



## **Miss South Carolina: a pragma-dialectical analysis**

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### **Abstract**

*This text presents an argumentative analysis of a very well-known interaction –a so-called “YouTube phenomenon”– that a candidate of a Beauty Contest gave when she was asked about the reason why a fifth of American people is not able to locate the U.S. in a World map. This analysis uses the Pragma-dialectical approach to argumentative discourse in its dialectical and rhetorical dimensions, and shows what powerful it is in order to decipher and evaluate the argumentative structure of a muddled discourse.*

**Keywords:** *argumentation; argumentative discourse; pragma-dialectics; School of Amsterdam; strategic maneuvering; Miss South Carolina.*

*[Antisthenes said that] philosophy was the study  
for those who were to consort with the gods,  
rhetoric for those who would live among men.*

John Ferguson (1975: 55)

### **1. A case in point<sup>1</sup>**

During the Miss Teen USA 2007 beauty contest, which took place on August 24th 2007 in Pasadena, California, the

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<sup>1</sup> I want to express my gratitude to Patricio Solar and Constanza Ihnen for their helpful observations about those aspects of Miss Upton’s discourse that were not clear for me.

participant Lauren Upton (1989) gave an embarrassing performance. When the actress Aimee Teegarden asked her “Recent polls have shown a fifth of Americans can’t locate the U.S. on a World map. Why do you think this is?”, she gave the following reply:

- (1) I personally believe that U.S. Americans are unable to do so because, uh,
- (2) some... people out there in our nation don’t have maps and, uh, I believe that
- (3) our, uh, education like such as, uh, South Africa and the Iraq, everywhere like
- (4) such as, and, I believe that they should, our education over here in the
- (5) U.S. should help the U.S., uh, or, uh, should help South Africa and should
- (6) help the Iraq and the Asian countries, so we will be able to build up our future,
- (7) for our children.

This 35 second, 100 words, speech, has turned into a phenomenon in Internet video sites such as YouTube. By the middle of March 2010, when I am writing this article, the video has already been viewed 60.000.000 times<sup>2</sup>. Internet users have commented on it on more than a 200.000 occasions, and we have seen all sorts of mocking versions. There is one for example where the participant is seen with a cloud over her head where comic characters are seen dancing a monotonous and lurid dance.

One can easily understand why this video has drawn so much attention. After her first sentence “I personally believe that U.S. Americans are unable to do so because”, and her strange reply, “people out there in our nation don’t have maps”, her speech becomes practically impossible to follow. She certainly became the laughing stock, confirming by all accounts that common place that portrays models as blonde bimbos. The end of her speech, “so we will be able to build up our future, for

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<sup>2</sup> This is the most popular version of it: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=lj3iNxxZ8Dww](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lj3iNxxZ8Dww)

our children”, resembles a rabbit coming out of the magician’s hat, just to finish off in style. This last move does not render the performance less pathetic, as it doesn’t appear a coherent conclusion to what she said before. Those who have seen the video might well ask themselves how on earth one can make so many errors in such a short space of time.

In this article I have attempted to analyse and evaluate the whole affair making use of the pragma-dialectical model of argumentation, both in its standard (dialectical) as well as in the broadened version (strategic maneuvering)<sup>3</sup>.

## 2. Dialectical analysis

Let’s first examine its dialectical dimension. This brief speech originates out of a question which describes a fact that is assumed as true, i.e., that “a fifth of U.S. Americans can’t locate the U.S. on a World map”. The task of the participant consists in providing an adequate explanation, regarding the above statement. Her explanation runs as follows:

...because some [a fifth] people out there in our nation don’t have maps.

As we can see, so far the speech is not argumentative, but explanatory, as she has not assumed a point of view whose acceptability is or could be questioned<sup>4</sup>.

The explanation she offers comprises an implicit premise, which may be expressed thus:

People who don’t have a World map cannot locate in a World map their country of residence.

Here is where the problems arise: her explanation describes a false reality. If with the word “some” she is referring to a fifth –as

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<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I use technical expressions –like “pragma-dialectical model”, “strategic maneuvering” and son on– that are part of the core of the theoretical developments of the Amsterdam School. Naturally, I cannot explain here the meaning of them: I presuppose that the reader manages this vocabulary. If it is not case, see the bibliography, especially Eemeren & Grootendorst (1992) and Eemeren (2010).

<sup>4</sup> “With a standpoint, the only issue is acceptability” (Houtlosser, 2001: 37).

it can be inferred– the explanation doesn't seem to be acceptable. Perhaps it is true that a fifth of U.S. population does not have a World map in their homes, but almost the majority is bound to have access to one, if only *virtually*, at schools, via TV or Internet, etc. In other words, who these days have not got access, in a developed country, to a World map?

Now, even if it were true, the implicit premise that backs her explanation remains problematic. This implicit premise provides a causal explanation, where it is suggested that to have a World map is a *necessary condition* to locate it. Of course this is not the case<sup>5</sup>. As she later suggests, the real problem seemed to be an educational one, i.e. of how to *interpret*, and not whether there is a map available or not. Indeed, what is here at stake is to know how to read a map and know, roughly speaking, the shape of the U.S. and its position in this abstract diagram.

When Miss Upton realizes that she has given an explanation in which a fact appears as false, along with a problematic implicit premise in her answer, she attempts a second alternative explanation, where the word “education” –mentioned twice– is key to her argument. Let's examine the lines 3- 6:

I believe that our, uh, education like such as, uh, South Africa and, uh, the Iraq, everywhere like such as, and, I believe that they should, our education over here in the U.S. should help the U.S., uh, or, uh, should help South Africa and should help the Iraq and the Asian countries.

If we are extremely charitable, these lines could be understood as:

...because some [a fifth] people out there in our nation don't have good education.

This second explanation, that seems to attempt to correct or completely do away with the first explanation, is actually plausible<sup>6</sup>, as it is the implicit premise that justifies it:

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<sup>5</sup> If it is an implicit premise of a causal argument, we can assert that she has committed an error called “false cause”. Copi and Cohen give the following definition of this violation: “An informal fallacy in which the mistake arises from treating as the cause of something that which is not really its cause” (Copi & Cohen, 2002: 632).

<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the initial question that motivated this discourse is part of a poll about the situation of American education.

Uneducated people are unable to locate on a map the country in which they live.

As analysts, the question we should ask ourselves is whether this reconstruction is permissible, i.e., if it is possible to argue the existence of an implicit explanation for lines 3-6. To allow this reconstruction is important because it can help us to reconstruct the argumentative dimension of this speech. However, it is not easy to answer this question. On the one hand, is inarticulate and it is almost totally incoherent; the Communication Principle is almost not respected. On the other hand, we find some relevant indicators that could be functional in our reconstructive purposes: “I believe that our, uh, education”, “our education over here in the U.S.”, the highly interesting *lapsus linguae* “[they] should help the U.S.”. To these indicators we can add the final words of her speech: “so we will be able to build up our future, for our children”. What is clear, though, in this text is that there is no explicit commitment.

Some methodological guidelines may be useful in order to clarify the issue. Whilst they have been analytically designed to deal with argumentative aspects of the speech, they can serve us to reconstruct explanatory aspects.

In order to reconstruct an argument dialectically, the pragma-dialectic model provides four reconstruction transformations. One of them is called *substitution*: “[It] entails the replacement of formulations that are confusingly ambiguous or unnecessarily vague by clear ones, so that every part of the discourse or text that is relevant to the resolution of the difference of opinion is included in the analysis in an unequivocal way” (Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: 103). Other analytical instrument is the so-called *addition*: “Among the most common instances are making explicit the communicative force of standpoints and arguments in cases where it is left implicit” (*ibidem*). From my point of view, the lines that I have leniently reconstructed, as if they were an explanation, would allow an *addition* as much as a *substitution*. It is important to point out that van Eemeren and Grootendorst recommend to make use of the strategic consisting of *maximally reasonable reconstruction* “in genuine cases of doubt” (Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: 115), and this appears to be the case. It is also important to point out that it is the *analysis* of this discourse what is here at stake.

So far the reconstructions carried out provide the following outcome:

<b>Question – explicit explanation – implicit premise</b>	<b>Question – second alternative explanation – implicit premise</b>
<p>Q: Recent polls have shown a fifth of Americans can't locate the U.S. on a World map. Why do you think this is?</p> <p>A: Because some [a fifth] people out there in our nation don't have maps.</p> <p>IP: (People who don't have a World map cannot locate on a World map the country where they live.)</p>	<p>Q: Recent polls have shown a fifth of Americans can't locate the U.S. on a World map. Why do you think this is?</p> <p>A: Because some [a fifth] people out there in our nation don't have good education.</p> <p>IP: (People without good education cannot locate on a World map the country where they live.)</p>

Now, an even more detailed analysis of Miss Upton's speech shows us that when she elaborates a second alternative explanation she also opens an argumentative plane. It seems to me as though this argumentative reconstruction demands further charitable on our part. Let's leave aside the references to South Africa, Irak and the so called "Asian countries", and let's just concentrate on the words she utters at the end of her speech: "so we will be able to build up our future, for our children".

Somehow surprisingly the alternative second explanation ("some [a fifth] people out there in our nation don't have good education") is transformed as the following standpoint:

1. The education in U.S. should be improved

This standpoint implies that the education in the United States is not good or quite frankly that it is outright bad (otherwise how could one explain that a fifth of the country does not know how to interpret a map correctly?). This standpoint is part of a pragmatic argument that has the following pattern:

1. X should be done.
  - 1.1a. X leads to Y.
  - 1.1b. Y is desirable.

(1.1a-b.) If X leads to Y and Y is desirable, then X should be done.

Hence the argument can be reconstructed as follows:

1. The education in U.S. should be improved.
  - 1.1a. Improving the education we will build a better future for our children.
    - 1.1b. Building a better future for our children is desirable.

The argument has sense and seems to appear reasonable. However –I should stress– this occurs only before the eyes of the analyst. As far as the Layman is concerned, what remains clear is that she proposes an explanation in response to the original question and then attempts to comment about the education without succeeding, closing off her speech with a good wish concerning the future of the United States.

As analysts, the question that we should ask ourselves is how charitable we are prepared to be when analyzing this speech, particularly when it comes to reconstructing lines 3-6. A non charitable perspective would emphasise the unlikelihood of reconstructing a second alternative explanation, which would lead one to conclude the absence of a pragmatic argument in the contestant's speech. Such perspective would make more apparent its fallacious content.

In lines 3-6 there is a clear and serious violation of the usage rule: "Parties must not use any formulations that are insufficiently clear or confusingly ambiguous, and they must interpret the formulations of the other party as carefully and accurately as possible" (Eemeren & Grootendorst & Snoeck Henkemans, 2002: 183). There are problems of clarity called "structural unclarity at the textual level" (Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992: 197), where above all we find "lack of coherence" and "obscure structure". We also detect ambiguous usages in her speech, especially in what concerns the word "help". Who exactly should be helped and why? Besides, who must provide such help and how? None of this is clear. On the other hand, the phrase "Asian countries" is extremely general and it lends it self to confusion. It is not clear either that when she refers to South Africa she is talking about Africa as a continent or not.

I would like to leave the both options open. What ever the case, the contestant does not in fact benefit whatsoever with these violations: her speech is a list of mistakes. Rather than artful tricks, they are flaws of her presentation.

### 3. Strategic maneuvering approach analysis<sup>7</sup>

From a strategic maneuvering point of view, we can immediately assert that she makes strategic use of mainly one aspect: the **adaptation to the demands of the audience**<sup>8</sup>. The **activity type** to which this brief communicational exchange belongs to is highly conventional: it is simply to do with a game of questions and answers of a beauty contest. As it is normally the case in these type of competitions, contestants are not expected to give complex answer, it is enough is they say something that makes sense without going beyond the politically correct. The goal of this **activity type** is to watch and listen to the contestant: not only examine her remarks, but also observe the way in which she talks, which naturally includes her tone of voice, the manner in which she moves her lips and other similar details. It is in this context where she tries to say exactly what is expected of her, with the goal of winning the support of the jury. This is why she acts strategically to be well assessed at this stage of the contest. So it can be seen in the repertoire of topics: she talks about “education” (she uses the word twice); she mentions the future (“build up our future, for our children”); and she quotes countries with problems of violence and poverty (South Africa, Iraq, “Asian countries”).

What has caused so much interest amongst Internet users is the manner in which she comes across in her speech putting forward her personal beliefs, a target of mockery that we can see in the many remakes of the speech on the Web. This is of

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<sup>7</sup> This approach is designed to deal with argumentative texts. Since the discourse I am analyzing here is in part an explicative one and also an argumentative one, it is important to note that we are doing a *sui generis* use of the approach.

<sup>8</sup> “The expression ‘audience demand’ refers to the requirements that must be fulfilled in the strategic maneuvering to satisfy the needs for cognitive ‘community’ the people the maneuvering is aimed at have a particular point in the exchange” (Emeren, 2010: n/p).

course linked to the necessity of satisfying the demands of the audience by way of a specific **presentational device**<sup>9</sup>. Here what is at stake is that she talks about her self autonomously. This appellation to the *ethos* is a very ancient rhetoric device<sup>10</sup>, that was around before any philosophical thematic, for instance the Aristotelian (cf. Fortenbaugh 2006: 117). It would have had very little effect to have quoted an expert sociologist on the subject: a beauty contest is not the right context to do so. She starts her answer with “I personally believe” and she further reaffirms on two more occasions in her speech. One could conclude that these devices are “cards” that she had prepared before, because often they are very efficient in such situations.

Miss Upton has at least two things clear: that what she should say has to adapt itself so that the jury hears what they want to hear, and that the way she should express it has to be from a personal point of view. Both strategic moves are efficient due to the context where they’ll be performed.

In my opinion, her speech fails rhetorically for two reasons. First, the adaptation to the demands of the audience has only been sketched. It is not sufficient simply to utter words –the selected *topoi*– that will please the audience’s ears. Rather, it is about handling those messages so as to articulate them in a plausible manner. Secondly, just as was mentioned above, the presentational devices must be demonstrated in the speech: it’s not enough to say that she personally believes in what she is stating. For example we do not see neither her own ideas nor inferences.

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<sup>9</sup> “When maneuvering strategically the speakers or writers are not just trying to give presence to something that suits them well and agrees with that their addresses will be inclined to accept but they are also making an effort to give this element presence in a certain way” (Eemeren, 2010: n/p).

<sup>10</sup> “Lysias’ second great gift to oratory was *ethopoeia*, his technique of conveying the character of the speaker in the orations he wrote for a client to deliver. This is one part of recognition, made by Aristotle on the theoretical level, that character is an important means of persuasion. A speech appeared more genuine and less rehearsed if it seemed to be the work of the speaker himself” (Kennedy, 1994: 66).

#### 4. Conclusion

After examining the speech in detail, we can conclude that Miss Upton's words do not comply with minimum standard of effectiveness. On the other hand, her ability to reason is not clear either. What could have happened? On this, we can only speculate. I got the impression that the contestant had "prepared" a speech with at least two features: it should at least refer to those themes that would be acceptable to the jury (education, poor countries and countries at war, the future of the United States) and that she should express her own point of view ("I personally believe"). Both the topics and the presentational device were correct. What actually happened is that the question put by Aimee Teegarden took her by surprise. As an answer, she reasoned in such a way that she immediately realized that was not acceptable. After that she attempted to get better her answer (lets say, "the underlying problem is education"). There was a problem with the second explanation: it doesn't appear to be politically correct to acknowledge educational problems in the United States at a Beauty Contest. What is politically correct would be to speak positively about education, without raising critics that may well be read as political comments. It was at this moment that she attempted with great difficulty to change her speech, passing from the explanatory to the argumentative. To defend a politically correct standpoint seemed like a good strategy. Whether she had achieved to put across an argument, is something that unfortunately her words did not accompany her with.

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