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Public versus private: indicators of ad hominem *fallacies*

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Introduction

Contemporary studies on argumentation are largely based on the dialectics and rhetoric of the antiquity and until the 1950s they had been dominated by the rhetoric and logic principles inherited from that period. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's *New Rhetoric* along with other studies by Toulmin, Van Eemeren and Grootendorst published in the second half of the 20th century have marked a shift in focus and lead to the modern state of argumentation theory.

The latter two Dutch discourse and argumentation theorists suggested in the early eighties a new approach entitled pragma-dialectics which paid special attention to fallacies. They developed a set of rules for critical discussion and identified o series of violations of these rules. From their viewpoint, any speech act that violates these rules is a fallacy.

The literature connected to argumentation theory is filled with classifications and typologies of these fallacies according to various criteria. The focus of this paper lies on one of the two large categories of fallacies that constitute violations of the first rule for critical discussion (The Freedom Rule), i.e. the so-called *ad hominem* fallacies. They are moves that aim at restricting the other party's freedom of action when attacking or defending a standpoint. There are three types of *ad hominem* fallacies: (i) the direct personal attack, also called the "abusive" variant, (ii) the indirect personal attack, also called the "circumstantial" variant, and (iii) the "tu quoque" variant.

The purpose of this analysis is to identify possible indicators of ad hominem fallacies and to structure them in a typology. Aware of the vastness of this research area, on the one hand, and of the virtual infinity of contexts of their appearance, on the other, the scrutiny was placed on the discourse of the Romanian presidency. The motivation behind this choice was twofold: firstly, presidential discourse is an institutional discourse and secondly, it takes place in the private space of the institution called presidency but it affects / concerns public interest. The analysis was made on the stenogram of a meeting between President Băsescu and the CP leader, Mr Dan Voiculescu, at Cotroceni Pallace published in the Romanian daily *Gândul* on March 22nd, 2007 and on a series of interviews given by the Romanian President between November 2006 and February 2007.

1. The direct personal attack

Also called the abusive variant, this type of fallacy is the easiest to identify for two reasons: (i) there is no effort of hiding the attack on the opponent in the case of such a fallacy since it is intended to be obvious; (ii) the mere presence of an open,

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aggressive, ironic or face threatening form of language is a strong indicator of an abusive variant of an ad hominem fallacy.

The instances of direct personal attack found in the corpus have been grouped according to the type of indicators and are shown in Table 1 in the Appendix

A particularly interesting and somehow more "elegant" type of direct attack is given in the last example from the above table. The speaker attacks his / her opponent by quoting in an approbatory manner a direct attack made against his / her opponent by some other person. This approach has, in our opinion, a potentially double effect: on the one hand, it generates the idea that the speaker is not alone in his position towards his / her opponent and, on the other hand, it tends to place the responsibility of actually attacking the opponent on the person that is quoted and not on the speaker per se.

2. The indirect personal attack

Also known as the *circumstantial variant*, the indirect personal attack was the least present in the corpus of our analysis. We identified only three instances characterized by two different types of indicators as it can be seen in Table 2 in the Appendix.

In the case of the affirmative structure, the indicator seems to be a noun (*dubii* = *doubts*) which in itself serves very well the main purpose of an indirect personal attack; i.e. to cast suspicion on the other party's motives. The suspicion factor is manifested in the case of the interrogative structures by means of indefinite adverbs (which would be rendered in English by a verbal construction – *I wonder why* … for *oare* – and a nominal construction – *by any chance* …for *cumva*) which by their nature seem to serve the same purpose we mentioned above.

3. The tu quoque fallacy

Sometimes the translation of this third type of *ad hominem* fallacy may be used instead of the Latin label; it is called the *you also variant* and it constitutes an attempt to undermine the credibility of the other party by highlighting a contradiction in that party's words, deeds or opinions in the past and in the present. It is also possible to point to a contradiction between what one says and what one does. The basic principle on which the *tu quoque* fallacy operates is that one who is not consistent cannot be right. From the viewpoint of the number of instances of *ad hominem* fallacies encountered in our corpus, this type proves to be the most generous. It also displays a rather complex preparatory process. The *tu quoque* fallacy seems to be a multiple stage process. First, there is a temporal and / or spatial setting which, most often than not, prepares the ground for the second stage represented by a *verba dicendi* structure of the *you said* type. These two elements require the presence of an interrogative structure asking for explanations (or apparently asking for explanations in the case of rhetorical questions). Nevertheless, some *tu quoque* attacks may be much simpler than this consisting only of a *not only X, but also Y* structure which does not require any preparatory stages of the above mentioned type. Irrespective of its structural organization, the *tu quoque* fallacy seems to be the favourite type of *ad hominem* fallacy in the presidential discourse (no matter whom they belong to: the president himself or the reporter / opponent).

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Table 3 in the Appendix encapsulates the indicators specific to all the stages above mentioned.

Conclusions

Judging by the results that the analysis of the presidential discourse has yielded, we could draw several conclusions:

(i) although all three variants of *ad hominem* fallacies are present, there seems to be a propensity towards the *tu quoque* fallacy;

(ii) the most reliable indicators of an *ad hominem* fallacy are those connected to a direct attack;

(iii) the indicators of the *circumstantial* variant seem to be the most difficult to identify and rely on (but we should take into account the fact that the corpus under scrutiny here did not deliver sufficient evidence and, consequently, the analysis regarding this category of indicators remains open to further discussions);

(iii) the presence of a *tu quoque* fallacy is signalled by a network of more or less interdependent indicators.

As we mentioned in the introductory part of the paper, this is a vast research area and in order to have solid results a more thorough analysis is necessary. Therefore, we will keep an watchful eye on the economy of the *ad hominem* fallacies in the presidential discourse, and in political discourse for that matter, analysing the linguistic elements that may be considered reliable indicators of these types of fallacies with a special focus on the *tu quoque* variant.

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Appendix

Table 1

Type of indicator	*Examples*
Name calling	*Felix motanul* (engl. *Felix the cat*) *securistul* (engl. *the 'Securitate' agent / political police agent*)
Offending and / or ironic descriptions	*supus al lui Iliescu* (engl. *Iliescu's crony*) *trompeta salvatoare* (engl. *the salvaging mouthpiece*) *trompeta actualului şef* (engl. *the mouthpiece of the current boss*) *el este doar tolerat în funcția de preşedinte al PSD* (engl. *he is only tolerated as a president of the PSD*) *tânăra speranță* (engl. *the young hope*) *aşa-numitul preşedinte al PSD* (engl. *the so-called president of the PSD*) *nu ştiu care liberal supărat* (engl. *I don't know which angry liberal*) *celălalt de la PSD* (engl. *the other from the PSD*) *lipsit de rațiune* (engl. *lacking reason*)
Face threatening verbal expressions	*se rățoieşte* (engl. *is blustering*) *țipă* (engl. *yells*)
Quoting some other person's direct attack	*l-a etichetat domnul Iliescu ca fiind "prostănac"* (engl. *labeled Mr Iliescu as "dummy"*)

Table 2

Type of indicators	*Examples*
Affirmative structures	*Eu am dubii serioase …*(engl. *I have serious doubts*)
Interrogative structures	*Oare de ce nu s-a întrebat domnul Ion Iliescu în 1990 unde-i este dosarul şi să-l arate?* (engl. *How come that in 1990 Mr Iliescu did not wonder where his file was to show it?*) *Nu v-ați gândit cumva că soluția, pe care vreți să o ascundeți, este cea politic corectă, adică demisia primului ministru?* (engl. *Haven't you anyhow figured that the solution, which you want to hide, is the politically correct one, that is the resigning of the Prime Minister ?*)

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Table 3

Type of indicators	*Examples*
Interrogative structures asking for explanations	*Cum se potrivesc …?* (engl. *How do these match … ?*) *Cum ați caracteriza …?* (engl. *How would you characterize … ?*) *Dar de ce …?* (engl. *But why … ?*) *Dar de ce nu este …?* (engl. *But why isn't it… ?*) *De ce a făcut-o …?* (engl. *Why did he do it… ?*)
Some of these structures are followed by "explanatory" conclusions	*Deci este un parteneriat …*(engl. *So this is a partnership ...*) *Deci aici este un pachet …*(engl. *So this is a package …*) *Pentru că …*
Structures of the type *not only X, but also Y*	*Nu numai românii, ci și antreprenorii din statele respective …*(engl. *Not only the Romanians, but also the entrepreneurs of those states…*)
Temporal and spatial settings	*o declarație din 2002* (engl. *a 2002 declaration*) *într-un interviu cu …*(engl. *in a interview with…*) *într-o carte intitulată …*(engl. *in a book titled…*) *la vremea respectivă …*(engl. *at that time…*) *acum 4 ani …*(engl. *four years ago…*) *într-o declarație a dvs din …*(engl. *in one of your declarations…*) *atunci …*(engl. *when / at that time*) *când X …*(engl. *when X …*) *în 2003* (engl. *in 2003*) *în timpul când …*(engl. *while / at the time…*) *la desemnarea lui X …*(engl. *at X's nomination*) *dar acum …*(engl. *but now*) *mai înainte …*(engl. *before*) *dintr-o dată …*(engl. *all of a sudden …*)
Verba dicendi or other verbal structures	*spuneați / ziceați* (engl. *you said / were saying*) *vorbeați* (engl. *you were speaking (about)…*) *erați întrebat* (engl. *you were asked*) *a hotărât* (engl. *(has) decided*) *sunteți acuzat* (engl. *you are blamed that…)*

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