

Commentary on Reijven's Strategic Maneuvering with Speech Codes: The Rhetorical Use of Cultural Presumptions in Constructing Argumentative Discourse

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1. INTRODUCTION

In "Strategic Maneuvering with Speech Codes," Menno Reijven intends to illustrate that speech codes can "be a source for strategic maneuvering" (p. 1). To do so, he analyzes 2016 United States presidential candidates' responses to a question posed to them at one of the presidential debates. Reijven selects "two already investigated speech codes (of honor and of dignity)" and argues "that these codes can effectively make sense of different choices made by [then-candidates] Clinton and Trump with regards to the three aspects of strategic maneuvering" (p. 3).

I think Reijven's work makes two sorts of analytical contributions to pragma-dialectics. First, he succeeds in showing that speech codes can be a source for strategic maneuvering—that from a speech code social actors can select resources such as topics and presentational devices appropriate for an audience. Second, he succeeds in showing that speech codes can explain why social actors strategically maneuver as they do—that a speech code can explain why a social actor chooses a particular topic, for example.

Both contributions illustrate tenets of speech code theory. One speech code theory proposition is that speech codes can be used strategically. As Philipsen and colleagues have noted based on empirical studies, speech codes are "resources that social actors deploy strategically and artfully in the conduct of communication" (Philipsen, Coutu, & Covarrubias, 2005, p. 64). They further note that one of the defining characteristics of speech code theory is that it "posits a way to interpret or explain observed communicative conduct by reference to situated codes of meaning and value" (Philipsen, Coutu, & Covarrubias, 2005, p. 56).

In this commentary my goal is to note some of Reijven's additional observations and suggest that they could be excellent starting points for advancing argumentation theory by using speech code theory

and methods. Specifically, I note Reijven's observations about what speech code theory is, its typical objects of study, and its relationship to pragma-dialectics. I explain how these observations point toward developing a research program that investigates the codes of communicative conduct social actors use to regulate their interactions.

2. SPEECH CODE THEORY CAN ADVANCE ARGUMENTATION THEORY

First, Reijven observes that speech code theory includes "code" in the sense of a law code or code of conduct (p. 1). Indeed, Philipsen, Coutu, and Covarrubias (2005) define speech codes as including "rules pertaining to communicative conduct" that participants use to "judge communicative conduct" (p. 57). Consequently, speech code theory and concomitant methods equip researchers to investigate and discover local rules or norms of argumentation. It would be worthwhile to investigate the U.S. presidential debates in order to describe rules of communicative conduct that explain the candidates' communicative conduct.

This leads to Reijven's observation about the typical objects of study for speech code theories: speech code theories are typically formulated by "discovering them ethnographically" (p. 16). Philipsen (1997) has noted that his research on communicative conduct in a Chicago neighborhood yielded "a rich corpus of metacommunicative commentary—a corpus of, to put it simply, talk about talk" (p. 130). Reijven's research shows that it is possible and desirable to analyze public communication by political elites in terms of speech code theory. As everyday talk by social actors and their talk about talk with ethnographic researchers can provide insight into norms and rules of communicative conduct, so too can scripted public, political talk. Because the stakes of a presidential election are high, presumably participants have considered what sorts of communicative conduct are in and out of bounds. The presidential debates are an excellent data set for beginning to describe rules of communicative conduct that explain the candidates' communicative conduct.

A third observation by Reijven is that the analytical tools for rhetorical analysis stipulated by pragma-dialectics—topic potential, audience demand, presentational devices—are designed to describe what social actors do to achieve "effectiveness" as distinct from what they do to achieve "reasonableness" (p. 2). Reijven's project covers the analytical side—how meanings are "coded" in language—but does not cover the evaluative side—codes of communicative conduct. As I have suggested, Reijven's research has potential to advance argumentation theory by investigating public talk by political elites in order to formulate a speech code, including rules and norms for communicative

conduct that explain communicative conduct. For argumentation theory, a research question could be: What rules for communication conduct comprise in part some speech code? After all, as communication theories are also communication practices (Craig, 1996), so pragma-dialectics itself is a speech code and, as Reijven (p. 2) notes, an ideal model. It is possible to analyze the communication activities of actual social actors to describe and explain their local theories of argumentation. Doing so enables researchers to see how ordinary social actors address communication problems and to describe the local speech codes they bring to bear in interactions. The presidential debates could illustrate clash between how candidates deploy norms such as deferring to people with experience and expertise in politics versus trusting people who are political outsiders.

3. CONCLUSION

In short, Reijven's research indicates the high potential for advancing argumentation theory by bringing to bear assumptions and methods of speech code theory in the analysis and evaluation of argumentation. His current project confirms that speech codes are both communicative resources and explanations for communicative conduct. That project points toward the sorts of new knowledge about argumentation that speech code theory could generate. First, the research program could advance a way of bridging of the normative-descriptive divide. Pragma-dialectics accomplishes this by analyzing communicative interaction in terms of an ideal model. Speech code theory shows how researchers could bridge that divide by attending to the full range of strategies social actors deploy in arguing and explaining in terms used by social actors themselves—i.e., speech codes—why the strategies could reasonably be expected to work. Second, because it is empirically-based, the research program could advance understanding of how social actors use arguments to accomplish any number of things besides resolving a difference of opinion. Third, the research program could advance our understanding of a range of normative resources that social actors may bring to bear in their interactions, including rules, norms, responsibilities, obligations, and more.

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