“Now is the time to put an end to all this.” Argumentative Discourse Theory and Letters to the Editor.

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Abstract
The principle aim of this paper is to apply argumentative discourse theory to the genre of letters to the editor, specifically letters written into and subsequently printed in the British Broadsheet press. The letters were all written in response to prior newspaper articles and reporting, in which Islam and/or Muslims were cited as actors. The Pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation is applied as a model for explaining and understanding argument, emphasising the functional, contextual and interactive features of argumentative discourse. As the name suggests, the theory rejects the traditionally strict bifurcation of dialectic and rhetorical dimensions of argumentation, (re)uniting them in the model.

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Argumentation, an example:

If immigrants will not adapt to our ways in public life - as Christians readily do in Muslim countries - the future looks grim. And if veils become commonplace in Britain, villains could resort to them instead of the less concealing stocking mask. Add a loose robe and you would never know the wearer’s sex.


As an example of hate speech masquerading as informed argumentation, the above example is remarkable. Unfortunately, as illustrated below, it is far from exceptional. The text is a letter written by a reader of the British Broadsheet newspaper *Daily Telegraph*, in response to a news-story printed two days previously, on December 3rd, 1997. This news-story, also included in another British Broadsheet, the *Guardian*, concerned an event in which a British-Muslim woman was asked to remove her *hijab* by the driver of a bus, revealing her face in order to establish whether it matched that on her bus pass. When the woman refused, the driver stopped her from travelling on the bus, and hence from getting to work.

Contained in the first sentence alone are examples of five of the most frequently occurring argumentative stratagem (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 1999: 484) applied in representing ethnic minorities in general, and the ‘Muslim-Other’ (Karim, 1997) in particular. First, the presupposition that the individuals represented are ‘immigrants’, and thus ‘foreign’ as opposed to ‘British’. Second, that these ‘immigrants’ can be referred to as a single group, without recourse to further nominal determiners (‘Black Immigrants’; ‘Asian__’; ‘Muslim__’; etc.). Third, that this group have ‘different ways’ to us, should have to adapt to ‘our ways’, and moreover, that they are *not* doing so. Fourth, the presupposition that Christians ‘readily adapt’ to different ways whilst in Muslim countries, with the attendant implication of ‘our accommodating nature’ regarding difference. This, of course, acts as an implicit denial of the extensive history of Western colonial/imperial domination, the acquisition and destruction of land and property across the globe, and the continuing presence of the United States of America and the United Kingdom within - and *upon* - the broadly Muslim lands in the Gulf, North Africa, Far-East Asia and the Asian subcontinent. And fifth, that the future, and specifically the effect which
these ‘immigrants’ will have upon ‘us’, looks ‘grim’. The ‘future threat of immigrants’ argumentative strategem has a long and enduring past, no less abhorrent since its mutation from the traditional position locating threat in ‘Race’, to one where ‘Culture’ is identified as the object of dread. Thus, in the second sentence, the Muslim veil is cited and connected explicitly with criminality, albeit in the form of a rather ridiculous “stocking masked criminal”. Presumably, in the world which Ms McNee inhabits, the police would always have recourse to the other two foolproof identifiers of a criminal - the stripped jumper and ‘swagbag’ - in the event that criminals changed their uniform.

Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) have suggested, that ‘…the object of the theory of argumentation is the study of the discursive techniques allowing us to induce or to increase the mind’s adherence to the theses presented for it’s assent’ (p. 4). Thus, the structured and directed manner in which texts achieve their persuasive goal(s) - in essence, their dialectic and pragmatic aspects - are of central importance in evaluating the power of argumentative dialogue, made all the more so when we acknowledge the discursive potential of texts to modify power relations in other fields (Bourdieu, 1991).

**Argumentation Theory**

Argumentative dialogue can take the form of a number of different dialogue types: a quarrel; a debate; an inquiry; a negotiation; and others, occurring in isolation or in combination. Each of these dialogue types display differences in their initial setting, their argumentative goals, and the methods employed in pursuit of these argumentative goals. A debate, for example, is characterised by both the protagonist and antagonist employing argumentative methods aimed at achieving the dialogue’s primary goal: success in the eyes of an audience. An inquiry, on the other hand, applies knowledge-based argumentation in the pursuit of the establishment of (scientific) proof (Walton, 1989: 3-10).

Traditionally, argumentative discourse has been divided into three ideal types, each of which are defined as follows. First, logic, concerning proof via deductively valid argumentation comprised by logical constants and internally verifying propositions. By this approach, if an argument has a valid form(1), and the propositions are true, the conclusion cannot be false. Second, dialectic
argumentation, which by the Aristotelian definition ‘...is best understood as the art of inquiry through critical discussion. Dialectic is a way of putting ideas to critical test by attempting to expose and eliminate contradictions in a position’ (van Eemeren et al, 1997: 214). Dialectic forms the normative model of argumentation, and although it represents an ideal type, definitions of argumentative discourse have a tendency to draw upon dialectic characteristics. Thus, Kopperschmidt (1985) offers his definition of argument to be ‘...the use of a statement in logical process of argumentation to support or weaken another statement whose validity is questionable or contentious’ (Kopperschmidt, 1985: 159), illustrating a strong dialectic bias.

There are arguments however, ‘...where the subject matter [does] not lend itself to certain demonstration’, i.e. through using either logical or dialectic methods, hence a third argumentative discourse type: rhetoric. The classical definition of rhetoric ‘...has to do with effective persuasion ...[emphasising the] production of effective argumentation for an audience’ (van Eemeren et al 1997: 213). Contemporary analyses of rhetoric retain this theme, focusing on ‘...the situated quality of argumentation and the importance of orientation to an audience’ (van Eemeren et al 1997: 215), and, in it’s simplest form, occurs ‘when someone, who believes some statement, ...[presents] reasons which aim at persuading others to adopt this same point of view’ (Thomson, 1996:6). Here we see how rhetoric differs from the previously defined argument types, in that it appears as the defence of opinion as opposed to the pursuit of ‘truth’.

Of course, rhetorical argument is still based on the offering of factual reason in support of a conclusion, but rhetorical (persuasive) argumentation operates through valid forms of argumentative discourse, appropriating them in order to grant credibility, and hence persuasive weight, to the otherwise questionable propositions expressed in ‘opinion’. In this way, argument represents ‘...opinion statements ...embedded in argumentation that makes them more or less defensible, reasonable, justifiable or legitimate as conclusions’ (van Dijk, 1996: 24). This definition is not offered in any pejorative sense, but rather to acknowledge the ‘laundering’ function which valid - dialectic - argumentative forms play in rhetorical argument, lending the appearance of fairness, ‘even-handedness’ and objectivity, in order to ward off both negative inferences regarding the participants (Kleiner, 1998:
210), and promote the argument’s acceptance in the eyes of the audience.

Thus, a fully formed critical model of argumentation should take account, not only of the form and content or arguments, but also the functional and interactive aspects of argument within their discursive context, and their application and effect in the social field.

Pragma-Dialectical Theory of Argumentation

The work of van Eemeren, collaborating with various other theorists (1984; 1997; 1999) is extremely useful in such a critical analysis of argumentative discourse. Building upon the acclaimed work of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969), they propose a theoretical framework which attempts a unification of normative and rhetorical theories of argumentation: Pragma-Dialectical theory. This theory,

…views argumentative discourse as an exchange of verbal moves ideally intended to resolve a difference of opinion. The dialectical angle of the theory is manifested in the maintenance of critical standards of reasonableness, the pragmatic angle in the definition of all argumentative moves as speech acts functioning in a context of disagreement.

(van Eemeren and Houtlosser, 1999: 480).

Thus, although it is acknowledged that the principle function of argumentative discourse is to persuade or convince with ‘the aim of securing agreement in views’ (van Eemeren et al, 1997: 208), this is achieved ‘…according to appropriate procedures of reasonable dialogue’ (Walton, 1989: 1). Such appropriate procedures, or ‘standards or reasonableness’, are manifest structurally (e.g. pertinency, turntaking), interactionally (e.g. rules of cooperativeness), semantically (e.g. avoiding ambiguity, equivocation and prejudicial language) and elsewhere across argumentative discourse. Semantic standards of reasonableness would, for example, include avoiding the expression of socially disapproved (anti-social) ideas, opinions and attitudes. This is not to say that such ideas are not still present in discourse, merely that they have found less obtrusive manifestations. The ideology of ‘Modern Racism’ is a case in point, wherein ‘modern racists are said to avoid expressing overtly anti-black opinions, instead preferring to express their
views in more subtle, sophisticated ways which may be defended by appeal to seemingly universally accepted egalitarian values and principles’ (Kleiner, 1998: 188). Such racism also contravenes the dialectic element of argumentation - the standards of reasonableness - at a structural level, since they represent a personal commitment to a particular argumentative resolution (conclusion) and as such, an obstacle to open debate.

Van Eemeren and Houtlosser define the dialectic aspect of argumentation in terms of four stages, crucial to ‘establishing systematically whether the standpoint advanced by the protagonist of a viewpoint is defensible against doubt or criticism of an antagonist’ (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 1999: 480). These stages of argumentation are, in turn:

- the confrontation stage, where difference of opinion is defined;
- the opening stage, where the starting point of the discussion is established;
- the argumentation stage, where arguments and critical reactions are exchanged;
- and the concluding stage, where the result of the discussion is determined.

(van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 1999: 480-1).

At each stage dialectic rules of argumentation are employed - by participant and analyst - the violation of which ‘…can result in errors, faults and shortcomings of various kinds in argumentation’ (Walton, 1989: 16)(2).

The rhetorical dimensions of the theory are defined as strategies ‘…for influencing the result of a particular dialectical stage to one’s own advantage, which manifest themselves in a systematic, co-ordinated and simultaneous exploitation of the opportunities afforded by that stage’ (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 1999: 485-6). This is accomplished, the theory suggests, through three strategic manoeuvres, exploiting: the *topical potential*, wherein ‘speakers or writers may choose the material they find easiest to handle’; adapting to *audience demand* by choosing ‘the perspective most agreeable to the audience’; and through *presentational devices* which frame ‘their contribution in the most effective wordings’ (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 1999: 484). Taking each in turn then, an example of the rhetorical use of topical potential was seen in the opening of this article, where the strategy taken by the writer drew variously on discourses of difference, discord and
threat. Since a variety of alternatives could have been used by the protagonist, the introduction of these particular argumentative strategies in the opening act to imply ‘their importance and pertinence to the discussion’ (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969: 119), and work to define the disagreement space to the benefit of the protagonist (van Eemeren et al, 1993). The use of topical resources in argumentation, in this case relying so heavily on negative other-presentations, thus provides interesting evidence about the ideological position of the protagonist, made all the more interesting in this case by the collaboration of a distributor, the Daily Telegraph.

Regarding audience demand, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) state that ‘…since argumentation aims at securing the adherence of those to whom it is addressed, it is, in its entirety, relative to the audience to be influenced’ (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969: 19). Rhetorical argumentation attempts to create empathy or communion’ with an audience (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 1999: 485), through appeal to the audience’s beliefs or preferences. One manifestation of this, is the recourse to the ‘common sense’ of an audience, either though implicit or explicit assumption, since common sense is founded on ‘…the existence of unquestioned and unquestionable truths’ (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969: 57). Taking a more explicitly linguistic approach, Fowler (1996) offers a conception of ideology to the discussion, corresponding very closely to the definition of ‘common sense’ given above. Fowler suggests that ideology delimits, or contains, thought and expression, since the boundaries of ‘the ideological’ include nothing less than:

…a society’s implicit theory of what types of object exist in their world (categorisation); of the way the world works (causation); and of the values to be assigned to objects and processes (general propositions or paradigms). These implicit beliefs constitute ‘common sense’ which provides a normative base to discourse.

(Fowler, 1996: 10-11)

Note, however the use of the indefinite article - ‘a’ - in the first line of the definition, suggesting the possibility of multi-various ideologies (common senses) specific to their own societies, and as such available for the protagonist of an argument to
Lastly, presentational devices, such as loaded definitions, figures of speech and rhetorical argumentative structures (e.g. analogy), should be employed in rhetorical argument in order that 'the phrasing of the words ...be systematically attuned to their discursive and stylistic effectiveness' (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 1999: 485). Since rhetorical figures of speech are one such presentational device, strategically employed as ‘...a way of describing things which makes them present to our mind’ (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969: 167), their persuasive character in argumentation cannot be denied. Further, since rhetorical figures are non-obligatory structures in both argument and in text in general, their inclusion must be regarded pragmatically, showing ‘...how and in what respects the use of particular figures is explained by the requirements of argumentation’ (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969: 168). The Pragma-dialectical model reflects such a concern for argumentation, analysing figures of speech ‘as part of the sequential environment to which they are tied, and ...[paying] attention to their contribution to the local and global coherence of the text’ (Ferrara, 1985: 140).

Reader’s Letters: an argumentative discourse genre
The sample of letters used is taken from a larger corpus of data, collected as part of a research project analysing the representation of Islam and Muslims in British Broadsheet newspapers. Over a period of four months (October 1997 - January 1998), 2540 articles (news stories, editorials, features, columns, cartoons, reviews and letters) were collected which featured Islam or Muslim actors in prominent positions(3). Of these, 86 were letters from readers.

Also coded during sampling were a number of variables which aimed at recording the manner in which Islam was (re)presented in the argument of the text. These optional binaried positions were suggested by the Runnymede Trust (1997) as characteristic features of ‘closed’ and ‘open’ representations of Islam, the ratio of which are shown below(4).
As we can see, in each variable there were texts which did not choose either binaried position: only six letters included ‘Criticisms of the West by Islamic scholars’ (four rejecting such criticisms and two considering them) whilst 68 letters chose to argue that Islam was either ‘Inferior’ or ‘Equal’. In the majority of these variables, regardless of the frequency of their appearance, negative other-representations are dominant. In letters which expressed a position, ‘only’ 48.5 per cent (n= 33) of the sample argued that Islam and Muslims are ‘Inferior’, and 45.2 per cent (n= 14) of the sampled letters ‘defended’ Islamophobia. On the other hand, 61.5 per cent (n= 24) represented Islam and Muslims as as ‘enemy’; 60.3 per cent (n= 38) argued that there is something innate in the erroneous enmity between ‘Islam’ and ‘the West’; and 67.9 per cent (n= 36) of the sampled letters argued that Islam and Muslims are ‘Separate’ from, or ‘Other’ in relation to ‘the West’.

The variables above show, albeit in a rather disembodied way, the frequency of argumentation in this sample of readers-letters which takes a ‘closed’ view of Islam. What this does not show however, is the structure of such argumentation, the resources employed by the protagonists in presenting an argument and the
conclusions reached. For this a more detailed analysis of an example is required.

**Argument: The analysis**

The following letter, transcribed in full, was published in the *Daily Telegraph*, 25/10/97. The writer, Mr Ray Honeyford, should be no stranger to anti-racists - often the target of his writing - nor to readers of critical discourse analysis of news-text, with the news coverage of ‘the Honeyford affair’ being analysed by van Dijk (1991; 1992). The letter was written in response to a news-story published in the *Daily Telegraph* covering the publication of research by The Runnymede Trust on the social exclusion of British Muslim communities. It becomes clear however, that the letter is not intended as either an explicit contestation nor an elaboration of the news-story, as are the frequent approaches of readers’ letters, but rather as opposition to the findings and implications of the Runnymede report itself. The letter is followed by an analysis focusing on each of the argument’s dialectical stages.

1. **Muslims should change radically**
2. Sir - One wonders why
3. that well known anti-racist pressure group The Runnymede Trust
4. bothered to undertake a survey into British Islam (report Oct. 23).
5. A survey presupposes an attempt to gather information
6. on which informed conclusions could be based.
7. But the trust had made up its mind about the subject
8. before the survey was carried out.
9. This is made clear in a consultation paper issued in February
10. entitled *Islamophobia - its features and dangers*.
11. This paper is highly critical of British public opinion
12. and represents British Muslims as an oppressed and persecuted group
13. - views which the survey obligingly confirms.
14. If these allegations are correct, one wonders why
15. so many Muslims reject life in their Islamic homeland,
16. and choose to settle in a country
17. whose history and institutions are fundamentally Christian and Judaic,
18. and which owe little to Muslim influence.
19. One can only assume that this country,
20. with all its faults,
21. offers them a better life
22. than their countries of origin.
23. If one compares the fate of Christians in many Muslim countries
24. with the life of Muslims in this country,
25. it is not difficult to see why British Islam gets a mixed press.
26. The truth is that
27. British Muslims’ problems are not rooted in something called Islamophobia
28. - an invented and offensive term -
29. and race relations.
30. Their difficulties are a function of the faith they profess
31. operating in a culture they find irksome.
32. There is a basic incompatibility between
33. orthodox Islam’s demands and objectives
34. and certain aspects of Western, secular, free and democratic societies.
35. If Muslims in Britain are to enjoy
36. the peace of mind and public respect they crave,
37. then they need to engage in a radical transformation,
38. so as to adapt Muslim theology
39. to the demands of the country they have freely chosen to live in.
40. On the other hand,
41. if that’s not possible,
42. they have an obvious choice to make.
43. RAY HONEYFORD, Bury, Lancs

Daily Telegraph, 25 October 1997
Confrontation Stage

As mentioned, the letter functions as a refutation of the Runnymede Trust’s report on Islamophobia. There are two sites of this confrontation contained in the text: the factual basis of the survey; and Islamophobia in concept and reality. How does Honeyford exploit the rhetorical opportunities offered by this first dialectic stage of argument? First, the topical potential available is structured in such a way as to be of benefit to the arguments which he presents. The issues raised, through which the arguments pass, act to restrict the ‘disagreement space’ of the argument in favour of Honeyford. Thus, the presuppositions which the Runnymede Trust were alleged to have had about the field of research are mentioned, whilst the extent to which their findings resemble or reflect the realities of the British-Muslim communities is ignored; immigration is used in order to falsely demarcate the British-Muslim communities as ‘foreign’ and ‘Other’, ignoring the communities’ history as British citizens. The use of these particular topics is doubly functional. First, Honeyford finds them manageable, and second, they are recognisable to the audience, forming discursive ‘stock subjects’ for the negative representation of Others, especially in newspapers such as the *Telegraph*. Since the topics chosen - the ideological bias of Others; immigration of Others; the cultural “difference” of Others - have a schematic usage in newspapers in general, and in right-wing newspapers in particular, Honeyford can presume a political orientation from the readership without recourse to further contextualisation.

Also present are implicit assumptions regarding the actors identified as the site of contestation: the British-Muslim community (sic.). The text presumes that ‘They’ are immigrants (line 15), that ‘They’ have chosen to settle here (line 16), and that ‘They’ have a problem (27). Including assumptions such as these in this first dialectic stage of argument exposes the extent to which Honeyford regards them as ‘given’ - as ‘common sense’ - and as such, is illustrative of his ideological position. Should they have been included in a lower stage of argumentation, for example in the adjacent Opening stage, or, better still, in the Argumentation stage, their debatable characteristics would have been implied.
As stated, this stage functions to establish the starting point of the argument (van Eemeren and Houtlosser, 1999: 480), which involves the summary of the two contending argumentative positions, in relation to the issues presented. Regarding the ‘scientific method’ of the survey, the Runnymede Trust is represented as employing faulty procedure and contravening the central basis of a survey (lines 5-8), whereas Honeyford’s opinions are clear (line 9), inevitable and straightforward (line 20), and ‘the truth’ (line 26). As mentioned above, because immigration is introduced as a topic with the attendant implicit assumption that ‘Muslims are immigrants’, the Runnymede Trusts’ position that ‘the British-Muslim communities are British’ - which should have appeared here - is excluded. The Trust is also represented as having ‘invented’ the ‘offensive’ term Islamophobia (lines 27-8), the ‘truth’ being that such things do not exist (line 26-7). In suggesting that Islamophobia does not actually exist, Honeyford’s argument is threatened with a paradox. It has already been implicitly assumed that British-Muslims do have ‘a problem’ (line 27, and above), thus in taking the position that Islamophobia does not exist, a ‘vacuum of agency’ is left where ‘the problem’ of British-Muslims is unexplained. The position that Honeyford takes, puts ‘British Muslim’s problems’ - left undefined and as such closed to critique - down to Islam’s incompatibility with Western culture and society (lines 32-4; 37-8) and the lack of Muslim adaptation (lines 30-1).

The audience is manipulated with regard to these argumentative topics. The Runnymede Trust is referred to as being ‘highly critical of British public opinion’ (line 11), and as such ‘against’ the British public. Such a tactic makes it harder for the readership - as part of the British public - to act as a neutral adjudicator of the argument, since it includes them within Honeyford’s position through asserting a communion of stake or interest in refuting the report’s allocation of blame.

Presentational devices - for example the syntactic structuring of expression through extensive use of the pronoun ‘They’, and the concomitant use of ‘Christian’ vs. ‘Muslim’ (lines 23-4), and ‘Western’ vs. ‘Islam’ (line 33-4) - encourage the readership to ‘side’ with the Honeyford position. Such bifurcated positions are then rhetorically presented to the readership through the use of antitheses such as ‘the fate of Christians in many Muslim countries’ (line 23) vs. ‘the life of Muslims in this
country’ (line 24); and ‘Islam’s demands and objectives’ (line 33) vs. ‘Western, secular, free and democratic’ (line 34). The identification of the Muslim-Other, with primary stereotypes, or ‘topoi’, such as those above, has a detailed and extensive history in North-Western countries and cultures, drawing upon ‘a reservoir of ideas or core images from which specific rhetoric statements can be generated’ (Ivie, 1980: 281 cited in Karim, 1997: 153). The rhetoric of this letter draws upon such topoi, endowing the Muslim Other with the ignoble traits of intolerance, threat, a dogmatism verging on fanaticism, and an implacable opposition to modernity (Hippler & Leug, 1995; Karim, 1997; Said, 1995, 1997; Sayyid, 1997).

**Argumentation stage**

Following Fisher (1988), there are essentially two methods of critique when it comes to challenging real arguments: first, questioning the truth status of an argument’s premises (‘supports’ by my terminology(5)) since ‘[i]f the premises of an argument are not true …then they cannot establish their conclusion’ (Fisher, 1988: 24). Second, by questioning the argument’s claim that the conclusion must follow from the supports. (Fisher, 1988: 25).

The argumentation of the Honeyford letter is very interesting since it has a highly coherent argumentative structure. The argument scheme, illustrated below, is based on a distinction between micro and macro argument, wherein ‘partial argumentations …are incorporated within a functionally integrating global argumentation’ (Kopperschmidt, 1985: 161). This is particularly apparent in ‘real’ arguments (as opposed to theoretical/logical arguments), which are ‘often macrostructures made of many smaller arguments or sub-arguments’ (Walton, 1989: 108). Laying out the argumentative scheme in the way opposite exposes both ‘the facts [Honeyford] appeal[s] to as a foundation of the claim’ (Toulmin, 1958: 97) and the ‘warrant’ of the claim, employed as proof that ‘…taking these data as a starting point, the step to the original claim or conclusion is an appropriate and legitimate one’ (Toulmin, 1958: 98).
The letter is essentially split into two main arguments: the denial of Islamophobia, the conclusion located in lines (26-9); and the reversal of blame, problematising Islam and British-Muslims, concluded in lines (30-42). The argumentative structure of Honeyford’s letter should be thought of pragmatically, employing arguments performing these two macro-speech acts. First, the conclusions of the Runnymede Trust, already in the public sphere, need refuting, hence the denial of racism in the Counter Argument. Second, it needs to be shown that the opposite of what the Runnymede Trust claimed to be true is actually the case, i.e. that Britain is not a racist society. And third, the ‘real’ cause of British-Muslims problems in this country need to be accounted for, hence the reversal, blaming the victim in the Contra Argument.

What Honeyford does in order to counter the claims of the Runnymede Trust,
is import a version of a Straw Man argument - a misrepresentation of an argument by either misquotation, exaggeration or distortion - into lines (5-13). Even if we accept the definition of a ‘survey’ offered (lines 5-6), and regard the two joint supports (lines 9-12; line 13) of the argument to be true - and these are themselves dubious assumptions - we still cannot fully validate the intermediate conclusion. It is only with the introduction of rhetorical devices that the conclusion offered - ‘the trust had made up its mind about the subject before the survey was carried out’ (lines 7-8) - is plausible. First, The Runnymede Trust are labelled as a ‘well known anti-racist pressure group’ (line 3), suggesting an ideological stake in achieving certain results (Edwards & Potter, 1992); and second, the report is cited as obligingly confirming their preconceived ideas (line 13), implying further corruption of the research process. Immediately recognisable as rhetorical devices, these strategies are regularly used arguments both in the denial of racism and racist attitudes, (see van Dijk, 1992), and to argumentation in general, representing the ad hominem attack. Fallacious argumentum ad hominem is ‘committed when one person criticises an argument by attacking the arguer personally instead of considering his argument on its real merits’ (Walton, 1989: 20), an accusation which is plausible in this case.

Even if it were true that the report confirmed the opinions of the consultation paper (and, I hasten to add, this is not really true), it does not mean that the Trust had ‘made up its mind about the subject before the survey was carried out’ as Honeyford suggests (lines 7-8), merely that consultation paper and survey produced the same results - results which could be true.

In order to dispense with the possibility that the Runnymede Trust have valid findings despite their “ideological commitment”, Honeyford employs the second element of the Counter Argument, drawing upon both the immigration and the cultural superiority strategies, selected in order to be immediately recognisable to the readership of the Daily Telegraph. In the two supports, British-Muslims are erroneously labelled as ‘immigrants’ (lines 16-18), who have rejected life in ‘their Islamic homeland’ (line 15). The intermediate conclusion that ‘this country, with all its faults, offers them a better way of life than their countries of origin’ (lines 19-22) is based on a strategy which both assumes and concludes ‘We are not a racist society’, typical in public discourse (van Dijk, 1992: 89). This micro-argument
functions as a double strategy frequently contained in argumentative denials of racism, and contains a ‘positive self-presentation, on the one hand, and a strategy of expressing a subtle, indirect ...form of negative other-presentation on the other hand’ (van Dijk, 1992: 89). Both of these supports are inherently contestable however, thus the intermediate conclusion that ‘this country with all it’s faults offers them a better life’ (lines 19-22) falters.

When the conclusion of the first principle argument in line (27) - ‘British Muslims’ problems are not rooted in something called Islamophobia’ - is stripped of validated supports, it simply becomes untenable. Indeed, even if the intermediate conclusion (lines 19-22) were accepted as true, it still would not be able to act as a valid support for the main conclusion (line 27), as this represents a false extension. The comparative betterment of their ‘new life here’ - even if this is shown to be true - has absolutely no bearing on the principle conclusion of the Runnymede report: that the British-Muslim communities enjoy a significantly lesser standard of living than that experienced by the majority white population, due to the discrimination they endure. Such a conclusion is in no way affected by the truth of the intermediate conclusion in lines (19-22). If the subjects of the argument actually were immigrants, it is very possible that ‘this country, with all it’s faults [could] offer them a better life’, and still only offer them a life subjected to religious and racial discrimination.

The double strategy of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation is also central in organising the structure of the remaining half of the letter, the Contra Argument, in which the “real” problem is located, or rather reversed, blaming British-Muslims for “their difficulties” (lines 30-31). The two supports employed as the bases for this intermediate conclusion have almost identical rhetorical structures: the topical potential is adapted to audience demand through the identification of ‘the West’ with positive characteristics; and the presentational device antithesis is used in order to make the argument more apparent to the audience.

The alleged poor treatment of (minority) Christian communities in Muslim countries is a topic frequently cited in the British Broadsheet press, especially in the Right-wing newspapers, occasionally whole articles being based on such assumptions. The assumed difference between the way ‘We’ treat minorities, in this case Muslims, and the way ‘They’ treat minorities, in this case Christians, is
exploited in lines (23-25) for rhetorical effect. The alleged negative status of minorities in Muslim countries, and therefore in Islam, is foregrounded through the use of the loaded noun phrase ‘the fate of Christians in Muslim countries’, emphasised via the use of the antithetical noun phrase of ‘the life of Muslims in this country’. In the second support, the antithesis is established between ‘Islam’s demands and objectives’ and ‘certain aspects of Western, secular, free and democratic societies’ (lines 33-34). The exact nature of ‘Islam’s demands and objectives’ remains unstated and therefore closed to argument, but since they are cited as being ‘incompatible’, in the timeless eternal tense (Said, 1995: 72), with ‘aspects of Western, secular, free and democratic societies’, these demands and objectives are, quite simply, not Western, or secular, or free, or democratic. It is their “lack” of these characteristics which, Honeyford suggests, is the cause of ‘British Muslims’ problems’.

The conclusion of the reversal argument is also interesting, quoted again here for ease of reference:

35. If Muslims in Britain are to enjoy
36. the peace of mind and public respect they crave,
37. then they need to engage in a radical transformation,
38. so as to adapt Muslim theology
39. to the demands of the country they have freely chosen to live in

What this conclusion does is to present a neat summary of the Pragma-dialectical strategies previously engaged with: British-Muslims as immigrants (39); the immigrants’ preference (therefore the superiority) of the ‘Christian-Judaic’ country over the ‘Muslim’ country (39); the implied superiority of ‘the West’, since ‘They’ are the ones who Honeyford suggests ought to change (37); the assumed wide divergence between ‘the West’ and ‘Islam’ suggested in the need for radical transformation’ (37); and the deterministic influence of ‘Muslim theology’ over Muslims’ lives (38). Such strategies are premised by an obvious commitment to an anti-anti-racist ideology and a barely concealed antipathy directed towards British-Muslims.
Concluding Stage

Honeyford closes the argument with a concluding remark which, despite being ambiguous, is labelled as ‘an obvious choice to make’ (line 42). Although unstated, one can only assume that coming immediately after the main conclusion of the argument - that Muslims need to adapt themselves to this country - the ‘obvious choice’ Honeyford is suggesting is that the whole British-Muslim community needs to decide whether to “stay here” or to leave. In this way, the letter functions as an argumentative summary of the Right-wing maxim: “Britain: Love it or leave it”. Such a conclusion could only be offered with the achievement of previous micro-arguments: Britain and British people are Western, secular, free and democratic; the British-Muslim communities are homogenised and both presented, and thought of, as being ‘not British’. If these micro-arguments are not assented to, an alternative course of action can be implied or directly suggested, wherein British-Muslim communities lobby or demonstrate to alter the aspects of society considered to be abhorrent. The absence of such a conclusion is illustrative of Honeyford’s argumentative and ideological commitments.

Conclusions

The analysis of the Honeyford letter in this article has shown that the Pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation can be suitably applied to the argumentative discourse genre of reader’s letters. The letter in question was taken from a larger sample of newspaper text(s), which, it was also shown, display both distinct characteristics of an argumentative discourse genre, as well as a predominantly anti-Muslim rhetorical stance. As such, the letter chosen was not exceptional in content.

The main strategy used by Honeyford in the Confrontation stage is a limiting of the topical potential available in such a way as to offer opportunities for dismissing the research findings of the Runnymede Trust as flawed without discussing the actual research findings. The ‘characteristics’ of British-Muslims are also introduced, with a view to relocating the focus of the argument to ‘Their’ alleged shortcomings as opposed to ‘Ours’. These are, respectively, Evasion and Inversion strategies, designed to benefit the arguments which Honeyford presents. The
Opening stage is characterised by a rhetorical elevation of Honeyford’s position: elevated both in relation to the antagonist position of the Runnymede Trust and also in the eyes of the imagined audience. Thus, the Runnymede Trust is characterised as being against British public opinion and as having invented offensive terms which suit their (ideological) agenda, whilst Honeyford’s position is ‘common sense’: clear, straightforward, ‘the truth’. This sows the seed of communion with the audience, cultivates Honeyford’s attempt to ally the audience to his forthcoming arguments, and as such, reaps a conventional strategy of this dialectic stage (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 1999: 493). The argumentative strategy adopted is particularly interesting, with the content of the argument being wholly subsumed by the argument scheme. Each clause in the letter forms part of a micro-argument which, in turn, supports main conclusions in each of the letters two macro-arguments: the denial of Islamophobia; and the reversal of blame, problematising Islam and British-Muslims. This strategy relies upon attempting to maintain the appearance of a valid argumentative structure, but is actually is based on racist presuppositions, questionable claims to truth, and hence, inherently refutable logic. The realisation that the letter is structured in such a internally self-supporting manner offers opportunities for both the criticism and demolition of the argument, either through questioning the truth claims of the supports, or by showing that the conclusions offered do not (necessarily) follow logically from these supports. When either approach is successful the structure, and hence coherence, of the argument evaporates.

After such a ‘watertight’ hierarchical argumentative structure, geared towards the support of a main conclusion, the Concluding stage simply states that the ‘choice’ open to British-Muslims is ‘obvious’: if they don’t like it, they should ‘go home’. As shown above, the only thing ‘obvious’ about this choice, is that it is only made possible with the implicit assumption that British-Muslims are non-British.

The implicit assumptions of argumentation are made manifest by any rigorous theory of argumentation however, since they are explicit in both the choice(s) of support and the moves from support(s) to conclusion(s). Where the Pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation excels is in illustrating: the successive dialectic stages of argument; the concerns, and thus what is at stake, in each of these dialectical stages of argument; and the rhetoric resources of the
argumentative participants, deployed in order to swing each stage to their own advantage. It is only when the dialectic and pragmatic aspects of argument are united in theory and analysis, that the structured, directed and interactive concerns of argument can be fully appreciated and subjected to critique.

References


Zokaei, M.S. (forthcoming) ‘Solidarity and inclusion among British Muslims: Empirical application of social differentiation theory’
Notes

(1) Examples of such valid forms of argumentation are: *Modus ponens* (If A, then B; A; therefore B); *Modus Tolens* (If A then B; not B; therefore not A); *Hypothetical Syllogism* (If A then B; If B then C; therefore, if A then C); *Disjunctive Syllogism* (Either A or B; not A; therefore B).

(2) Examples of such violations are the *fallacies*, a particularly strong criticism, suggesting that an argument contains ‘systematically deceptive strategies of argumentation, based on an underlying, systematic error of reasoned dialogue’ (Walton, 1989: 16). Classically fallacious arguments involve *post hoc ergo propter hoc* errors, involving an unwarranted move from a relation of correlation to a relation of causality.

(3) Articles were recorded which featured Islam or Muslim actors in either the headline, the first paragraph of the text, or in articles which dedicated a whole paragraph to them, thus excluding passing references.

(4) Although the criteria of recording an article was, as mentioned, that Islam and/or Muslim actors were cited in prominent positions, it was found that ‘Islam’ was not always referenced as a causal or explanatory factor in the text. This was found to be significant, and will be covered in later work. The rolling story on the ‘UNSCOM weapons inspection stand-off’ is a prime example of this, where Islam is only mentioned in the later stages of the sample, after President Saddam Hussein had started employing (broadly) Islamic rhetoric in order to justify his actions.

(5) The term ‘Support’ is used in preference to ‘Premise’ or ‘Proposition’ in order to emphasise the functional use of such clauses to the conclusion and the argument as a whole. Remaining terminology is defined as follows: Intermediate Conclusion, a clause ‘presented both as a conclusion from prior [supports] and as a [support] for a subsequent claim’ (Fisher, 1988: 20); Assumption, a support which is taken for granted, and can be either implicit or explicit in the text; Supposition, a situation suggested ‘for the sake of argument’, not presented as being true but ‘so that we can consider its implications’ (Fisher, 1988: 83).

(6) For an example of such a story see ‘Carey urges tolerance for converts’, *Daily Telegraph* 6/12 p.9. This news-story details a speech given by Carey during a visit to Pakistan, wherein he ‘...stepped up his evangelical campaign yesterday by
urging Muslims to accept and support Christian conversions in their community.’

The headline is premised on the assumption that tolerance is not a sentiment currently being metered out to converts in Pakistan, and, moreover, the use of the verb ‘urge’ suggests that such tolerance is something which is not forthcoming, backed up in the quotation above wherein the verbs ‘accept’ and ‘support’ are used in their infinite forms. These assumptions remain so, lacking any further support in the body of the text.
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