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Examples as crucial arguments in discourse on 'others'

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Abstract

In this article we take the classic meaning of *exemplum* as a point of departure to show how examples are marked and used in oral discourse on 'others'. The empirical material is a transcribed focus group interview with Swedish students talking about a trip to Warsaw.

Examples may be marked in explicit ways but also in implicit ways. Some examples seem recognizable by their allusive nature, others by annotated talk or quotations.

Examples have various functions. They specify things but restrict them at the same time. They may serve as objectifications of an argument, they may mobilize associations, display attitudes, or indicate 'types' of persons or items. Some examples are virtual; they exemplify what could happen, or what never happened. Speakers may question another's argument by referring to counterexamples, or request examples and thereby 'disarm' an opponent. Examples are also a target for protests. A dissatisfied listener may consider others' examples as misleading, badly chosen, or too few.

In general, examples serve as shortening induction. They are articulated in relation to something general, vague, or abstract. Typically, a speaker confirms, challenges, or in other ways elaborates an argument with the aid of examples, in order to convince and please the audience.

Keywords: example; rhetoric; argument; induction; focus group; 'others'.

1. Introduction

People's use of examples is at least as old as rhetoric itself. To refer to a specific event or character in order to give a concrete form to something abstract, or to support one's argument with evidence, is a firmly established convention. Our everyday habit of 'giving an example' is, however,

rarely accompanied by any serious interest in what is going on when we do it. This article deals with this matter. How do people recognize examples, and how do they proceed when using them? What is at stake when something is to be exemplified?

1.1. Examples in rhetoric

An important theoretical clue may be found in classic rhetoric. As Johannesson (1991: 94) points out, 'example' originates from the Latin *exemplum*, meaning 'sample'. In a figurative sense *exemplum* could also mean 'copy', 'pattern', or 'model'; the same is true for the Greek equivalent *paradeigma* (paradigm). The original rhetorical principle of an *exemplum* assumed that a certain event or a certain person through his or her acts and utterances could be conceived as giving a 'sample' of certain moral characteristics, certain virtues. They could be turned into 'models' for other people, in a positive or negative way. Such a use of *exempla* has permeated public debate since ancient times—as political and pedagogical arguments, as icons of saints or portrayals of ancestors, even in the form of architecture (Johannesson 1991: 94). Recurrent 'examples' in this classic sense, Johannesson argues, may be seen as constituting a rhetorical stock for a whole culture's never-ending interpretations and reinterpretations, providing that culture with something to argue about: Socrates and Jesus, Athens and Rome, Machiavelli and Stalin (1991: 97). When a speaker today uses an example, he or she may still bring these functions into play—constructing a 'sample', 'copy', 'pattern', or 'model'; introducing 'evidence'; giving something abstract a concrete form.

Rhetorical analysts have tried to give a more precise picture of example, often in terms of induction. As Billig (1987: 131–132) points out, Aristotle (in *Rhetoric*) suggested that the basic unit of a rhetorical argument does not rest on induction but on the opposite, deduction. Rhetorical arguments resemble deduction. The difference is, Aristotle claimed, that instead of using complete syllogisms (two premises, from which a conclusion is deduced) rhetoric uses incomplete or shortened syllogisms, 'enthymemes'. Here, one of the premises is omitted for the sake of persuasiveness and brevity, which means that an enthymeme is a conclusion supported by a single premise or justification. Thus, the logic in rhetoric is hidden or assumed rather than spelled out, and its aim is not an indisputable truth but probabilities (cf. Grimaldi 1972: 97). The justification of a conclusion may easily be criticized, Billig continues, 'and it in turn will need an enthymemic support, which in its turn will be open to criticism, and so on *ad infinitum*' (Billig 1987: 132).

A similar open-ended dispute may however also take place in another way. Even though enthymemes are considered to be the basic unit of a rhetorical argument, the use of examples or 'paradeigma' represents another, alternative unit. Here, the speaker seems to be engaged in induction rather than deduction, and that may sometimes, as Grimaldi (1972: 83) argues, turn out to be more persuasive and clear. Although syllogistic (or enthymemic) reasoning is considered more forcible and effective, Grimaldi claims, the use of examples is experientially more known.

The power of deductive reasoning relies on the fact that a conclusion must be accepted if the premises are accepted. The relative weakness of inductive reasoning depends on the fact that it is still possible to question the conclusion, even if the premises are accepted. No matter how many examples a speaker presents to support a specific conclusion, a critic can always say that these examples are not the only ones, that there are others proving something different. In rhetoric, however, presenting many similar examples may not be necessary. By analogy with enthymemes, which rely on incomplete or shortened deduction, examples rely on incomplete or shortened induction. Induction in rhetoric is assumed or hidden rather than spelled out, making it possible for a speaker, with the help of an example, to only *indicate* that 'by mentioning this example, I sketch an inductive argument.'

In rhetoric, thus, a complex relation between 'paradeigma' (example) and 'enthymeme' may be identified. On the one hand, example is defined in *contrast* to enthymeme, since its underlying logic is induction rather than deduction. On the other hand, example is also defined as *similar* to enthymeme, since the logic of both these techniques is incomplete or shortened. They are both rhetorical ways of demonstration and proving, not necessarily logical. As Grimaldi (1972: 104) argues, an example may even be a source of an enthymeme insofar as it appears to give you a probable universal principle or truth. From this you may then go on reason, by the use of enthymeme, to a particular conclusion.

Thus, a given debate about examples may actually also be a debate about potential enthymemes, or potential deductive reasoning, albeit not in an explicit way. As will be shown in our data, a speaker's potential deductive reasoning, implied in an example, may be directly challenged with another speaker's example, implying something different, without having the speakers explicitly state any general arguments. To use the words of Grimaldi: when a speaker tries to picture a probable universal principle or truth from which you can draw a conclusion, you may reply with another picture of another probably universal principle

or truth in order to defend another conclusion, and all this can go on implicitly.

This means that in rhetoric, inductive and deductive reasoning may be intertwined with the use of *exemplum*, even though this rhetorical device is formally associated only with induction. One could say that examples have a function similar to that of a 'representative anecdote', a term coined by Burke (1969 [1945]). Such a suggestion also points out the vulnerability of examples, from the user's point of view. When using pieces of reality to figure out guiding principles of this reality, Burke claims, people may easily end up misrepresenting reality:

Men seek for vocabularies that will be faithful reflections of reality. To this end, they must develop vocabularies that are *selections* of reality. And any selection of reality must, in certain circumstances, function as a *deflection* of reality. (Burke 1969 [1945]: 59)

On the other hand, Burke emphasizes, this is not to say that such a search must be futile. The inserted words 'in certain cases' in the quotation above imply that in *other* cases the selected vocabulary may *not* deflect reality, according to Burke. A 'proper' example, a representative anecdote, should be 'suited to the subject matter which it is designed to calculate', Burke says (Burke 1969 [1945]: 59). Thereby he is pointing out precisely what arguments based on examples are about. Is this example a proper one? Is it suited to the subject under discussion, or not?

Consequently, the rhetorical figure of example is not only defined in relation to inductive and deductive reasoning, it is also defined in relation to *disputes* on inductive and deductive reasoning. The possibility of an example being a 'deflection', as Burke puts it, constitutes a motivation for rhetorical quarrels. Although clearly a *synecdoche* (taking the part as the whole, *pars pro toto*), an example is supposed to reflect rather than deflect. In Potter's terms, examples are supposed to appear independent of the speaker in question, providing 'out-there-ness' (Potter 1997: 150).

Finally, example and enthymeme are sometimes defined in terms of speaker's characters, especially when it comes to rhetorical recommendations. According to Aristotle, examples should be used 'for those less skilled in reasoning but syllogism for the more dialectically skilled' (Grimaldi 1972: 84). 'Induction is clearly more appropriate for the ordinary person since it permits more ready comprehension and understanding' (1972: 84). Our article does not deal with such recommendations; it reflects on a specific kind of discourse rather than specific speakers. In a discursive respect, though, Aristotle's remark may be taken into account. Speakers' use of examples may *render* their discourse everyday or ordinary.

1.2. Examples in discourse on 'others'

This article explores a specific type of argument in which examples proved to be prevalent and significant: oral arguments about 'others'.¹ More specifically, it explores arguments about another nationality, ethnicity, or nation. There are several reasons for choosing such a field of study. As a political and cultural idea, a 'nation' represents something abstract that is given a concrete form. As an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991), it depends heavily on memories and monuments, maps and flags, boundaries and personifications. A 'nation' is also likely to be argued about. Its presumed 'essence' or meaning is often disputable and the disputes as such may be valuable settings for research on how such essences or meanings are constructed.

In addition to this, a discourse on 'others' is characterized by a particular delicacy that may be worth studying in itself. Alongside a concern about their *national* identities (defined in relation to 'others'), speakers may be concerned about their *moral* identities, their 'ethos' (defined in relation to other speakers). One reason may be found in the discourse itself. In order to define what another nation or nationality 'is' or 'should be', speakers may find it hard not to use some kind of exemplification: a typical character, a characteristic way of acting, a person or figure taken as an embodiment. However, they may also find it hard to choose the 'proper' example in order to convince and please their audience. An argument deemed tactless may easily end up portraying the speaker as prejudiced and narrow-minded, even racist. If the speaker is not careful or diplomatic, an argument about 'others' may turn socially or politically risky. Face-saving strategies may therefore be useful, strategies that allow speakers to articulate in indirect ways what they seldom articulate in direct ways (Holsanova 1998a,b). Using 'good' examples may sometimes in itself be such a face-saving strategy. As we will demonstrate later on, it allows speakers to dwell on seemingly innocent details instead of broad, conspicuous generalizations.

There is a voluminous and interdisciplinary literature addressing the issue of 'the other', from philosophical works by Emmanuel Levinas and Martin Buber to empirical studies of intercultural or cross-cultural communication. In this article, we use the term in a specific and yet general way: to summarize the symbolic significance of those who are not present when a given interaction takes place, but who nevertheless are indicated in that interaction. This interest in 'others' is ultimately grounded in Mead's social-psychological paradigm, in which 'the generalized other' plays an important role (Mead 1967 [1934]: 89–90, 154). Mead argues that meaning arises when individuals take the attitude of the other in his