



The Effective and/or the Reasonable: Border Crossing in Strategic Maneuvering¹

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Abstract. The main aim of an argumentative speech act complex, as defined in argumentation theory, is to resolve a difference of opinion by advancing a constellation of reasons brought up by the arguer in order to justify the acceptability of a standpoint. In order to achieve one's goal, the arguer is entitled to employ strategic maneuvering, a process through which a balance between reasonableness and effectiveness is to be established, and the aim of which is to move towards the best position in the actual context of argumentation. A prototypical example of applying strategic maneuvering is that of political speeches where speakers frequently achieve their goals by the rhetorical means of persuasion and manipulation, by misleading language use. The speaker's orientation towards finding the best position will be followed through the analysis of dialogues taken from the TV series *House of Cards*.

Keywords: argumentation, strategic maneuvering, effective, reasonable, manipulation

Introduction

In this paper, speech acts are approached from the point of view of argumentation theory as developed by Frans van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst (1984, 1992, 2004) and further extended by van Eemeren (2010, 2015). First, I start from the basic concepts of speech act theory, the illocutionary and the perlocutionary act, and their relation to argumentation theory. Next, I turn to the definition of strategic maneuvering the aim of which is for the arguer to move towards the best position in the actual context of argumentation. A prototypical example of applying strategic maneuvering is that of political speeches where speakers frequently achieve their goals by the rhetorical means of persuasion and manipulation, by

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misleading language use. This theoretical approach is then employed in some selected conversations from *House of Cards*, one of the most popular television series of recent times.

Theoretical background

As it is known from Grice (1975), the Cooperative Principle stands at the foundation of all types of interpersonal communication. According to this prescriptive rule (Grice 1975: 45), interlocutors are supposed to speak appropriately according to the conversation they are involved in. It goes without saying that if one adopts the CP, one will also adopt the four conversational maxims as well: the maxim of quantity (referring to the quantity of information to be provided), the maxim of quality (concerning the truthfulness of the contribution), the maxim of relation (concerning the pertinence and relevance of the contribution), and the maxim of manner (regarding the way of what is said).

When speakers address each other, they do not only wish their words to be understood by their interlocutor(s), but they also want themselves to be accepted and dealt with accordingly. Language users performing different kinds of speech acts express themselves not only with the intention to make themselves recognized what speech act they used, but they also hope to elicit a particular (verbal or non-verbal) response from their addressees. Therefore, the way they use language must/will serve both a communicative and an interactional purpose. The communicative purpose can be interpreted as the speaker's attempt to create the *illocutionary effect of **understanding***, while the interactional purpose can be regarded as the speaker's attempt to create a *perlocutionary effect of **accepting*** (van Eemeren–Grootendorst 1984: 23–29).

An illocutionary act (as a communicative act) is felicitous if it achieves the effect that the listener understands the communicative (illocutionary) force and the propositional content of the utterance. On the other hand, a perlocutionary act (as an interactional act) is felicitous only if not simply its acceptance but another (a further) desired effect on the addressee occurs. A distinction must be made between effects of utterances **intended** by the speaker and consequences of utterances which are only brought about **accidentally** by the speaker (van Eemeren 2010: 37). Speech acts themselves (as opposed to mere behaviour) are defined as “conscious, purposive activities based on rational considerations for which the actor can be held accountable” (van Eemeren 2010: 37).

Argumentation is basically aimed at resolving a difference of opinion about the acceptability of a standpoint by making an appeal to the other party's reasonableness (van Eemeren–Grootendorst 2004: 11–18). The process of argumentation that is put forward in a discussion or a debate is designed in

such a way as “to achieve precisely defined verbally externalized illocutionary and perlocutionary effects immediately related to the complex speech act performed” (van Eemeren 2010: 37). The acceptance of the speech act by the addressee is defined as inherent perlocutionary i.e. a minimal effect, while all other consequences that a speech act may have are defined as consecutive perlocutionary consequences, i.e. optimal effects.

In argumentation, mainly within the domain of politics, there may be cases when one's intended perlocutionary effect is for the speaker to find his best strategic position which would prove to be effective and reasonable enough to control his/her interlocutor. This is what pragma-dialecticians call strategic maneuvering, i.e. “moving towards the best position in view of the argumentative circumstances” (van Eemeren 2010: 40). Strategic maneuvering (the concept introduced in van Eemeren–Houtlosser 1997) is defined in argumentation theory as “the management of argumentative discourse to maintain the balance between pursuing one's ‘rhetorical objective’ of having one's own position accepted and complying at the same time with one's professed ‘dialectical objective’ of resolving a difference of opinion in a reasonable way” (van Eemeren 2005: xiii). It is the process of continual efforts carried out in argumentative discourse in order to keep the balance between reasonableness and effectiveness, i.e. to maintain reasonableness and achieving effectiveness at the same time (van Eemeren 2010: 40). The term “maneuver” denotes a planned movement to win or to get to an advantageous position, while “strategic” refers to the way a goal is reached by clever and skilful planning, “doing optimal justice to both reasonableness and effectiveness” (van Eemeren 2010: 41). Strategic maneuvering in argumentative discourse is viewed as a means for arguers to realize their rhetorical aims (wanting to be effective) while complying with the requirements of resolving differences of opinion (wanting to be reasonable).

However, in the case of political discourses, strategic maneuvering is just one step away from manipulation. Persuasion can be distinguished from manipulation in that the addressee has the freedom to respond to the attempt of convincing them. The speaker's intention for persuasion is clearly perceived by the addressee and, as such, he/she can react to it. On the other hand, in manipulative discourse, this intention is covert, it remains undetectable, and thus the speaker is unaware of it. Manipulative discourse in fact flouts the ethical and rational means of persuasion. Van Eemeren (2005: xii) claims that “manipulation in discourse boils down to intentionally deceiving one's addressees by persuading them of something that is foremost in one's interest through the covert use of communicative devices that are not in agreement with generally acknowledged critical standards of reasonableness”.

How can one verbally deceive one's interlocutor? One serious mode to do so is by manipulating pragmatic inferences, for instance, by insinuating or misinformation.

***House of Cards* – The series**

All these theoretical considerations have been presented here in order to get a better grip of the maneuvering strategies and manipulative moves of the two protagonists of the American political drama in the form of the web (Netflix) television series entitled *House of Cards*. The American series (as well as its earlier British counterpart with the same title, 1990–1995) are adaptations of the novel of the same title by Michael Dobbs. So far, six seasons have been aired, the first having been released in 2013, the last one starting in autumn 2018. The series is set in Washington D.C. and is the story of Congressman Frank Underwood (also called Francis by his wife) (played by Kevin Spacey) striving for higher and higher social positions: first, he is the party leader of the Democrats, but soon we find him in the position of Secretary of State. Aided by his wife, Claire Underwood (played by Robin Wright), they plot against the current President in order to gain more power, finally Frank becoming the President of the United States. He manages to ascend to political power through ruthless pragmatism and manipulation, mainly achieved through argumentative discussions he and his wife carry out with Frank's political allies and enemies. In shaping the diabolic character of the Underwoods, their verbal behaviour is constructed in such a way that it intentionally, even hyperbolically emphasizes the way they manage to manipulate both their political allies and their enemies.

Methodology

The script of the series is considered to be an authentic corpus based on which the characters' linguistic behaviour is studied within their context. By analysing selected conversations from the first three seasons of the series, we are trying to investigate what strategic moves Frank and Claire Underwood employ in order to covertly persuade their interacting partners to speak or act according to the couple's wants, enhancing their ascension to the highest political power. The study of fictional exchanges can provide useful insights into the mechanisms of real-life interactions.

The analyses

Speakers – according to the Cooperative Principle – need to play the resolution game by the rules, they have to observe the rules of correctness (reasonableness) because they may be held committed to what they have earlier said, assumed, or implicated, all this against their wanting to have their point of view accepted

(effectiveness) (van Eemeren 2010: 42). In the case of the Underwoods, they frequently use power (political power in their case) to persuade their interlocutor of their standpoint. As one of the characters claims: “Power is the old stone building that stands for centuries” (2.04).

Frank Underwood continuously employs the speech act complex of argumentation, together with its different sub-acts performed in the process of convincing his interlocutors, with the help of which he aims at bringing about the perlocutionary effect of acceptance of his current standpoint in a seemingly reasonable (i.e. acceptable) way. The phrase “strategic maneuvering” is used intentionally here as it perfectly suits our aim to describe the Underwoods’ well-planned, cleverly and skilfully elaborated moves and verbal behaviour. In an emblematic conversation, Frank Underwood, already President of the US, the Vice-President, Donald Blythe, and Frank’s chief of staff, Seth, are preparing to release the President’s new government programme called “America Works”.

(1) Vice President Donald Blythe: You need a word that goes beyond America Works. Something that can be used for anything. /.../

Seth: What about ‘vision’?

Frank: Isn’t that too generic?

Seth: That’s what we want. I mean, the more generic, the better. People can project anything they want on ‘vision’. (3.37)²

Seth explicitly explains why the word “vision” is the perfect choice to describe the programme: it is general enough for a wide variety of implicatures from the part of those who release it, and it leaves plenty of room for inferences for the people, the intended addressees of the campaign: “they can project anything they want” in the message. This is exactly the intention of those in power: to say one thing in such a way that afterwards they cannot be blamed for saying it because they can claim that they did not mean it that way, that their audience inferred the wrong message. Due to the fact that the addressee cannot be aware of the speaker’s intention, this pragmatic act is non-overt and deniable at any time (Sorlin 2016: 78, Bell 1997).

This idea is overtly expressed in Claire’s utterance:

(2) Claire: It’s just words, words you can *disown*³ the moment you’re back on US soil. (3.32)

She addresses her words to Michael Corrigan, an arrested gay activist protesting in Moscow against Russian anti-gay laws. He is to be released by Russian

² The numbers denote the season and the episode the quote is taken from.

³ My emphasis, Zs. A.

President Petrov on condition that he makes a statement in which he apologizes to the citizens of the Russian Federation for breaking the country's laws. As the Russians are not able to convince him, Claire Underwood travels to the Russian capital to persuade him to make this apology because this act would bring the Underwoods political capital to build on. Her later words also signal that in her attitude there is a huge difference between what is said (the locutionary act) and what is meant (the illocutionary act). "Words thus become empty shells that serve as mere pragmatic tools" (Sorlin 2016: 92). She tries to urge her interlocutor to separate the utterance itself from the responsibility undertaken by uttering the speech act of apologizing:

(3) Claire (*later on*): A statement for the Russian media, that's all. You don't have to mean it, you just have to say it. (3.32)

As Claire's utterance shows, "the Underwoods who have no difficulty sorting pragmatic function from propositional content. Francis cynically confesses about politicians: 'No writer worth his salt can resist a good story, just as no politician can resist making promises he can't keep.'" (3.31) (Sorlin 2018: 93).

"[P]olitical discussions are in fact no more than a one-way traffic of leaders talking down to their voters, and only when elections are close do politicians adjust their campaigns, sometimes in a blatantly opportunistic way, to the opinions of their voters" (van Eemeren 2010: 3). In politics, lying is taken for granted, as Frank Underwood reveals unashamed:

(4) Claire: We've been lying for a long time.
Frank: Of course we have. Imagine what the voters would think if we started telling the truth. (3.39)

These are the cases when speakers do not even want their interlocutors to see through their intentions. For Frances and Claire Underwood, a conversation succeeds only when it satisfies their own personal motives and self-advancement (Sorlin 2016: 116). They address their words to their interlocutors in such a covert way that their real intention can be denied later. Frank frequently resorts to using the strategy of stepping back, not taking responsibility for his previous promises. Peter Russo, candidate for the Congress, had promised his electorate to keep a shipyard open, but later Frank Underwood, Vice-President at the time, requires it to be closed. He justifies his decision with the ultimate but not the real, only a covering reason: politics.

(5) Francis: I'm sure you've done splendid work, but unfortunately it can't come to fruition.

Peter: Why?

Francis: Politics. There's forces bigger than either of us at play here. (1.4)

Francis appeals to a higher entity than himself, resorting to action in the name of politics that nobody can control but can only be controlled by. Covering his true intention, he manipulates his interlocutor and presents himself being in a similar position to Russo, while in reality he is the one who pulls the strings. In a similar vein, he invokes politics to justify why not telling the whole truth to his political enemy can be an acceptable act:

(6) Bob: Has Marty Spinella seen this?

Frank: Not the version I showed him.

Bob: So, you lied to his face.

Frank: No. I revised the parameters of my promise.

Bob: Which is lying.

Frank: Which is politics, the sort you're well versed in, Bob. (1.4)

Frank's wife, Claire, who employs similar manipulative moves, commits an act of insinuating⁴ with the First Lady, Patricia Walker. She attempts to raise doubts about a possible relationship between Patricia's husband, the President at the time of the conversation, and Christina, his secretary (now working for the President, but who was her earlier employer, Peter Russo's girlfriend and secretary until the latter's death):

(7) First Lady (*addressing Claire after an exchange about the president's schedule*

with Christina who just left): I know you want Garrett there, but with this energy crisis...

Claire: No, it's (.) not that.

First Lady: What?

Claire: (*pause: 2 s*) I shouldn't say anything.

First Lady: Well, now you have to tell me.

Claire: I've just (.) never been fond of her. Christina.

First Lady: Why not?

Claire: Peter Russo? I just have a thing about women who sleep with their bosses. Anyway, I'm sure whatever they had was genuine. It's none of my business, cause if she's doing a good job, that's all that matters, right?

First Lady: Garrett seems to think she is.

Claire: Then I should just keep my feelings to myself. (2.19)

4 Insinuation is the act where the speaker wants his interlocutor to think something bad about the figure or target (cf. Culpeper—Haugh 2014: 149).

By directly not revealing her true intention, Claire manages to attract the First Lady's curiosity, making her want to know more about what she is insinuating. She finally expresses her doubts concerning Christina, pretending it is none of her business to question the President's choice if the secretary is acknowledged to be doing a good job. Claire manages to have the First Lady perceive Christina differently by classifying her among the "women who sleep with their bosses". Naturally, Claire does not risk implying a relationship between Christina and her new boss, she merely reminds her interlocutor of the secretary's history. She wants the First Lady "to think something bad" about Christina, hoping to stir suspicion in her mind. This is a well-planned maneuver as the President's relation with his wife has been weakened lately, so the doubt cast into her easily turns into real and bitter suspicion. In this way, Claire wants to ensure that she cannot be held accountable for saying or even meaning anything negative about a trustworthy person (Christina), still she manages to denigrate her in front of the First Lady. She sounds reasonable, but effectiveness overtakes in her words.

Conclusions

Starting from the basic claims of speech act theory, the present study has crossed the border towards argumentation theory by reviewing some of the basic concepts of the latter: strategic maneuvering, reasonableness and effectiveness, as well as an argumentation theoretical perspective on illocutionary and perlocutionary effects. These concepts have been employed in some brief analyses conducted on excerpts from the script of the TV series *House of Cards*. It is hoped that the empirical attitude has revealed that a speaker's strife for effectiveness in the process of argumentation, as Goffman (1970: 86, qtd in van Eemeren 2010: 41) has put it, can easily shift into manipulation because "effectiveness" can be identified with the maximization of gain that represents one sense in which an actor is said to be "rational".

On the other hand, such film dialogues, in spite of their fictional character, are inspired from real-life political machinations. As Declan Kiberd (2017: 495) claims: "politicians [...] betrayed our public trust", which brought about disillusionment regarding the power of politics. The insights gained from such analyses can reveal the real intentions behind verbal (and political) maneuvers and can shed light on the true face of political moves.

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