

## Argumentation Strategies in Negative Academic Book Reviews

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### Abstract

Although nobody would deny that academic criticism is an inherent feature of academic communication, most of the existing studies assume that due to the nature of the development of science, collaborative rhetoric is intrinsic to academic discourse and criticism is the exception rather than the rule. In order to check this hypothesis, the present pilot study investigates a sample corpus of 10 book reviews in the field of English applied linguistics that are definitely negative in character.

Scientific book reviews not only belong to the basic academic genres, but also possess a functionally determined highly evaluative character, thus being potential carriers of academic criticism. They have, unfortunately, received relatively little attention as yet. The study aims to uncover the argumentation strategies used by review writers in terms of classical Aristotelian argumentation theory. Within this theory the notion of *topic* plays a crucial role. There are two basic types of topoi: those based on *everyday-logic generic premises* and those with *conventionalised conclusions*, whose subgroups are used as a methodological instrument of the analysis.

The analysis leads to conclusions concerning the surface expression of the argumentation strategies used by writers, the degree to which criticism is based on objective logic and on subjective personal evaluation, the preference for certain topoi, as well as some general concerns in relation to confrontation in the academia.

**Keywords:** academic discourse rhetoric, negative book reviews, English, confrontation in science, argumentation

### Aim and data of the study

The pilot study is based on a sample corpus of 10 book reviews in English applied linguistics that have a definitely negative character. This means that the 'final verdicts' of the reviews are in accord with the above motto. The investigation aims to elucidate the argumentation strategies used by review writers in terms of the classical

Aristotelian theory combined with the modern argumentation theory. The analysis leads to conclusions concerning the realisation of the argumentation strategies used by writers, the degree to which criticism is based on logic (objective) and on personal evaluation (subjective), the preference for and/or avoidance of certain topoi.

### **The scientific book review**

Wills (1997:136) defines the academic book review in the following way:

“A person, as a rule an expert, expresses her/his opinion on a scientific work with view to bringing about a (tacit) feedback between herself/himself and the respective author and to familiarizing a more or less expert leadership with the achievements and failures of the work under review. The reviewer produces, on the basis of his subjective text assessment, a metatext directly related to a primary text.”

What follows from this definition are the two basic features of the review, namely:

(1) The discourse of the review is not independent and self-sufficient, but is closely related ideationally to preceding texts and/or practices, thus forming a wide and complicated network of intertextual links. (“Ideational function” after Halliday 1985)

(2) The two basic communicative functions of the review are the informative and the evaluative. (“Interpersonal function”, *ibid.*)

### **Methodology**

McElholm (2002:67-68) maintains that:

“Argumentation takes place when there is *disagreement* (or lack of agreement) as to a certain state of affairs, or as to what should be done, or as to whether something is good or bad; a speaker or writer intends to bring about consensus on the subject, i.e. transform disagreement into agreement, by persuading his or her audience of the correctness of the point of view put forward by him or her by advancing an *argument* which appeals to certain *commonly held beliefs or opinions*, i.e. beliefs or opinions shared by his or her audience.”

Eggs (1994:16ff. and 1996:183) classifies argumentation into three types depending on the author’s objectives. Thus, there are three ways to react to a controversial problem of the type:

Problem: T or not T?

For T	to assert	to advise in favour of	to appreciate
Against T	to deny	to advise against	to find bad
<i>Argumentation</i>	<i>epistemic</i>	<i>deontic</i>	<i>ethical/aesthetic</i>

On the other hand, within the classical Aristotelian argumentation theory the notion of *topic* plays a crucial role. There are two basic types of topoi: those based on *everyday-logic generic premises* and those with *conventionalised conclusions*, where each of these groups contains the following subgroups:

I. Topoi based on everyday-logic generic premises:

1. Topoi from the consequence
2. Topoi from the comparison
3. Topoi from the contrast
4. Topoi from the division (classification)
5. Topoi from the example

II. Topoi with conventionalised conclusions

1. Topos from the authority
2. Topos from the analogy
3. Topos from the person.

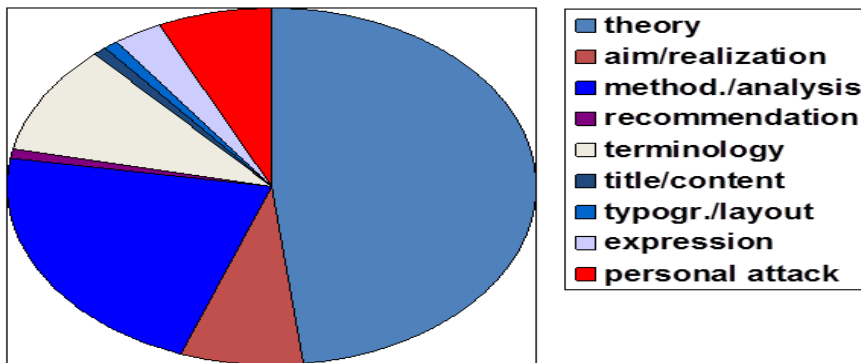
The topoi enumerated above will serve as a second analytical methodological instrument for the investigation of argumentation in book reviews.

## Results

### Content- and form-based premises

The expression of criticism may take various forms and may be based on different premises – theoretical assumptions, methodological failures, relevance of data, etc. I have divided the premises into *content-oriented* and *form-oriented*, where the first type refers to criticism of the content *per se*, while the latter refers to the graphic representation, spelling mistakes and the structure in general. Graph 1 shows the distribution of the two types and their sub-types within the present corpus in percent.

As Graph 1. below shows, the most frequent premise for criticism is theoretical deficiency or failure, which accounts for almost half of the cases (48%). Next comes criticism of methodology / analysis (22%), followed by pointing to discrepancies between the aim(s) of the respective study / course book and their realization, erroneous and/or imprecise use of terminology and ‘personal attack’ which I shall dwell upon later in more detail.

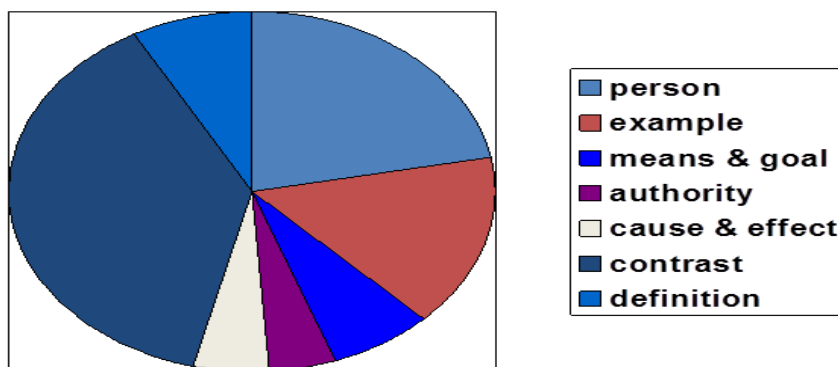
**Graph 1.** Content- and form-based premises

Hyland's (2004) investigation of book reviews in various disciplines showed a tendency to praise general features and criticise specific ones: "[...] while over 80 per cent of the positive commentary on content addressed general aspects of the book, critical observations tended to be more specific, with 60 per cent referring to particular content issues." This, however, does not seem to be the case in the present investigation. Reviewers tend to attach more importance to theoretical and analytical aspects of publications.

### Topoi in English book reviews

Graph 2. demonstrates that 22% of the topoi consist of *topos from the person*, which, together with *topos from the authority* (4.5%), makes more than ¼ of the topoi. That is, unlike other academic genres where argumentation is primarily based on topoi based on everyday-logic generic premises (see e.g. Vassileva 2006 for spoken academic communication), within the genre of the academic book review the topoi with conventionalized conclusions account for a relatively high percentage of argumentation. Thus, it seems that the review is one of the few academic genres that are highly personalized.

**Graph 2.** Topoi in English book reviews



The *topos from the person* is very often realized in the form of a personal attack and may have a snide and sneering, contemptuous tone:

Ex. (1) But in my view, the outcome was merely a bizarre charade of camouflaged communication where the lion's share of the analyst's work was kept out of sight by invoking the "native speaker's intuition" and "introspection" (cf. Beaugrande 1998b).

In this example, there is a shift from condemning the content of the book under review to denouncing the author as incompetent and arrogant, thus flouting "need to facilitate a continued sense of solidarity with their readers" (Hyland 2004:48).

The *topos from the authority* prevails in criticism of theoretical and terminological issues, usually pointing either to failures or to deficiencies:

Ex. (2) But then Saussure never said it was, and nor did anybody else as far as I know. So this departure from tradition is not a radical theoretical innovation at all but a rudimentary mistake, [...].

Topoi based on everyday-logic generic premises:

The *topoi from the contrast* account for 38% of the cases:

Ex. (3) If this were just an occasional lapse or aberration, it would not matter much. But this disregard of inconvenient textual features seems to be endemic in the critical approach.

Most of the topoi from the contrast are used in criticism of theory and methodology / analysis. In addition, such criticism is often expressed by involving both the reader and the review author in the process of argumentation:

Ex. (4) Meanwhile, bleary-eyed readers might ask with mounting frustration: if all these would-be “discourse analysts” have got it wrong, when is [X] going to present his own method that sets matters right? This does not expressly occur, as far as I can see, until pages [...].

Next in frequency (with 15.5%) comes the *topos from the example*, which is not surprising for the genre since reviews often draw directly on the original text for argumentation:

Ex. (5) However, some of the previous weaknesses continue to exist in this edition, which is rather disappointing. For instance, the writing is still not very reader-friendly and, in fact, is somewhat inaccessible.

The ‘*definition*’ *topos* accounts for 8% and relates primarily to terminology; it is often expressed in the form of questions:

Ex. (6) So there are seven main headings, but how the second group relate to the first is not explained. Nor is the relationship between headings (aspects?, dimensions?, functions?) within the groups. What, one wonders, [...], is the difference between cohesion and text structure?

The *cause and effect topoi* account for 5% of the cases. They refer either to negative consequences of problematic theoretical assumptions or of errors in the analysis:

Ex. (7) It would be difficult for an EST teacher to try and use the book [...] as there does not seem to be any attempt at teaching techniques [...].

The *topos* based on *means and goal* (7%) expresses criticism concerning discrepancies between author’s aim and its realization. The latter may concern the overall aim of the publication or certain ‘local’ aims:

Ex. (8) However, due to the brevity of the chapter there is very little by way of examples, and it is really only a reminder to the reader to use some visuals during the talk.

## Conclusions

From the viewpoint of argumentation theory and Eggs’ (1994) classification, one could draw the following conclusions:

- Epistemic argumentation dominates review articles. This is only logical, since academic discourse in general reproduces the natural striving of research for the truth and for explanations of phenomena.
- Deontic argumentation is relatively more frequent compared to other academic genres such as the research article (see Vassileva 2000, 2006) due to the evaluative character of the genre;
- The same holds for ethical argumentation, which presupposes the categorization of a claim on the scale of ‘good – bad’.

- Although this kind of personalized evaluation clashes in principle with the universal assumption of the objectivity of science, the wide use of topoi from the person in reviews points once again to their highly subjective character.

The correlation between the topoi based on logical generic premises and those based on conventionalized conclusions is approximately 2:1 in the present corpus. Linguistics is a '*Geisteswissenschaft*' ('spiritual science' if translated 1:1 from German) that does not and cannot always operate with strictly measurable, tangible and therefore verifiable matter, so it has to rely on logic for securing successful argumentation. The latter is obviously true for English with its high percentage of 'argumentation pure' through topoi from the contrast.

Moreover, English-speaking reviewers are rather derisive and idiosyncratic. Particularly prominent is the relatively frequent use of 'personal attacks', realized in "scornful, contemptuous, and sarcastic tones" (Tannen 2002:1664) – a fact that contradicts Galtung's (1985) observation that the English-speaking academic discourse community is more tolerant than, e.g., the German-speaking one. This new development is most probably due to the function of English as the global *lingua franca* of research, the language that is the medium of the ever-growing global competition in academia.

In the humanities it is easy to play down the discourse of other scholars. Especially in cases where there is a preliminary conception that there could not possibly be any common ground to be found, where the review writer sees him/herself as a worrier, as a gatekeeper whose mission is to fight for the **only** cause, his/her own cause, the discussion of a book may turn into a battlefield and remain a battlefield, only to take other forms, sometimes through other media of academic communication. Thus, one could, to my mind at least, hardly speak today of the academic discourse community as one consisting of like-minded peers.

Like-mindedness consists in 'moving within the same semiotic space', so to say, in partial sharing of terminology and background knowledge, in observing certain politeness rules. It stops, however, there, where basic interests of various kinds clash, since the competition for power and prestige in science becomes ever more intensive with the increase of its importance in modern society.

Tannen (2002:1653) maintains in this connection that: "oppositional moves traditionally assumed to be constructive can have hitherto unexamined destructive consequences" and, further, that "there is much wrong with the metaphorical assignment of research to warring camps. It obscures the aspects of disparate work that overlap and can learn from each other. It obscures the complexity of research" (ibid., 1661).



Our present conventions of climbing the academic ladder and making a name in the community through opposition and refutation of the work of our predecessors could be extremely counterproductive in the achievement of our primary goal, namely the maintenance of the purity of science and its principal aim – to explore the enormous complexity of our world.

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