



Multimodal argumentation in news magazine covers: A case study of front covers putting Greece on the spot of the European economic crisis

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, front covers of news magazines are studied as a distinct multimodal genre that invites readers to buy the magazine not only by attracting their attention but also by assuming a position with respect to the particular cover story. In order to account for the argument that a front cover may convey in support of that position, an argumentative reconstruction is required that also needs to take seriously into account the way in which the verbal and the visual modes interact to create meaning. The study proposes a multimodal argumentation perspective on the systematic reconstruction of the arguments that front covers of news magazines put forward. As a case in point, six covers by two German weekly news magazines are analysed, featuring the role of Greece in the eurozone crisis in the period 2010–2012.

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1. Introduction

While lifestyle magazines have received extensive attention within discourse and multimodal analysis (Bell, 2001; Machin, 2007; Martínez Lirola, 2006; McLoughlin, 2000), news magazines have been less studied as such. Moreover, studies in media and news discourse have mainly paid attention to the interaction between the verbal and the visual modes on the (front) pages of newspapers (Bednarek and Caple, 2012; Economou, 2006; Kress and van Leeuwen, 1998), without addressing the specificities of the cover of news magazines. Finally, although the studies of the verbal–visual interaction in magazines and newspapers have addressed questions of representation and ideology, not enough attention has been paid to the way in which the design of the front cover and the combination of modes can be used as clues for recovering the argument put forward with respect to the cover story.

In this study, I analyse news magazine covers from an argumentation studies perspective as a multimodal text designed to convince the reader to buy the magazine by way of advancing a standpoint with respect to the story on the cover. Assuming that communication is multimodal rather than monomodal (Kress,

2010), those communicative practices that seek to convince an audience by means of advancing argumentation can thereby be studied as multimodal argumentation. A number of argumentation scholars have argued in the last years for the possibility and actuality of visual or multimodal arguments (Groarke, 1996; Kjeldsen, 2007; Roque, 2012; Van den Hoven and Yang, 2013). More case studies are still needed focusing on particular contexts of use, in which the properties of a specific genre and the constraints of a given communicative activity are taken into account for the identification of the argumentative relevance of the interaction of the verbal and the non-verbal modes.

To this direction, I focus on one concrete story that has received wide media coverage in the last five years, namely the ongoing eurozone crisis (Tzogopoulos, 2013; Wodak and Angouri, 2014). More specifically, I study the choices made regarding the way in which two German magazines, *Focus* and *Der Spiegel*, have featured the role of Greece in the period 2010–2012. The question that I seek to answer is: how can the meaning of the choices concerning the verbal and the visual mode on front covers be interpreted as an instance of argumentation? A magazine's front cover can be analysed as advancing a standpoint and arguments that support it that would not only be in line with the magazine's own editorial stance but also seek to accommodate the expectations of their readership as well as make a rational contribution to the ongoing discussion. In order to analyse front covers as arguments, I take a specific approach to the study of argumentative discourse, namely the pragma-dialectical approach

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(Van Eemeren, 2010). Moreover, I pay attention to the images chosen and their composition in order to extract information that is relevant for the argumentative reconstruction. To this direction, I also draw some insights from authors working within a multimodal perspective to the analysis of discourse (Bateman, 2014; Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996; Machin, 2007). My goal is to illustrate the benefits of analysing a multimodal text such as front covers from an argumentation studies perspective, as well as to exploit the insights of multimodal analysis in order to extend the object of analysis within rhetoric and argumentation studies.

2. Towards an argumentative analysis of multimodal discourse

In the last two decades, scholars from discourse analysis as well as from rhetoric and argumentation studies have shown increasing interest in the role that visual images and other non-verbal modes play in the communicative process. As the following overview illustrates, the quests of the various scholarly communities have run in parallel without entering into a dialogue that could benefit both the extension of the object of analysis within argumentation studies and the methods for multimodal analysis. On the one hand, studies on multimodal analysis (Bateman, 2014; Jewitt, 2009) have elaborated on the meaning-making potential of a great variety of non-verbal modes but lack the concepts and tools needed for accounting for the argumentative functions of these modes. On the other hand, a growing number of argumentation scholars have begun studying discourses where the verbal mode interacts with other modes, mostly visual, but overlook or simply ignore the bulk of work carried out within multimodal analysis (see Tseronis, *in press*).

The work carried out by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) has opened up the road for exploring the mechanisms of meaning-making in advertisements, newspapers and magazines, websites and blogs, films and painting, among other objects of (media) culture. Starting from the view of language as social semiotic, advocated by Halliday (1978), these scholars have sought to provide a systematic overview of the choices at the image maker's disposal regarding colour, perspective, composition, and typography, and to account for these as being motivated by the social, cultural and historical context. Despite the criticisms concerning the possibility of a comprehensive theory of multimodal meaning (see the discussion in Forceville, 1999 and Machin, 2009), Kress and van Leeuwen's work has provided a wide range of concepts and tools for the systematic analysis of multimodal discourse. In his own work on multimodality, Bateman (2008) argues that attention also needs to be paid to the constraints that distinct genres of communication place in the production and interpretation of multimodal discourses. Nevertheless, little attention has been paid to the role that the various modes, and the interaction thereof, may play in communicative situations where parties seek to resolve a difference of opinion by means of arguing.

Within communication studies and rhetoric, there has been a call for the study of visuals on an equal footing with verbal texts, since the 1970s, as Foss (2004) explains. Inspired by Burke's (1966) conception of language as action that involves the use of symbols with the aim of getting the addressee to do something, rhetoricians and communication theorists have studied images used in advertising, politics, and media, but also art and science, in an attempt to describe their nature and function, and to evaluate their role in communication (see collection of papers in Hill and Helmers, 2004). Having recourse to the concepts of ethos, pathos and logos, as well as to the five canons of classical rhetoric and the taxonomies of figures of speech, modern rhetoricians have sought to describe the meaning of various artifacts in terms of their function for a given audience, in a

given situation, at a given time (see Kenney and Scott, 2003). While the attention paid to the non-verbal by scholars of visual rhetoric has produced a wide range of studies, a clear interest in theory-building and theory-testing is found lacking (Foss, 2004: 145). Moreover, it is not clear what the standards are for the purpose of evaluation proposed within rhetorical criticism (ethical, cultural, epistemic, rational, or other).

Also acknowledging the pervasiveness of visual images in contemporary culture, but running parallel to the work that had been carried out by multimodal analysis and visual rhetoric until then, Birdsell and Groarke (1996) launched a call for broadening the object of argumentation studies. Unlike communication scholars and rhetoricians, these scholars assume a view of argument as a product that consists of premises seeking to enhance the acceptability of a standpoint. Groarke (2007: 135) defines visual argument as: "an argument conveyed or communicated in images – drawings, diagrams, photographs, paintings, actions, film and so on. In many cases, such arguments incorporate visual and verbal cues, combining images and words". Despite his rather formal approach, Groarke acknowledges the role of context by identifying three layers that need to be considered when analysing and evaluating visual arguments: the immediate visual context, the immediate verbal context, and the visual culture. In search of a theoretical framework within argumentation studies that can prove friendly to the project of visual argument, Groarke (2002) has considered the pragma-dialectical approach to the study of argumentation, developed by van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 2004.

The pragma-dialectical approach studies argumentative discourse (be it written or spoken) as a "dialectical procedure for solving problems regarding the acceptability of standpoints by means of a methodical discussion aimed at testing the tenability of these standpoints" (Van Eemeren, 2010: 31). It postulates that argumentative discourse is the result of a discussion between two parties, the protagonist of a standpoint and the antagonist, who take turns in contributing moves to the critical testing of the standpoint. In this view, the analysis of argumentative discourse amounts to the study of all the moves that are relevant in this procedure, beyond those of putting forward a standpoint and of adducing arguments in support of it; namely, moves such as expressing doubt, establishing starting points, giving clarifications, asking critical questions, and responding to or anticipating counter-arguments, among others. Moreover, attention is paid to the effectiveness of these moves, and to the possibilities that the various contexts and genres of communication allow to the two parties for balancing their quest for effectiveness with the requirement for reasonableness. In this broader view of argumentation as a social and rational activity, the meaning conveyed by the visual and other non-verbal modes in combination with the verbal mode can be studied as contributing to the design of the moves carried out in the dialectical procedure of resolving a difference of opinion.

The added value of adopting an argumentation studies perspective on the analysis of multimodal discourse is that it provides a frame (and related concepts), within which the verbal and visual relations can be interpreted, at least in those contexts in which it can be plausibly assumed that there is an attempt at convincing a reasonable critic by means of adducing arguments. The meaning conveyed by the various elements of the modes in use can therefore be structured as arguments (connected in some way) in support of a standpoint. At the same time, the integration of insights from multimodal analysis into argumentation studies can help the latter to analyse and evaluate discourse produced in communicative activities involving more than just the use of the verbal mode. In the following section, I describe front covers of magazines as a distinct multimodal genre that has a certain argumentative goal, and present the generic argument structure that can be reconstructed from them.

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