be of a more “creative” kind than the ones we are familiar with in the currently dominant paradigm (Section 3.2).⁷ Finally we observe that generally speaking more elements are complex mixtures of argumentatively relevant information, because the relation between the world as presented in the discourse and the reality the discourse claims to be relevant for, as well as the kind of information discourse elements convey (mimetic or diegetic), is more complex (Section 3.3).

3.1 The division of labor between rhetor and audience

In the division of labor between rhetor and audience, we see, in multimodal argumentative discourse, a shift towards the audience. This follows from the very restrictive formative requirements of the paradigm. The paradigmatic format requires expressions to convey propositions in a straightforward fashion. Of course, the concept of *proposition* is not very clear, so that it can be taken in a more or in a less restricted sense, requiring more explicit guidance for assessment or less. In the standard paradigm, we can accept expressions such as “Our experiences with 9/11 teach us that we need to accept a certain surveillance of our private sphere by the government” as conveying straightforward, almost 1:1 propositions, if we define the concept of proposition more loosely; or we can be quite strict in what we consider a proposition, not even accepting the expression “One candidate looks sickly” as straightforwardly expressing the proposition it most likely attempts to convey, but as merely bearing a “familiar and relatively unproblematic” relation to such a proposition. In any case, the multimodal discourses that are far removed from the prototypical format will generally leave more to the interpreting audience than the prototypically formatted ones (which may explain why discourse that is close to the prototypical formatting is extremely rare, even in very formal and serious contexts such as the courtroom).

7 By “argument schemes we are familiar with in the currently dominant paradigm” we refer in general to the treatments in handbooks and theoretical studies, neglecting numerous interesting and important debates. Compare Walton et al. 2008.

We already gave the main reason for this shift in the division of labor when we discussed the difference between the two statements: “If in a television debate the one candidate looks sickly and sweaty, and the other appears calm and confident, then it is plausible that a significant proportion of the impact of the debate has to be explained in terms of the difference in physical appearance” and “If you see what you are seeing in the clip, then it is plausible that a significant proportion of the impact of the debate has to be explained in terms of the difference in physical appearance.” The sole ‘guidance’ the latter expression gives is “Look for yourself”; the audience has to find out for themselves what features are relevant, or if perhaps it is the image as a whole. These may be features like an enormous difference in physical appearance between the candidates, making it plausible that this accounts for a significant proportion of the impact, as is the case in the historical example. But the multimodal discourse might also fulfill its argumentative function if the audience sees the two candidates as being quite comparable in physical appearance, but with one of them looking slightly better, engaged in a debate in which there is so little difference between them in terms of their performance that the impact of the debate cannot be but due to this minor difference in appearance as it cannot be attributed to the debating skills or any other difference.

The rhetorical situation in this Nixon-Kennedy example is very simple. The discourse evokes a discourse world (we use the term *mimesis* for this). The claimed relation between this *mimesis* and the audience’s reality is a straightforward correspondence relation; the *mimesis* is claimed to be “true.” The validity of the interpretations and evaluations of this *mimesis* (we use the term *diegesis* for this) is claimed to be grounded on regularities, rules, or principles that are clearly valid in the audience’s reality. Even in this simple rhetorical situation the pictorial elements in the discourse meant to present this *mimesis* can convey such a rich image of the *mimesis* that the audience nevertheless needs to select what is relevant and what is not.

When we speak of a shift towards the audience in the division of labor between rhetor and audience, it should be clear that we adapt our terminology to the terminology of the currently dominant paradigm, also taking the prototypical format as our reference point. We can also adopt a paradigm that takes as its reference point a situation in which the meaning of argumentatively relevant discourse is considered deliberately open, complex, negotiable, a means to develop a meaning in a dynamic interactional process. In that case, it would be more apt to say that in the very exceptional format, which the currently dominant paradigm considers prototypical, we observe an exceptional

and extreme and perhaps even artificial shift in the division of labor from audience to rhetor.⁸

3.2 “Creative” schemes

In multimodal discourse the schemes employed can be of a more “creative” kind than the ones we are familiar with in the currently dominant paradigm. By this we mean that multimodal expressions that are clearly meant to convey an argumentative appeal to reason may guide the audience towards interpretation processes that are only partly predictable, also have “creative” aspect of *emergent* meaning that is left to the audience, or that is meant to be negotiable in the discussion.⁹ This is caused by the fact that many multimodal formats present discourse worlds with a mimesis that maintains a complex relation to reality, while in the prototypical format it seems to be assumed that the claimed relation between mimetic elements in the discourse (“descriptions”) is always a kind of straightforward correspondence.

There are numerous examples of (multimodal) discourse that seem to employ an audience’s disposition to reason, but present discourse worlds with a mimesis that does not claim to correspond to reality at all and therefore requires an elaborate, partly creative mapping process.¹⁰ Quite extreme are the metaphorical relations discussed in Van den Hoven 2012a. One of the examples cited there is the following. It seems that in government circles in Washington in 1998, a verbal joke was circulating: “If Clinton were the Titanic, the iceberg would sink.” This was at the time when the movie Titanic was very popular and then US president Bill Clinton was involved in a sex scandal with Monica Lewinski. It seems undeniable that this radical metaphor actually guides the

8 This may also be part of an explanation why in some conventionalized communicative practices the “prototypical discourse format” is so dominant, at least as a presentational device. For instance, in legal adjudication the rhetor is ideologically supposed to provide a format that makes his argumentative commitments optimally determined.

9 The term *emergent meaning* we take from Fauconnier and Turner (2002) who in general try to develop a theory that accounts for the creative aspects in interpretation processes. Schilperoord (2013) develops a model for the interpretation of metaphors, more in particular metaphorical cartoons, based on this conceptual integration theory. This is an example of the type of semiotic account that we consider necessarily part of an argument theory that can account for multimodal argumentative discourse.

10 Of course in currently dominant theories there is attention for schemes with descriptions that do not claim to correspond to the reality the discourse is about (schemes based on counterfactuals or schemes based on conditional possible worlds); but these are very specific schemes with very specific mimetic relations.

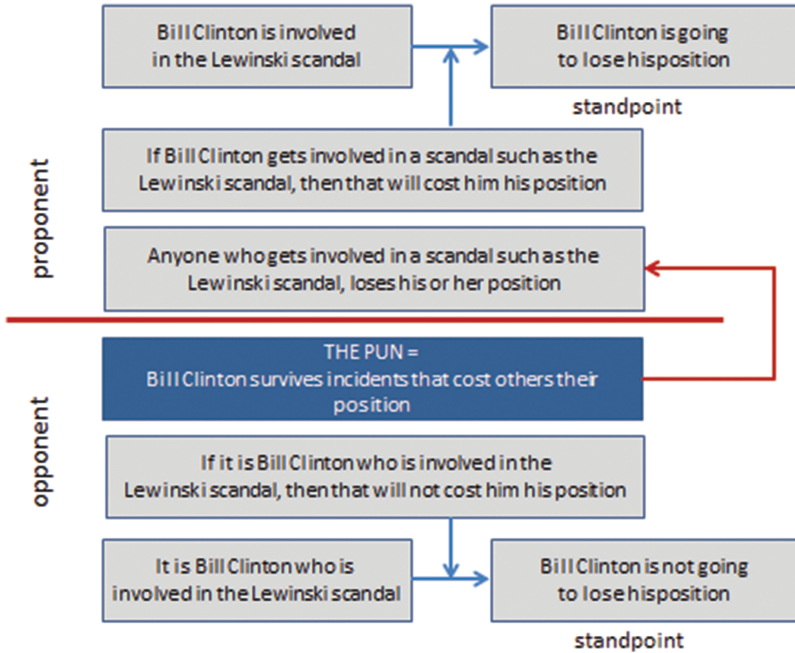


Figure 1: Reconstruction of a dialogue, suggested by “If Clinton were the Titanic, the iceberg would sink.”

audience to reconstruct an argument and its counter-argument in a brief dialogue (Figure 1).

The core of this mapping process, though complex, seems rather predictable. Still, it is very different from interpreting “indirect speech acts” or making implied premises explicit. The apt choice of the rhetor is more than “a presentational choice not to express his standpoint and the supporting argumentation in an explicit way.”¹¹

¹¹ This expression is used by Feteris et al. (2011) when discussing a cartoonish visual metaphor by Sir John Tenniel, after having reconstructed the argumentation in a compatible way with the paradigm. The choice for a cartoon is explained as strategic maneuvering because it “allows him to concentrate on certain characteristics” (2011: 67). This must refer to topical selection but we do not see why this inspires him to use a cartoon or metaphor as even the prototypical format allows him to do so. “Furthermore the metaphor allows him to convey his arguments in an indirect way so that the critique becomes less overt.” This seems incorrect; cartoons are known to be often used to convey sharp criticism. “Finally the visual metaphor allows him to show his skills in amusing the audience.” This indeed is the “paradigmatic” way to explain a presentational choice. In his most recent work, Groarke seems to have left his idea that cartoons

Another illustrative example of verbal non-prototypical argumentative discourse is by Steve Jobs, former CEO of *Apple Inc.*, delivering his famous commencement address at Stanford University. Jobs tells three stories, episodes from his life, all ending in an epilogue that functions as an argument, eventually ending in the standpoint, beautifully formulated as “Stay hungry, stay foolish.” Although we would judge Jobs as basically being an honest and sincere person, it is not relevant for the structure of the argumentation whether in this discourse all the elements of his stories correspond entirely with the reality of his life. Also, his “anecdotes” are certainly not meant to be generalized according to rules of inductive logic. Oldenburg and Leff speak about a “holistic insight that reaches beyond the possibilities of propositional argument” that “is not a strictly propositional form of argument” but that “can and sometimes does act in a rationally acceptable manner” (2009: 8).¹²

Examples that we sincerely believe argument theory has to deal with as serious argumentative discourse can be found in many documentaries. In the 1939 documentary *The 400 million* by Dutch cinematographer Joris Ivens, the world was confronted with images of the horrors of the Sino-Japanese war. All images were compiled from original footages, shot in China during this war, or from archive documentary materials. In that sense, the mimesis claims a 100 percent mimetic correspondence relation. However, to present the mimesis of a discourse world, the rhetor has to “interpret” that world. Thus, the rhetor shows a camera registration of bombs falling on a populated neighborhood. In the next scene, he shows dead and wounded children in a hospital. Subsequently, he shows a destroyed area with dead bodies, followed by a shot of disoriented people on a bridge, on the run carrying some of their last belongings, some only able to crawl on their hands and feet. Clearly, the audience is guided towards a construction of the mimesis of the discourse world in which the people in the latter shots are victims of the bombings in the first shot. The mimetic relation of that element of the discourse world with the audience’s reality, however, is not one of pure correspondence. The rhetor, the maker of the documentary, confronted with the question whether these children lived in the specific

and other visuals can be considered indirect speech acts as he represents nonverbal discourse elements unanalyzed in the new form of diagramming in key-component tables he proposes (Groarke 2015).

12 One finds an interesting discussion of the ideas of Oldenburg and Leff in Govier and Jansen (2011). It seems these authors want to make a distinction between the argument as reconstructed (basically a very weak induction) and the effectivity of the presentational choice made (the anecdotal presentation) when they state: “It is obviously possible for premises X to make conclusion Y more believable, persuasively, without making it more worthy of belief, logically” (2011: 79). This is entirely according to the paradigm we discuss here.

neighborhood that we saw being bombed, will immediately admit that that is not the case. Shots taken at different events, maybe shot on different days, maybe even shot in different neighborhoods, are edited in such a way that a causality is suggested, but this causality is more ‘abstract’ than the bombing in the first shot killing the children in the next shot. The causality should be interpreted as that events like those in the first shot happen many times and cause effects such as those shown in the following shots. The mimetic relation is therefore that of a model, a prototypical scene.

We observe here the “hand” of a narrator who creates this causality of a more abstract kind. The mimetic relation of the discourse world, as far as this causality is concerned, is not pure correspondence, but a mimetic relation that we should identify as a constructed prototypical example of scenes that are claimed to occur in reality all the time. The rhetor claims that many bombs have been dropped, and that these horrible scenes are in some way caused by the bombing and other cruelties that accompany it. For each shot, the mimetic relation claims correspondence. For the causal chain, the (claimed) relation is more abstract and should be interpreted as a diegetic element, an articulated interpretation. The narrator (who can almost be identified with Ivens here) claims his diegetic interpretation to be valid (he claims a diegetic relation), in that it represents a generally valid interpretation of what the aggressor is doing here to a defenseless population. To accept the diegetic relation, the audience has to accept the validity of narrator’s interventions. Together, these are obviously intended to construct an argument to support the strong call upon the world, made explicit in the opening shots of the documentary (compare Van den Hoven 2017).

Interpretation processes such as metaphorical mapping, extracting information from narratives, mapping a model on reality, are “creative” processes that are hard to deal with and that are largely neglected in the standard paradigm.

3.3 Complex mixtures of relevant information

Examples in Section 3.2 already illustrate that multimodal argumentative discourse often contains complex mixtures of relevant information, more complex than the prototypical format. Discourse always only conveys to its audience a *discourse world*. The audience, interpreting the discourse, constructs a mental representation of this discourse world (Van den Hoven 2015a; Van den Hoven 2015b). But argumentative discourse intends to convey information that is meant to influence the audience’s attitudes in its reality. So, the audience is guided towards relating this discourse world to its reality. The discourse world can be said to present two distinguishable kinds of information. It presents the

discourse world in the way it looks, in descriptions (verbal) or images (pictorial) or maybe also in sound. This we have called the *mimesis*. And it presents, implicitly or explicitly, guidance to the audience determined by how the rhetor thinks the audience should interpret and evaluate this world. This we have called *diegesis*. This implies that the audience has to construct a *mimetic relation* between the discourse world on the one hand and its own reality on the other, and that it has to construct a *diegetic relation* between the discourse world and its own reality, either accepting the rhetor's intended relations or not.

The crucial point is that the discourse world is a *rhetorically organized world*. An organizing principle we have called the *narrator* mediates between the "reality" the discourse claims to be relevant for and the discourse world as evoked by the discourse. In verbal discourse, this narrator is traceable in the organization of the text, in its layout, its typography, and so on. In multimodal discourse there is the camera-framing, the shot- and sound-editing, additional effects in post-production, perhaps the conscious construction of the mise-en-scene, and so on. The discourse world is constructed using *discourse voices*. In the prototypically formatted verbal discourse these voices seem to be restricted to human voices, uttering language. In multimodal discourse, there are human voices, of people who are visible, of voice-overs, of anchor persons, and so on, but also non-human "voices" such as the camera, music coming from the depicted world (intra-diegetic music), and background noises.

A more "extreme" example of a non-prototypically formatted "argumentative" discourse may illustrate the necessity of the distinctions made. Jonathan Demme's 1993 movie *Philadelphia*, acknowledging HIV/AIDS, homosexuality, and homophobia, is meant to contribute to a discussion.¹³ To assess this movie as an argumentative appeal to reason, we need to evaluate the world as it is constructed in the discourse (the credibility of the *mimesis*). We also need to assess the validity of the *mimetic relation* between this obviously fictional discourse world and the reality it claims to be relevant for, a *mimetic relation* that obviously does not claim any form of direct correspondence. We need to assess the interpretations and evaluations of that world conveyed by means of embedded voices, by means of the narrative coherence, by means of the use

¹³ Compare for example Catharine Marcks' analysis on <http://marcks14sbc.weebly.com/philadelphia-film.html>: "The film *Philadelphia* uses a full spectrum of emotions, images, and metaphors to discuss homosexuality and AIDS during the nineties. Among the moral and ethical issues raised in the film, punishment for supposed guilt is a common theme. This worldwide epidemic made people very much afraid of contracting AIDS and becoming exposed to the various stigmas and discrimination associated with this illness. The film *Philadelphia* clearly demonstrates this proposition." Also the tag line of the movie is significant: "No one would take on his case ... until one man was willing to take on the system."

of the camera, the rhythm, the editing, the music (the validity of the diëgesis). Finally we need to assess to what extent an acceptable diëgesis in the discourse world has validity for the interpretation and evaluation of the reality the discourse claims to be relevant for (the *diegetic relation*).

If we “translate” the prototypical paradigmatic verbal discourse into this semiotic model, an interesting observation will be that all semiotic complexity sketched above seems unnecessary *when dealing with this (idealized) discourse format only*. But it is a required and inevitable complexity when dealing with non-prototypical discourse formats that are considered apt ways of expression, not to be reduced to the prototypical format as a preliminary step before an assessment. This is why we consider the prototypical format of the currently dominant paradigm as a very specific, atypical format.

The *mimesis* of the discourse world in the prototypical paradigmatic discourse is constructed by means of verbal expressions that claim to convey “facts.” That is: the description of what the discourse world looks like is claimed to correspond straightforwardly to a situation in reality (currently existing or having existed in the past). The “truth” of an expression conveying a mimetic element may be supported by an argument. Such an expression then becomes a (sub)standpoint. As its *data* the arguments will add other mimetic elements, also claimed to correspond to the audience’s reality. Further, the argument needs an (implicit or explicit) *inference rule* that accounts for the step from data to standpoint; this inference rule is claimed to be valid in the audience’s reality, because it can be based on grounds that are claimed to be “true” or valid in that reality. The *diegesis* of the discourse world in the prototypical paradigmatic discourse consists of one or more interpretative or evaluative (verbal) expressions, to be clearly distinguished from the mimetic elements. These expressions convey standpoints for which the mimetic elements supply the data. The inference rules that claim to account for the step from data to standpoint are again based on grounds that are claimed to be ‘true’ or valid in the audience’s reality.

In such paradigmatic argumentative discourse, it indeed seems like distinguishing the discourse world from the audience’s reality as well as distinguishing *mimesis* from *diegesis* is irrelevant. Argument theorists, taking the paradigmatic verbal discourse as their reference point, may therefore judge this model as unnecessarily complicated. There seems to be no need to distinguish a separate discourse world, neither does a distinction between *mimesis* and *diegesis* appear necessary (although assessment criteria may differ for descriptive and evaluative expressions).

Nevertheless, in the discourse model that deals with multimodal formats we have to make a distinction between the discourse world and the real world; we need to try to distinguish *mimesis* from *diegesis*, and to assess the mimetic and

diegetic relationship between the discourse world and the audience's reality. Relations between discourse world and reality are much more complicated than the rather straightforward relations assumed in the prototypical format. In our examples we encountered metaphorical relations, fictional worlds and idealized narrative constructions, but even more important is that all pictorial mimetics depend on numerous choices of a mediating narrator, who chooses camera position, angle, objective, specific qualities of the image, editing moments, and so on, inevitably merging mimetics with diegetics. The result is presented as a holistic world the relevance of which has to be interpreted largely by the audience.

In practice most verbal and certainly all multimodal discourses do not fit into the prototypical format, and a reconstruction, if possible at all, does not seem to be neutral towards the appeal to reason. It is precisely this deviation from the idealized format that causes the need for the more complex model proposed.

4 Implications for argument theory as an academic discipline

Multimodal discourse formats deviate essentially from the prototypical verbal format. Accepting multimodal discourse formats as apt and serious ways to convey argumentation means accepting that these deviations are more than *presentational choices*. Even compared to what one might imagine as more or less *functionally equivalent* prototypical verbal discourses (as we tried to do with the Nixon-Kennedy example) the appeal to reason differs.

- a. In a multimodal presentation of the discourse world a rich and highly determined mimesis can be presented. Simply claiming that this mimetic world corresponds to any reality is playing on what Feigenson (2014) calls *naïve realism*.¹⁴ Even in case of a rather straightforward camera registration, the mediating narrator strongly influences what mimesis is presented. Theories about documentary making, often obviously argumentative discourse, explicitly address the problem that every discourse presentation of

¹⁴ This is a somewhat degrading term for a phenomenon that can be part of very well thought-out discourse. Dove discusses photos as evidence and states in this context: “One doesn’t infer the truth of the claim from the photo, one perceives it” and “I distinguish the process of inferring, in which a claim gamers support conditionally upon the acceptance of some other claims, from the process of perception, whereby one apprehends the truth or falsity of a claim” (Dove 2012: 228). Still, we think this attempt fails; one does infer the truth, in a way that can be contested in a discussion (compare Groarke 2013).

‘reality’ is necessarily an interpretation of that reality. This means that the mimetic relation is always complex and far less determined than in the case of an ideal, prototypical verbal format, and even in the case of rather straightforward registrations (due to technology of registration, editing, and presentation). It also implies that a careful reflection is required on what is mimetic and what is diegetic, as strong diegetic guidance may be conveyed simultaneously with mimetic elements.

- b. As human beings can only form a phenomenological impression of what they consider reality, discussing differences of opinion about that reality are always discussions about such impressions. Therefore, predominantly mimetic expressions also contain elements that cause us to suspect there is a certain amount of diegetic guidance involved. Description and evaluative interpretation are often intertwined in complex ways, even in the simplest verbal expressions. This goes along with a holistic multimodal presentation of this discourse world, leaving it largely to the audience to determine its relevance (compare Section 3.1). Therefore, it is important to distinguish between presenting a discourse world and interpreting a discourse world, between mimesis and diegesis.
- c. We mentioned the frequent use of iconographic elements in verbal discourse. Many pictorial elements are also “iconographic” in this sense (McGee 1980). A rhetor can evoke an audience’s foreknowledge about 9/11, with all its mental images, narratives, emotions and opinions, by inserting a photo of one of the twin-towers collapsing. Such discourse elements are intended to convey a mimesis that encompasses much more than merely the direct iconic meaning of the scene in the photo. The audience constructs a mimesis about an event presented this way that has characteristics yielding a negative or positive assessment of the standpoint. So actually, in the interpretation of the discourse the audience supplies a lot of the mimesis from its supposed foreknowledge and the rhetor plays on that; this “completed” mimesis basically is to be considered part of the discourse. So it is relevant to reflect upon the more ‘complete’ mimesis that is evoked as discourse world, given the rhetorical situation; which audience encounters the discourse where and why? Besides this, it is clear again that the discourse world, even one that claims a direct correspondence relation with reality, needs to be distinguished from that reality.
- d. Assessment of the mimetic relation is not a “yes” or “no” issue, not even when a straightforward correspondence is claimed. Reflecting on the correspondence between the mimetic discourse world and its perception of reality, an audience can come to complex assessments such as: basically yes, although some elements are exaggerated and it is hard to arrive at an

adequate judgment of certain aspects because not enough information is supplied; part of the inserted statements by interviewees seem to be reliable as descriptions and are acceptable as “true,” but certain others are not credible in light of the rest of the information given, and need to be disregarded for that reason; and so on. All this is caused by, and therefore it is accounted for by the fact that the discourse world is not a mirror, not a reflection but a mediated “mime” of whatever possible reality and therefore needs to be conceptualized as such. This mimetic complexity is a fortiori the case as soon as we look at metaphorical relations, idealized models, anecdotes, parables, and so on, as discussed in Section 3.2.

Taking these points together, we inevitably end up with the complex (semiotic) model as sketched above.¹⁵

We concentrate our attention on the implications for argument theory as an academic discipline. Here one can indeed go in two directions. Obviously one can decide to restrict argument theory to argumentations as reconstructed according to the paradigmatic prototype. This does not necessarily imply that one does not develop theoretical ideas about the act of reconstruction. However, that phase of reflection on *presentational devices* is an analytical step that is distinct from and basically unconnected to the assessment of the argumentation as reconstructed in the prototypical format. This reconstruction is considered the actual argumentation that can be presented in many different formats, some formats perhaps more effective (in terms of persuasion) or more apt (in terms of clarity) than others, but all conveying the same argumentation, therefore equal in terms of appeal to reasonableness. We think that Ralph Johnson (2003), denying the possibility of “visual” arguments, would consider examples like the ones in Section 3 as evidence that requiring the verbal representation in the paradigmatic format is a necessary intermediate step to determine that argumentation. If some formats prevent an audience and an analyst from performing a reconstruction, these formats do not convey argumentation or do so in a defective way. This saves the paradigm, but it has serious consequences for the scope of argument theory.

A crucial topic in every argument theory is that of the discussants’ accountability. Our analyses make clear that the problem of modeling the protagonist’s commitments inevitably requires having to deal with the so-called more indeterminate, “raw” discourse formats. One of the central achievements of pragmatic-dialectical argument theory is that it came to consider and subsequently fully developed the complex communicative act of argumentation as a move in a critical discussion (Van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004). Discussants putting

¹⁵ This rhetorical and semiotic model is discussed in detail in Van den Hoven (2015b).

forward argumentations act as protagonists or antagonists in such critical discussions. Modeling the discussants' commitments is essential in assessing their contributions to the discussion. In Van den Hoven (2012b) as well as in Van den Hoven and Yang (2013) it is shown how 'problematic' modeling this accountability is even in quite common forms of multimodal argumentative discourse. It requires substantial interpretative acts and therefore choices on the part of the analyst, and therefore also choices on the part of the audience. Given the fact that argumentative discourse formats that are partly undetermined in this respect (also due to the complexity that we analyzed in Section 3.3) are used in serious contexts by sincere and serious discussants, we conclude from this observation that argument theory needs to incorporate multimodal semiotics as an integrated element (to be able to understand and model this indeterminacy) and it requires our accepting that argumentative commitments are deliberately underspecified and negotiable.

If we stay within the currently dominant paradigm, we are confronted with a dilemma. Certain interpretations of the audience may be considered inadequate by the rhetor/protagonist. When the rhetor/protagonist does not consider the interpretation adequate, then analytically we can be confronted with either the fallacy of hedging, committed by the rhetor/protagonist, or with the fallacy of creating a straw man, committed by the audience/antagonist. We consider it an unacceptable theoretical and analytical gap if argument theory fails to meet the challenge of developing procedures and criteria to deal with this dilemma. Limiting argument theory to the current paradigm, denying the ability of non-prototypical formats to convey argumentation, or rejecting this interpretative process as an object for argument theory, leaving it to semiotics or discourse studies, would imply a refusal to deal with this topic. As in many socio-cultural contexts multimodal formats are fully accepted as apt means to convey argumentation; this affects the ecological validity of the theories based on the "hidden" paradigm.

Another consequence is that certain formats run the risk of being entirely excluded by the standard paradigm, as at least sometimes it is hard if not impossible to reconstruct the appeal to argumentative reasonableness that is conveyed by some of these discourse formats into the prototypical format that dominates the hidden paradigm (compare Section 3.2). Ian Dove (2013) elaborates on argumentation that is hard if not impossible to reconstruct verbally in the standard format, presenting convincing examples of graphics, which illustrate that graphic discourse can give guidance to the mental representation of justifying or refuting reasons that simply cannot be expressed verbally. Concerning anecdotes as a means to convey arguments, it seems artificial and not doing full justice to the reasoning processes that they evoke to format such discourse in, for example, a scheme of argument by example or argument by analogy. Also, the

mapping process of an argumentative metaphor, entirely replacing the vehicle by the constructed tenor as the only argumentatively relevant result of the mapping process, besides the problem of accountability mentioned above, does not seem to do justice to the specific appeal to argumentative reasonableness.

In sum: accepting multimodal formats as apt ways to convey argumentation implies that different formats convey different – though probably sometimes more or less equivalent – argumentations. Accepting that some formats deliberately underspecify the protagonist's commitments, making it an element of a reasonable discussion to explore such commitments requires our incorporating multimodal semiotics as an integrated element of argumentation theory; and it requires our accepting that argumentative commitments are deliberately negotiable. Accepting argumentation schemes with complex mapping processes, resulting in not always clearly delineated, emergent meaning requires our having to deal more with indeterminate, “raw” discourse formats, not to be replaced by verbal reconstructions.

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