Beyond neutrality and/or political commitment
The ethical commitment of the discourse analyst

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1 Most French linguists, discourse analysts and even argumentation scholars maintain that a researcher can and is obliged to remain neutral and objective even if his object is “hot”, and by hot I mean polemical and/or political, in our case: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As a member of this scientific community – I am a linguist dealing with discourse analysis and its links to argumentative theories and rhetorical devices – I approve and share this stand as often as possible and do not wish to judge, moralize or evaluate systematically every text I have to describe, question and comment on.

2 I will try to demonstrate, however, that there are cases where this decision is disputable and where neutrality and objectivity are no longer relevant nor justified. My contention is that in these cases refusing to cross the red line separating neutrality from commitment is problematic from a scientific point of view. There is a risk of leading to a refusal to see and know what is anchored in discourse, taking in vain a fundamental scholarly function of constructing and transmitting knowledge linked with evaluation and action. This stand is not justified on a priori political grounds but on knowledge established by some theoreticians in the sciences of language. It is, in my view, for an Israeli scholar the only raison d’être of the right to analyze and criticize the way the state of Israel and the conflict are portrayed in the French medias. Most of my French colleagues assert that one has to dissociate radically research and militant commitment which is a question of citizenship and not of research; my contention is that this dissociation prevents us from seeing that there is at least a third option which is not ideological: scientific ethical commitment adequate to the axiological components of discourse and by axiological, I mean conveying explicit or implicit value judgments, evaluations of what is good or bad from an individual or collective point of view.

3 We should remind these theoreticians of the following: language is not a harmless technical mirror of reality, but a formal symbolic arbitrary structure, an extremely
powerful mode of social life; one of its fundamental and unavoidable mechanisms is selection consequently linked with the notion of subjective choice; the essence of language theorized by the famous linguist Emile Benveniste (1966) is fundamentally subjective. The verbal act of saying “I, Je” transforms the speaker, in his terms, into a human social being; this act is automatically linked to the simultaneous emergence of “tuyou” so that subjectivity and inter-subjectivity are the pillars of discourse defined as a central mode of social life. When Benveniste deals with subjectivity, he does not mean emotions but the basis of the human cognitive aptitude and the interdependence of the notions of individual and society in language. And last, but not least, we know that one of the fundamental functions of language is to build and transmit information and knowledge, so that the subjective utterer is responsible for the referential truth of his assertions; we also know, however, due to the rhetoric of Aristotle and to his reinterpretation by Perelman in The New Rhetoric, that discourse is also activated simultaneously by a logic of values. Due to this logic we justify our choices, opinions and decisions which lead to persuasion and action, to polemical debate and disagreement or to a heuristic negotiation of our respective stands. Language is not only a set of techniques dealing with truthful representation, it is also a discursive space where we deal with values such as good, bad, just and unjust and with conceptions of norms and argumentative rules grounded in referential truth, but also in ethical rectitude or efficiency which have often nothing to do with truth. So the speaker is accountable not only for truthful information, but also for his explicit or implicit ethical evaluations and value judgments which are an essential component of social and political discourses. All of us have to speak, whether we like it or not, in linguistic patterns coined by the circulation of language in society, but the subjective system of discourse also contains an indelible component of autonomy regulating the speaker's liberty and responsibility.

Does it mean that to be rational, a presentation has to remain in the field of referential truth and discursive objectivity? My contention as a rhetorician is radically different and I will try to prove it in my case study. There are, in my view, other regimes of rationality grounded in critical evaluation and justification; an ethical decision can and must be explained and justified as rigorously as a judgment of fact. The passive dominated audience of an assertion mirroring reality “telle quelle” has to accept it without trying to discuss it; the audience of an arguer dealing with the justification of what is right or wrong, just or unjust, honest or fallacious from his point of view, is the master of the game. The speaker’s argumentation is not rational a priori, it’s axiological rationality depends on the construction of the argumentation and on the “critical rationalism” of the addressees. Their identification with the speaker’s point of view cannot be imposed by any kind of force. The rationality of the arguer’s speech is then achieved by the interaction with an autonomous audience and also by an interior dialogue with a third anonymous type of audience which Perelman calls the “universal audience”. This addressee is called by Bakhtine the “surdestinataire”; he is also grounded in the profound subjective system of discourse where he plays a crucial ethical role. The speaker has to try, in front of this inner ethical instance, to aspire to surpass himself. The function of this aspiration is to prevent him from violating the social values system of his community but also his own personal beliefs. There is however no guarantee that this speaker will prefer to aspire to equity and to renounce for example to the benefits of the demonization of the Other, in the name of justice...

So if the dominant Cartesian values system presents neutrality as the ultimate value, and if however absolute objectivity is linguistically impossible, how can journalists but also
scholars affirm that one can choose to remain neutral and pretend that language can be
the mirror of referential truths? When an article – or a scientific paper – seems, in spite
of the knowledge that has been evoked above, to appear neutral and objective, my
contention is that these appearances are grounded in well-known rhetorical devices
which create artificial effects of objectivity. There are a lot of such devices: erasure of the
verbal traces of the speaker’s presence, impersonal syntactic forms, citations, attribution
to facts of human behaviors, numerical indications, counting of victims and statistics
transformed in salient events. One can observe, for example, in the following statements
the attribution of human behaviors to facts: the irony of history has transformed the former
terrorist into the institutional head of the State, The situation requires serious economic
changes, etc. Erasing the verbal presence of the speaker can also transform a value
judgment, an opinion into a pseudo-neutral judgment of fact. The utterer then can
pretend that he is not responsible for his report; he presents himself as the neutral
mirror or the “loud-speaker” of indisputable self-evidences.

Beyond neutrality or political commitment: the ethical commitment

5 So my proposition of a different conception of the ethics and commitment of the scholar
is grounded in the above epistemological stands. I do not pretend that my proposition is
unique and original. The English school of discourse analysis, the American theories of
informal logic and the argumentation theory of the pragma-dialectic center of Van
Eemeren in Amsterdam do not hesitate to be normative; the refusal of normativity is
specific of most of the scholars in the sciences of language in France. The English school
of discourse analysis3 asserts for example explicitly that its theory is grounded in a
Marxist ideology of social life, but that it does not impair the scientific aspect of a
conception of research deeply anchored in close reading and linguistic knowledge. I do
not wish however to enter any prior ideological conviction in my scientific frame; my
conception of the discourse analyst’s commitment is not political but ethical and by
ethical I mean in this paper: questioning the verbal rectitude and the discursive
responsibility of scholars and journalists dealing with the image of the State of Israel and
of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. What is at stake here is the accountability not only to
referential truth but also and often simultaneously to value judgments about what is good
or just, bad or unjust and to the consequences of verbal stands in a context of questions of
life and death.

6 Discourse analysts and the linguists generally agree that there are no verbal specific signs
of truths and lies; I do not intend to criticize this established fact. Most of these scholars
also deny the possibility and the scientific right of designating and describing verbal
traces of deliberate manipulation or argumentative fallacy. When they admit that there
are polemical devices of destruction of one’s public face or image, they restrict
themselves to the description of these devices and refuse to utter any value judgment on
the eventual consequences of these types of demonization even if it may constitute an
implicit legitimization of lethal intentions. The discursive responsibility of the utterer’s
value judgments is not a scientific objective in their view. My contention is however that
reasoning in a deliberately deceptive way implies visible linguistic traces of
argumentative and discursive dysfunctions. These dysfunctions have to be deconstructed
and evaluated if one wishes to lead to an emancipator function of knowledge. I will try to
show that fallacies, deliberate verbal manipulation, and bad faith are not optical illusions depending on the addressee’s benevolent or malevolent perception in particular socio-historical contexts. One can designate the procedures and the verbal places of discursive and argumentative dysfunctions: informal natural logic is normed less rigorously than formal logic, but ethical norms of rectitude, and the rules derived from them, are anchored in the deep structure of discourse and are well known and defined by scholars. So, in my view, it is scientifically relevant to ask such questions as: “Is this reasoning valid?”, “What are the limits beyond which the argument is not admissible?”, and to try to answer in a rational scientific way, even if you know and accept a priori that your conclusions are refutable and will surely be discussed. The alternative for the scholar who prefers not to enter these pitfalls where it is so difficult to trace clear and absolute frontiers between bad faith and discursive rectitude is meta-linguistical scholarly silence; refusal of being simultaneously spectator and actor and consequently, in my view, refusal of dealing with a lethal component of language and with its consequences in cases of life and death, refusal of knowing, analyzing and evaluating the part of the speaker’s responsibility which does not deal with referential truth but with value judgments. Scholarly silence about this component of language is not imposed, in my eyes, by ethical incontestable professional rules, but by a rationalist fear of judging and taking a stand. My contention is that in the field of ethical vital questions the discourse analyst has to turn to “critical rationalism”, and by critical I mean evaluative axiological rationalism grounded in scientific knowledge and activation of the ethical responsibility of any speaker.

From theory to practice...

Let us move now from these theoretical considerations to a concrete case study: the role played in the presentation of the conflict by a rhetorical device called in French l’amalgame, a term which can be translated to English as fallacious analogy, translation containing a scientific normative stand: “fallacious” refers indeed to a manipulative dysfunction in the well-known frame of analogy. Analogy plays a central role among the verbal arguments establishing the structure of extralinguistic realities; it is considered by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1971) in the The New Rhetoric A Treatise on Argumentation as a crucial heuristic argument, stimulating reflection and thoughtful debate. The basic analogical pattern is “A” is to “B” what “C” is to “D”, which underlines a partial similarity between the type of link binding “B” to “A” and “D” to “C”; “AB” being the unknown phoros, and “CD” the known theme helping the audience to define and conceptualize the unknown. “AB” and “CD” are heterogeneous, but this fact is not an obstacle to the construction of knowledge: what is at stake is only a partial similarity. There are several types of analogies: for example “A” is to “B” what “A” is to “C” where “A” can be, for example, the notion of totalitarianism (namely totalitarianism is to the German political power in 1940-45 similar to totalitarianism activated by the communist executive power, totalitarianism being so transformed into a general common qualification). Analogy becomes fallacious when the speaker authorizes himself to deduce, from this partial similarity, that one can glide from it towards total assimilation. If “A” is to “B” what “C” is to “D”, then “AB” and “CD” are no longer heterogeneous, but totally equal: “CRS = SS”, “IDF (Tsahal) = Wehrmacht” and “Gaza = the Warsaw Ghetto”. One can then consider that if they are equal, one has to apply in their case the “rule of justice”; an argument
stipulating that identical entities have to be treated in the same way in the name of an egalitarian rationalism refusing to judge and evaluate lest they become unjust and partial. The role of the well known theme "CD" is often played in the "amalgame" by one of the actual paragon of the evil: Nazism, Hitler, the SS, racism, fascism, apartheid, etc. Gliding from analogy to historical metaphors implies a procedure of discursive condensation which gives to the metaphoric qualifications the appearances of disturbing pseudo self-evidences. In the case of the "amalgame", the historical heuristic metaphor turns into an axiological incriminating qualification which justifies implicitly the target's destruction. Fallacious metaphors such as "CRS = SS" ground their power in efficiency and not in referential truth or ethical rectitude. The verbal force of the amalgame should not to be confused however with the brilliance of truth or self-evidence; the fallacious assimilation becomes irrelevant from the moment one opposes it historical essential differences, which have been obscured to mask ideological or lethal stands such as: if “X” equals “evil incarnate” then it is legitimate to ask for the physical destruction or for the public de-legitimization of the target’s right to exist. The assimilation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to WW II and the procedures of nazification and demonization of the state of Israel are at stake here. I am quite aware that there are also some Israeli people using “amalgames” for de-legitimizing Palestinian politicians or even their own political adversaries. I’m also aware that the fallacious analogy is not specific to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and that this conflict has not invented it. It has become today a rhetorical international device which tries to justify and legitimize implicitly punitive violent sanctions or hatred in a period of human history where killing or hating are condemned by the western systems of values.

8 So if using fallacious analogies is not specific of the image of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict we are dealing with, if “CRS = SS”, “Nazism = Communism”, “Milosevic = Hitler”, “Islamism = Nazism” are also well known and frequent lethal formulas, is there no difference at all between the use of this device in the Middle East and in the case of other international actual targets? Let us analyze some examples and try through them to answer this question.

9 1. Libération (20.09.1982) publishes after the massacre of Sabra and Chatila the following statement in an editorial by Gérard Dupuy: “In a period following the great Nazi genocide you witness a major perversion of Jewish ethics. [...] The Israelis say: ‘we did not want’, ‘we did not know’. But do you think that the German populace [...] acknowledged joyfully the existence of Dachau and Auschwitz?”. The rhetoric of this editorial is of course much more subtle than the equation “Nazi Germany = Israel”; it leads implicitly to the following points by simply juxtaposing the evocation of the theme, the massacre of Sabra and Shatila next to the phoros “Nazi genocide”; this syntactic structure creates through juxtaposition a new type of discursive synonyms. The assimilation of the Israeli people to the “German populace” follows a similar procedure: people who say the same thing when discovering the existence of massacres are identical; this identification justifies another one, the assimilation of the camp of Palestinian refugees to Dachau and Auschwitz. We can observe here a rhetorical device called by Libération (21.09.1982) the “Copernican revolution”, namely a phenomenon of inversion of the roles of victim and hangman which implies implicitly that the real murderers of the Palestinian refugees are the Israeli soldiers. This inversion is an additional device constituting a specific trait of the fallacious analogy in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. A second trait is the excessiveness of a repeated fallacious equation of Israel to the absolute evil.
2. Additional illustration: an extract of an editorial of Jean Daniel also published in 1982. It could constitute a link with the actual rhetoric using the phoros “ghetto” to refer to Gaza. Daniel's article “Pour l'honneur d'Israël” begins by a pseudo-lexicographic definition of the notion of ghetto: “the place where a population finds refuge, the place where they are parked, enclosed, locked up, what do you call it? A ghetto. You may invoke whatever you wish, that the rapprochements are painful, the fact remains nevertheless unavoidable.” This definition constitutes the ground of a total assimilation of the ghetto with the camps of Sabra and Shatila. The editorialist infers then from the total identity of these two places that the Palestinian victims have become “the Jews of their butchers” (“les Juifs de leurs massacreurs”). Israel has lost, asserts Jean Daniel “the caution of the martyr which has sanctified its origins”. What is here singular to the rhetoric constructing the public image of Israel is the “Copernican revolution” which reverses the roles victim-hangman, the implicit questioning of Israel’s right to exist and the exorbitance of the peremptory tone of “the fact is nevertheless unavoidable” which presents an opinion and a fallacious analogy as a truthful indisputable judgment of fact. What is common however to the journalistic rhetoric of the presentation of several contemporary conflicts is the Manichaean oscillation between demonization and victimization making it impossible to think of the complexity of the conflicts in political, socio-historical terms. This rhetoric does not question the lethal consequences of these assimilations and places the appeal to emotions, such as compassion versus hatred, above the contribution to the explanation of the complex ins and outs of the enemies positions.

Conclusion

My decision to argue in favor of a scientific ethical commitment is essentially linked here with the decision to unmask fallacious assimilations, which constitute more or less an implicit justification of hatred and destruction. This decision implies the activation of a scientific knowledge which permits justifying every step of a conception of discourse analysis integrating an argumentative logic of values. Does this choice impair scientificity? Does it dispossess the audience of its freedom of thought? My contention is that it does not impair it nor dispossesses anyone of his freedom of thought as long as the following conditions are fulfilled: explicit distinction between the levels of scientific description and explanation on one side and ethical evaluation on the other side, justification of the scholar’s point of view anchored in scholarly knowledge, accountability for judgments of fact but also for value judgments, acceptance of the fact that a speech act cannot mediate absolute truths but only subjective disputable and refutable opinions. However, everyone, scholar and citizen included, has, in my view, the right and sometimes the obligation to judge and protest against bad faith and argumentative fallacies when it is an ethical question of life and death.
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NOTES

2. See, regarding this notion, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1971), p. 31-35.
4. One can also easily observe verbal marks of argumentative dysfunctions in the frame of humor, irony, jokes and puns. See for example Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1971), p. 204, “Presenting theses as compatible or incompatible”: “an amusing case of the application of retort”.

ABSTRACTS

The aim of this contribution is to revisit the question of the duty of objectivity of the researcher, analyst of media discourses on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is not to contest the validity of a “neutral” posture, but rather to reexamine it and to amend it in particular cases where matters of life and death are analyzed. The author shows that this amendment is necessary not for political but for ethical reasons: even if words do not kill, they can however legitimate a vilifying image of one side, while rendering acceptable deadly violence of the other and incitement to hatred. The author will try to justify the following hypothesis: objectivity or, on the contrary, political commitment, are not the only options in matter of scientific position. There exists a third option, namely an explicit ethical commitment of the researcher, supported by scientific knowledge.

Cette contribution souhaite problématiser la question du devoir d’objectivité du chercheur, analyste de discours médiatiques sur le conflit israélo-palestinien. Il ne s’agit pas de contester la validité de la posture “neutre”, mais de la revisiter et de l’amender dans les cas où les corpus analysés ont des questions de vie et de mort pour objet. On soutiendra que cet amendement est rendu nécessaire pour des raisons éthiques et non pas politiques: les mots certes ne tuent pas, mais il peuvent contribuer à la légitimation de la diabolisation et de la violence mortifère ou de l’incitation à la haine. L’auteur tentera de justifier l’hypothèse suivante : l’objectivité ou au
contraire l’engagement politique ne sont pas les seules options en matière de positionnement scientifique ; il en existe une troisième : l’engagement éthique explicite, justifié par un savoir scientifique.

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Roselyne Koren is Full Professor of Language Sciences at the French Department of Bar-Ilan University and coordinator, with Professor Ruth Amossy, of the research group ADARR (Discourse analysis Argumentation Rhetoric). She is the author of Les Enjeux éthiques de l’écriture de presse et la mise en mots du terrorisme [Ethical stakes in press writing and putting terrorism into words] (Paris, L’Harmattan). She is also the author of numerous articles and chapters on the following questions: the regulation of appearances of discursive objectivity and subjectivity in the French written press, denomination and implicit argumentation; the ins and outs of argumentation by analogy; publications about totalitarian discourses, demonization in polemical discourses, axiological evaluation in discourse, scientific research and commitment, enunciative responsibility, ethics of discourse.