

The Opinion Essay as Example of Discourse Analysis: Rhetorical Assessment

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ABSTRACT

The argumentative class of texts possesses a certain structure that allows the addressee to recognise the possible controversy of the ideas posed in it, be it for the persuasion of some conflicting view or the mere reflection on what has been uttered. In particular, the opinion essay, as an argumentative exemplar, can be analysed following a rhetorical model regarding a double perspective: the textual analysis of the piece and the contextual assessment, in which some ideological traits can usually be found. To this respect, the student who takes up English for a specific purpose, in this case the analysis of the argumentative discourse, can find in the rhetorical outline that we propose some tools for the depiction of this and other classes of texts he or she may encounter.

Key words: argumentation, argument, text, context, Rhetorics, rhetorical figure, discourse, essay, class of text.

RESUMEN

La clase de textos argumentativa posee una estructura específica que permite al destinatario el reconocimiento de una posible controversia. Este reconocimiento surge a partir de las ideas expuestas, ya sea para la persuasión de alguna opinión en conflicto, ya sea para la mera reflexión. En particular, el ensayo de

opinión puede analizarse siguiendo un patrón retórico que refleja una perspectiva doble: por un lado el análisis textual y, por otro, la valoración del contexto, donde surgen los posibles rasgos ideológicos. Con este propósito, el estudiante que se dedica al inglés para fines específicos y, en concreto, el análisis del discurso argumentativo, puede hallar en el esquema retórico que se propone algunas herramientas útiles para la descripción de esta y de otras clases de textos.

Palabras clave: argumentación, argumento, texto, contexto, Retórica, figura retórica, discurso, ensayo, clase de texto.

A piece of text can be commented or analysed following a variety of models that are able to depict different aspects, depending on the stance or perspective the author may be interested in. In this study, we propose the outline and further analysis of an argumentative class of texts containing an essayistic nature, belonging to an argumentative discourse and, as such, examining it following the guidelines and indications of a rhetorical model. This model is especially appropriate for the representation of a class of texts abounding in the variety of opinions and the subjective point of view which can be confronted at any time. The argumentative text focuses on “the validity of relations among concepts (M. A. Martínez-Cabeza 2002: 71)”, in which the ideas stated are expressed “in the awareness of a differing or opposing view (Leith and Myerson 1989: 85)”. Argumentation can then be considered as an activity of reason that implies that the arguer “has given some thought to the subject” (F. H. van Eemeren 1996: 2), and this subject can have a number of different opinions that make the need for argumentation. In this sense, “arguing makes sense only if there is a listener or reader who entertains doubt about an opinion or has a diverging opinion. Argumentation starts from the presumption (...) that the standpoint of the arguer is not immediately accepted, but is *controversial* (2)”¹.

We include the analysis within Rhetorics, seen as a global science that can analyse any discourse, either oral or written. At the same time, we foreground the notion of rhetorical argumentation versus the logical argumentation with

¹ Italics are present in the original source.

respect to the emphasis on oppositions of ideas, and the supply of information meant for an audience (Martínez Dueñas 2002: 24). Besides, the choice of the argumentative class of texts, as far as it may range from the mere persuasion for the reflection to the eventual conviction of its ideas, can be useful for the reader who wishes to deepen into the study of discourse analysis. A rhetorical model of analysis allows the portrayal of elements that constitute the organisation of a text as regards the principles, not the grammatical rules, which comprise it. In this sense, speaking of the rhetorical components implies talking about the discourse traits that we may find in a piece of text. It implies a first recognition of morpho-syntactic and lexical elements, and then the identification of a second level of meaning that transcends grammar, which further reflects those cognitive² and contextual elements that discourse contains. The rhetorical level is then the result of an understanding of the communicative and cognitive elements (36). Hence, in the piece selected we will refer to the topics, arguments and rhetorical figures present in an attempt to provide a rhetorical analysis.

Model for the rhetorical analysis

For the recognition and further commentary of the arguments, we attend mainly to the study by Ch. Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca (1989), who in their treatise on argumentation restructured some of Aristotle's works on rhetoric and dialectic into argumentative techniques, which allow the inclusion of the value judgement against the necessary and objective judgement of logical thinking. Perelman's main concern (S. Frogel 2004: 170), for this reason, was with practical reasoning related to values, which cannot be reduced to logic or empirical methods but are dependent on controversy and refutation. His work draws attention to the fact that some rational arguments are neither logical nor empirical and, therefore, need a different approach. In our case, this 'new rhetoric' fits adequately the argumentative class of texts due to the abundance of values and opinions found there.

² In the case of metaphor, for example, we recognise the grammatical construction but we must go beyond the sentence elements to comprehend the metaphorical significance. A cognitive process is then established by which we transfer the elements of one conceptual domain to another one.

In the analysis³ we deal with two main parts (M. E. Arenas 1997: 156):

1. The compositional or cotextual component, which comprises:
 - The syntactic-semantic macro component: it constitutes the syntactic and semantic structure of the text considered as a whole. Here we foreground the semantic content or topics, the main arguments, and the order in which the parts of the text are arranged.
 - The micro component: it refers to the lineal textual manifestation or superficial structure of the text. We are especially concerned with the likely expressiveness of the text through the use, especially, of rhetorical figures which may contribute to its persuasion.
2. The contextual projection of the cotextual elements, which covers the constituents of textual communication: addresser, addressee and the context. They depend on the addresser's communicative intention.

The first part of the analysis deals then with the cotextual component, in which both the semantic and the syntactic elements are foregrounded. To this respect, we follow the categories of classical rhetorics, called *partes orationis*, distributed by means of the *exordium*, the *expositio* or *narratio*, the *argumentatio*, and the *epilogus* or *conclusio*. These *partes orationis* can suffer modifications as regards the class of texts they are inserted in, and have a double orientation: the argumentative, as justifying the main thesis, and the persuasive, as trying to influence the addressee so that he or she may agree with or modify certain behaviour. Although the argumentation section is the most important, for it presents the proofs in favour or against the main thesis, the others get subordinated but their persuasive function is essential as well. In this sense, the *exordium* or introductory lines try to surprise the addressee in order to get his or her attention; the narration can supply the necessary information, and the concluding section should attract the addressee emotionally.

³ We follow M. E. Arenas' general theory about the essay for our outline of rhetorical analysis as to the division between the cotextual and contextual elements that can be present in this argumentative class of texts.

As for the topics that can be present in the *exordium*, we foreground the following ones:

- The presentation of the thesis that is going to be discussed.
- The reasons why the essay is written. Here it is also possible to find an allusion or explanation to the title of the essay, so that the motive is more explicit.
- Expressing the main precepts which the argumentation is going to be based on.
- Assessing the possibilities that may exist to defend a view.

The following category corresponds to the narration and the exposition. They usually deal with happenings and people, and most frequently appear fused with the author's personal observations that are subsequently integrated as another semantic element. They are, for this reason, transmitted from a subjective point of view. The way in which these short narrations and expositions are incorporated constitutes an argumentative process and orients the addressee's persuasion towards a certain direction.

The argumentation entails the most important rhetorical category. It is essentially dialectical, intended for the search of those most convincing arguments to reason into any issue through the use of controversy and discussion. The organisation of arguments will have significant repercussions in the reader/hearer's persuasion, and are stressed by the author's subjectivity and his or her imaginary associations. In any case and, as we have remarked above, these arguments do not follow the strict rules of logic, but are described by the rules of the probable, possible reasoning.

Some of the most recurrent arguments are the following⁴:

1. The quasi-logic arguments. They intend a sort of conviction to the degree that they can be compared to formal, logical and mathematical reasonings. Some of them include:

⁴ We follow the classification proposed by Ch. Perelman and L. Olbretchs-Tyteca (1989) in their treatise on argumentation. Nevertheless, in the analysis of the following epigraph we mention

- The argument from definition and identity.
 - The argument from analysis and tautology.
 - The argument from division.
 - The argument from comparison.
 - The argument from sacrifice.
2. The arguments based on the structure of reality. They draw on reality in order to set up the cohesion between an already admitted judgement and others encouraged by the addresser. Some of them contain:
- The argument from the cause.
 - The argument from the consequences.
 - The argument from a person and his or her acts.
 - The argument from authority.
3. The arguments that support the structure of reality. They include those instances in which reality is determined by means of a particular case; and those in which analogy plays a decisive role. The most important are:
- The argument from the example.
 - The argument from the illustration.
 - The argument from analogy.
 - The argument from metaphor.
4. The dissociation of notions. This technique consists in the transformation of entities that are either merged and should be separated or, otherwise, are confronted and opposed. We foreground here just one:
- The argument from opposition.

other arguments, such as the rhetorical question or the ironical process, which are not recognised by the authors as argumentative techniques and yet influence the organisation of the discourse.

The last rhetorical category is usually situated in the final part of the essay and is considered a flexible category with reference to its semantic content. We will be able to find topics aimed at persuasion, and other affective mechanisms characteristic of a *peroratio*. Yet we can also discover other types of content that are not related to the addressee's disposition. Some of them are:

- Relating the theme with an authority.
- Making hypotheses and conjectures about the future. The formulation of wishes is one of the most frequent topics of the concluding section.
- Rhetorical questions.
- Comparing and contrasting the subject matter with other similar cases.

The second part of the analysis focuses on a pragmatic dimension of the text and the construction of the communication participants starting from the linguistic features. In all argumentative texts, the linguistic information indicates the subjective nuance of this type of discourse, implying the moral presence of the addresser and the active participation of the addressee. To this respect, the author's presence is shown through two different aspects:

1. Through the message, which conveys those linguistic traits that reveal the author's attitude and determines the influence either upon the reader or the hearer.
2. Through the author's own personality, who reveals his or her moral and intellectual qualities.

Subjectivity can be accomplished, for that fact, through the use of two main elements: deixis and modality.

The rhetorical analysis

We have chosen for our analysis an opinion essay from the Women's section of *The Guardian* printed edition, rich in judgments and ironical nuances, in which a selection of topics and arguments can be identified. The opinion essay, to the contrary of a news stories, with an expected expositive and objective presenta-

tion of facts and actions, shows a distinctive structure where the *exordium*, the *argumentatio* or *expositio* and the *conclusio* sections can be often signalled in relation to the author's nearly always subjective mood, and his or her particular vision of the depicted situation which is to be confronted with systems of thought. In the article, the author, Vicky Frost, announces the launch of Fly Pink, an airline made up exclusively for women, but from the third line we become aware of her negative response, as she wonders about our necessity and, we will conclude, our stupidity, for buying pink products.

The title of the text can be an indicator of the irony tinged with subtlety all along the article. The author, Vicky Frost, names it "La vie en rose" as a probable allusion, first, to the moody, slushy song by the French singer Edith Piaf, in which she describes the feelings that make her see life rose-coloured; second, it introduces the main topic of the article, that is, the launch of an airline, Fly Pink, devoted only for women, entirely in pink, to our obvious delight. This seems to be the most up-to-date design for women and, as such, we should all be thrilled, but the author asks at once, "Why on earth are we buying them". Since this initial question remains unanswered, we recognise it as a rhetorical question and limit up to the end of this line this brief *exordium* contained in the first paragraph. This type of interrogative sentence which does not require an answer can be interpreted as a rhetorical question, an indirect assertion that, prior to requiring a response, can suggest its own answer or even create an effect (J. M. Kertzer 1987: 242). If we try to find out the function of this utterance, we could propose the authority by which a rhetorical question creates, places and looks for a certain influence since, when posing a question like this, in which the author complains about the notion of women buying pink stuff, the wish and the expectancy for an imperative answer occur (250). The rhetorical use (Martínez-Dueñas 2002: 72), therefore, derives from the lack of information in this type of questions.

A short narration introduces, after the introductory section, the reason why pink has been the traditional colour for girls and leads, in the next paragraph, to the topic of the article, the announcement of the new airline. This brief narration telling the influence of pink constitutes a semantic element contributing to the argumentative process, in keeping with a subjective manner with words like "Barbie", "bubblegum" and "plastic tat". These data, furthermore, suggest a negative opinion of the colour tradition, for it reminds the author of shallow

dolls, chewing gum and worthless materials. As a result, this manner of presenting the information, interpreting it from the author's one-sided vision, entails an argumentative mechanism which somewhat biases the addressee's persuasion. After detailing the airline offerings, we encounter an ironic utterance as the author remarks: "Which just underlines the fact that it is now possible for women to experience their entire day in pink". It is ironic to the extent that it seems to us that, until this moment, we could not know to a full degree the advantages, and the pleasure, if it exists indeed, of being submerged in a pinkish cloud a whole day, not just part of it. We presume, along with the author, that she can not deem a benefit the fact that flights offer "shopping breaks" in Paris, and that we are tendered "pink champagne and complementary manicures before take-off". Since we do not assume what it assumes, we see these utterances as instances of irony, that is, "the possibility that what we say might be read for what it *means*⁵ rather than what *we* say (C. Colebrook 2000: 24-25)".

So as to emphasise this notion, some arguments from the example illustrate some of those delightful acts that we can accomplish by using this colour. The example technique tries to clarify a particular case so that the reader or hearer is not confused by the reasoning. This practice (W. Olmsted 1997: 240) allows the reader/hearer to look at one example in light of another, so that his or her understanding of the first is revised when checking out the other. Furthermore, this argument possesses a heuristic function for it helps to discern significant thoughts that may become a source of persuasion. In the text, the author presents a (S) + V + O + C structure: "You can work out with a pink yoga mat and weights; adorn your windscreen wipers with pink wiper wings; cook dinner on a pink George Foreman grill and style your hair with hot-pink hair straighteners. You can even see off would-be attackers with a powder-pink Taser gun". Due to the enormous importance of some of these every day actions women apparently cannot live without, we must guess the irony goes on and, in practising them, we observe a syntactic parallelism that gives the sequence a rhythmical cadence. We can perceive a figure of balance or *parison*⁶, in which there appears a correspon-

⁵ Italics are present in the original source.

⁶ The definitions of rhetorical figures are in Vickers (1988).

ding or symmetrical structure of a sequence of clauses or sentences that suggests a mechanical series of activities for women's stressful lifestyle.

The text focuses, starting from the following paragraph, on those devices that have turned into pink so that they look more appealing for feminine customers. The argumentation process relies on two main types of reasoning: the argument from the example, continuing to indicate the increase in the colour transformation of different appliances apt ideally to women's exclusive use; and the authority argument, as confirmed by some representatives of those appliance companies. The use of an authority in an argumentative text is usually associated with a person or organisation whose reputation supports or condemns the author's point of view. In the article we are considering, the inclusion of this argument strengthens the ideas that the author is trying to convey. It involves a legitimate mode of persuasion and, more often than not, persuasion requires some sort of authority (Y. Liu 1997: 417).

This is the case, in the first place, of mobile phones. A marketing director declares to this respect that not only teenagers buy pink phones, but also their older relatives. Next we encounter a number of electronic gadgets also transformed into a supposedly more enticing look. At this point some harsh criticism must be pointed out, as the writer declares that "manufacturers have realised that women buy technology too (although it is obviously to their benefit to do so). Then the full horror hits you". In this utterance Vicky Frost forwards the hopeful message to be conveyed in the conclusion section, as we will observe below. A website editor complains, in this occasion, about the fact that manufacturers do not usually strive to encourage women the same way they do with men; they just change the colour of the merchandise and, therefore, "these products hardly do much for women's credibility". The third instance comes from the DIY market and its assault of pink tools. An office manager of one of these companies agrees that women of different ages buy their appliances but, even though the author does admit women's newly-acquired independence when buying this type of products, she suggests "that they need to constantly remind themselves of their femininity even when they're hammering a nail".

In the next two paragraphs the predominant reasoning is the argument from the cause. We are provided with some of the possible motivations that may compel women to buy everything they use and take pleasure in pink. The first reason alludes to the idea of women possessing, for example, two different phones for

diverse events, one professional and, hence, more “serious”; and another for more playful meetings and, hence, pink-coloured. It answers directly the question “why are these products selling so well?” with the conjunction “because”. The second reason is more optimistic and has to do with the colour that breast cancer charities are identified with. There is not an explicit causal nexus but the sentence “there are more positive reasons”. To this respect, the causal argument tries to find out the reason why an episode, in this case the invasion of pink products, has occurred. It matters, principally, its complementary function as judgment markers and its semantic and pragmatic meaning, at the cost of causality in itself (A. E. Nielsen 1996: 334).

The inclusion of various arguments is present in the last paragraph, which can be matched with the conclusion. The mention of the conjunct “however” expressing a reaction to what has been exposed until now may well reflect an opposition argument, for women’s interest in the technological field is changing the existing trend of purchasing pink products. Although we can not speak of a proper opposition argument that contradicts something that the author has said before, nor does she include other views that refute her reasoning, it does assert a revision in the feminine interest for a prospective buy. We can suggest an opposition leading to a future consequence (B. Godin 1999: 349), that is, the positive inclination, on companies’ part, for exploring women’s real needs. This idea is supported by an authority mentioned above, telling us that there exists yet some hope for our future shoppings. At last are manufacturers worrying about what we really want. A concluding argument, characteristic of this part of the opinion essay, contains an author’s wish regarding this promising message: “Surely not a moment too soon”. By means of this semantic topic we recognise the longing for a modification in a negative state of affairs.

“La vie en rose” possesses other linguistic elements that we can point out as regards the participants in the communicative exchange, hinting at the ideological stance present in the opinion essay. Focusing first on deictic items as part of the cohesive elements that can orient a text, we mention the participant identification of personal pronouns, which in the second line of the essay contains an inclusive “we”, as the author wonders about women’s foolishness when buying pink products. Since she includes herself, we assume that she participates in and identifies with other women who can not seem to stop falling for pink. With reference to the verbal tenses, we foreground those that relate the presence of an

interlocutor with a situation that involves the addressees of the utterance. The most frequent tenses are the present simple, used in the essay to transmit the immediate commentary with a neutral, general value; the past simple, which introduces either a past recall or reproduces the words of some authorities; and the future simple, guaranteeing some benefits from the pink comfort. The present continuous with a future reference appears in the conclusion, so that we live in hope that manufacturers explore our non-coloured, less superficial demands. We can also remark the time indicators, for they accentuate the contrast between the naive influence of pink in the past and the label on the feminine remainder at present. Accordingly, we confront the “next month” of the first line telling us the launch of the airline for women, and the “not so long ago” recalling that pink was the colour of little girls. We also encounter the “then” that stresses that pink is everywhere, together with the reiteration of “next month” and the “now” it is possible for women to experience their whole day in pink. Again, there is a contrast between “less than two years ago” and “now”, which suggests the rapid progress of the rosy influence. Some nouns and adjectives also give strength to the importance of time, as the mention of “it’s the latest in an explosion of pink products”, “the recent explosion of pink” and, especially, the last phrase, “surely not a moment too soon” that, in this case, hopes for the opposite, that is, the awareness of other possible markets that may attract women’s attention.

In the case of modality, concerned with the speaker’s attitude towards, or opinion about, the truth of the proposition expressed by a sentence (P. Simpson 1993: 47), we give emphasis in the text to the epistemic modality, dealing with the speaker’s confidence or lack of confidence in the truth of the proposition expressed. In “La vie en rose”, Vicky Frost ranges from ‘epistemically non-modal’ categorical assertions, such as “it’s now possible for women to experience their entire day in pink”, “these products hardly do much for women’s credibility”, and “the colour gives bizarrely mixed messages”, to modal adjectives and adverbs in expressions like “surely teenage girls are buying most of them”, “there is probably a stomach-churningly version of it”, “there’s bound to be a bubblegum version in the pipeline for women”, and “surely not a moment too soon”. Clearly, she manifests in the essay her discomfort for the rose-coloured marketing while merely supposing some of its effects.

The last feature we are commenting upon refers to the impact that this article may have on its audience. Bearing in mind that the text appears in the Women’s

section of a very widespread audience newspaper, we guess that the main reader will be the female one as the major consumer and target of pink products. As to the author's intention, we also presume the achievement of a certain effect on the addressee, be it the performance of a specific behaviour or the modification of a previous one. The production and reception of this essay in a certain social context constitutes a discourse action with an illocutionary force which, in this instance, reveals a prevailing appearance of representative speech acts consistent with the epistemic modality considered above. Having, therefore, a primary informative goal, the author avails herself of the opportunity to criticise "la vie en rose" as a possible remainder, on the part of some companies, of our feeble appearance that would require using a delicate colour to tolerate our every day routine.

"La vie en rose" text

Next month sees the launch of Fly Pink, an airline aimed at women. It's the latest in an explosion of pink products - from barbecues to Taser guns. Why on earth are we buying them, asks Vicky Frost.

Not so long ago, pink was a colour reserved for little girls. It was the colour of Barbie and bubblegum, of plastic tat that parents were pestered into buying, of pre-teen bedrooms and pocket-money accessories.

Then, suddenly, it was everywhere - and being targeted at grown women. Next month, for instance, sees the launch of Fly Pink, a "boutique airline designed especially for women" which plans to operate from Liverpool's John Lennon airport. The airline will offer flights to Paris for "shopping breaks" in customised pink planes, and, to complete the experience, will also provide pink champagne and complementary manicures before take-off.

Which just underlines the fact that it is now possible for women to experience their entire day in pink. You can work out with a pink yoga mat and weights; adorn your windscreen wipers with pink wiper wings; cook dinner on a pink George Foreman grill and style your hair with hot-pink hair straighteners. You can even see off would-be attackers with a powder-pink Taser gun.

Less than two years ago, Motorola launched a fuchsia mobile phone, the first pink model on the high street. Now there are dozens of pink handsets to choose from. "It really took us by surprise," says Carphone Warehouse marketing director Tristia Clarke. "There have been phones in other colours - a red phone, a blue phone - but they are never as popular as pink."

Surely teenage girls are buying most of them. “Yes,” agrees Clarke, “but it goes right up to mums, and even older.”

Name a piece of electronic kit - a stereo, MP3 player or laptop - and there is probably a stomach-churningly girly version of it. If it has a high-spec, titanium finish for the boys, there’s bound to be a bubblegum version in the pipeline for women. It is tempting to be grateful for small mercies - at least manufacturers have realised that women buy technology too (although it is obviously to their benefit to do so). Then the full horror hits you.

Susi Weaser, editor of Shiny Shiny, a website about gadgets for women, has had her fill. “I get very cross about it,” she says. “Sometimes I just think, ‘Do you not think you need to improve the product instead of just making it pink?’ When manufacturers are making a product aimed at men, they might make something aimed at businessmen, or early adopters. For women - who make up 50% of the population - it’s, ‘Oh, we’ll just make it a different colour.’” And these products hardly do much for women’s credibility. “If you’re in a meeting full of men and you get out a pink phone,” points out Weaser, “you’re probably putting yourself at an even greater disadvantage.”

Even the DIY market has seen an invasion of pink products. Take the Pink Toolbox Company. Thirty quid will buy you a plastic box packed with salmon-hued screwdrivers, hammers and pliers - the first products went on sale in November 2005 and last Christmas their website was so busy that more than 75% of products were sold out by the start of December.

“The people who are buying our products aren’t young girls - it’s the thirtysomethings and up,” says Holly Salter, the company’s office manager. “We sell to a lot of divorced women.” And while there is nothing wrong with tools designed for women, the colour gives bizarrely mixed messages. These tools are clearly aimed at independent, capable women but there is the suggestion that they need to constantly remind themselves of their femininity even when they’re hammering a nail.

Why are these products selling so well? When it comes to phones, says Clarke, it is partly because many people have two handsets - a sober business one and another for socialising. Which sounds as though women know that they’re being infantilised but don’t really care so long as it doesn’t affect them professionally.

Of course, some would suggest there are more positive reasons. The recent explosion of pink has been prompted partly by breast cancer charities, who receive a share of the profits from some of these products. But surely one can care about breast cancer without wanting to possess anything in a vibrant rose finish.

In technology, however, there are signs of a backlash. For instance, the Blackberry Pearl, a phone aimed at women, comes in red, white and black. “We’re seeing less of the pink stuff, and manufacturers are accepting that women are an

important market for technology. They are now beginning to do some research about what women really want,” says Weaser. Surely not a moment too soon.

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