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# The prospects for multimodal schemes of argument: Assessing the spoofing strategies in subvertisements of the tobacco industry

ASSIMAKIS TSERONIS  
*Örebro University*  
[assimakis.tseronis@oru.se](mailto:assimakis.tseronis@oru.se)

Recourse to argument schemes and to their accompanying critical questions can provide a fruitful way of assessing visual and multimodal arguments. The prospects of such an approach are discussed based on analyses of spoof ads. Their spoofing strategy amounts to raising critical questions about the argument scheme employed in the original advertisement. How can the various aspects of the verbal and the visual mode cue critical questions and what is their overall contribution to the evaluation of multimodal arguments?

**KEYWORDS:** argument from negative consequences, argument from values, argument schemes, critical questions, multimodal argumentation, subvertisements.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

While studies regarding the analysis and reconstruction of multimodal argumentative discourse abound (see the volume edited by Tseronis and Forceville (2017), and references therein), studies addressing the issues concerning the evaluation of such discourses are of recent date and relatively limited (Blair 2015; Dove 2016; Godden 2017). Recourse to argument schemes and their accompanying critical questions seems to provide a fruitful way of assessing visual and multimodal arguments as convincing or unconvincing, weak or strong (Groarke 2019). Dove (2016) has emphasized the versatility of argument schemes and the non-exhaustiveness of the existing lists as positive reasons for applying the relevant distinctions to the analysis and evaluation of visual arguments.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the concept of argument scheme has been problematized already by scholars studying verbal arguments. One main question that has been raised is whether the identification of a certain argumentative sequence as belonging to a specific scheme is the consequence rather than the cause of

reconstructing that argumentative sequence in a particular way (see Pinto 2003). Questions have also been raised about the origin, number and function of the critical questions that accompany the various schemes (see Blair 2001).

In this paper, I consider the ways in which the strengths and weaknesses of the analytical and evaluative tools accompanying argument schemes manifest themselves when we try to apply these to the analysis and evaluation of multimodal argumentation. To do that, I study a number of anti-tobacco subvertisements found on the Internet. The spoofing strategy of these ads can be said to amount to raising critical questions about the argument scheme employed in the original advertisement. In this sense, subvertisements, or any other concrete instance of practices of dissent, offer a case study of how arguments are received as well as criticised. The various aspects and dimensions of the verbal and the visual mode can be analyzed as cues for such critical questions or as properties of the multimodal discourse that can be shown to affect the evaluation of the argumentation conveyed in it. At the same time, the formal properties of the verbal and the visual modes as well as their combinations can be shown to cue one type of argument scheme than another.

## 2. ARGUMENT SCHEMES FOR MULTIMODAL ARGUMENTATION

Argument schemes can be broadly described as a general and abstract pattern with infinite number of possible substitution instances, which helps to 'transfer' the acceptability of the premises to the standpoint of an argument (see Garssen 2001). Walton et al. (2008: 1) define argumentation schemes as:

forms of argument (structures of inference) that represent structures of common types of arguments used in everyday discourse, as well as in special context like those of legal argumentation and scientific argumentation.

Garssen (2001: 96, note 1) remarks that while argument schemes can be said to correspond to logical reasoning patterns, they differ from the latter because the transfer of acceptability in the case of schemes is based on more than just the formal characteristics of the scheme.

Depending on the theoretical perspective to the study of argumentation one assumes, a variety of typologies of argument schemes have been proposed. Pragma-dialectics, for example, suggests that there are three main types of argument schemes, and treats any other schemes that can be identified in argumentative discourse as types or subtypes of the three main ones, namely comparison, causal, and symptomatic

argumentation (see van Eemeren and Garssen, 2019, for the latest update). Walton et al.'s (2008) typology, which is widely cited in the literature and even used in applications of argumentation and computation, contains more than sixty different types, some of which have subtypes. Most recently, Wagemans (2016) has proposed a theoretically grounded way for distinguishing types of arguments based on three formal criteria. Existing and new argument schemes can thus be mapped on a so-called 'periodic table' which makes it possible to see in which respects schemes relate to each other and in what other respects they differ.

Despite the varied typologies of schemes proposed, almost all argumentation scholars agree that schemes are useful both for argument reconstruction and argument evaluation (see Walton & Macagno 2015, for example). Regarding the analysis of argumentative discourse, argument schemes help one to identify types of arguments. The scheme provides a certain heuristic for the analysis, or as Godden and Walton (2007: 272) put it, a "model for comparison", a "kind of interpretative, or hermeneutic, hypothesis". Regarding the evaluation of argumentative discourse, argument schemes provide a list of questions for testing the reason-giving relation.

Both of these contributions of the concept of argument scheme have been questioned, however, notably by Pinto and Blair. Pinto (2003) has argued that the application of schemes is the consequence not the cause of reconstructing the argument in a particular way. The analyst, as it were, does not start by identifying a certain reasoning pattern but rather by interpreting and reconstructing a piece of argumentative discourse which eventually turns out to fit one pattern of reasoning rather than another. The list of schemes provides a guide to the analyst for selecting the type that matches the reconstruction as well as for adjusting the reconstruction to fit one type, and eventually for naming the reconstructed type of argument. Blair (2001) has also raised a number of questions concerning the nature of argument schemes (descriptive/prescriptive; patterns of reasoning or types of argument), their classification; their normativity (what is their grounding); and their use for the evaluation (the role of the critical questions). The answering of the critical questions can at best tell the analyst something about whether the scheme has been applied correctly, and whether its use can be plausibly said to transfer the acceptability of the premises to the standpoint, but are these answers enough for checking the quality of the argumentation?

When it comes to the analysis and evaluation of visual and multimodal argumentation, recourse to argument schemes was motivated both theoretically and analytically. In the first instance, Dove (2011, 2013) took up the challenge to argue that there are such

constructs as visual arguments by showing that there are instances where the reasoning from premises to conclusion is made partially or wholly through the use of visuals, and that such reasoning fits existing patterns of reasoning described for the monomodal cases of verbal argument. He then went on to show that there are even types of argument schemes that characterize instances of purely visual arguments (Dove 2016, 2017). Following this line, Groarke (2019) has proposed identifying a series of related argument schemes that belong to the family of what he calls ‘matching schemes of argument’, where the matching can be performed “with the eye” or “with the ear”.

Dove and Groarke maintain that, at least, two kinds of schemes are possible for visual argument: those originally developed to assess verbal arguments, a subset of which can be used, with slight modifications, to assess some cases of visual argumentation (slippery slope, analogy, sign, etc.); and schemes that are developed in order to handle visual argumentation proper, and which may or may not have applicability to instances of monomodal verbal argumentation. Here is how Dove (2017: 113-114) describes how argument schemes work:

On this account, argumentation schemes individuate argument types according to structure or pattern of the inferences they contain. Beyond their use in categorizing argument types, schemes aid in the recognition, reconstruction, and evaluation of arguments. To do this, first, an individual scheme will delineate a standardized pattern for the reasoning. This entails naming and explicating the premise types involved in such reasoning. The explication of premise types might require the identification of particular sentential structures, for example, conditionals for arguments from consequence, and comparisons for arguments from analogy. In any case, naming and explicating the premise types associated with a particular scheme would facilitate recognizing whether actual reasoning exemplified the scheme. Moreover, once one has identified the scheme associated with actual reasoning, the scheme could be used to aid in the reconstruction of the pattern by guiding an analyst as regards relevant claims.

From the above, it is clear that recourse to argument schemes has been essential for canonizing the study of visual arguments by showing that the reasoning involved in these cases can be described with the categories and distinctions applied already to instances of verbal argument (albeit with slight modifications). This said, the questions raised by Pinto (2003) and Blair (2001) regarding argument schemes apply even more so in the case of visual and multimodal argumentation.

Before assessing what argument schemes can contribute to the analysis and evaluation of visual and multimodal argumentation one

more point needs clarification. Most of the examples that Groarke and Dove discuss concern cases where a scheme describes the reasoning process that a viewer/receiver of a visual argument undergoes in order to understand how the conclusion follows from the premises, but not really cases where the viewer/receiver identifies and understands the scheme used by the producer of the argument. The question that concerns me in this paper, however, is whether there are any clues on the visual form that can be said to cue a certain scheme or to help one reconstruct the reasoning pattern as belonging to one scheme rather than another. Referring back to Dove's quote above, the question would then be: what visual structures and forms could be said to cue analogies, comparisons, causes, etc., if any? The more general point I want to make in this paper is that we cannot assess the strength of the argument without also paying attention to the mode(s) in which it is realized in a given context.

### 3. ANALYSING AND EVALUATING SCHEMES IN SPOOF ADS

#### *3.1 Spoof ads and dissent*

Subvertising refers to the practice of making spoofs or parodies of corporate and political advertisements. Subvertisers manipulate the visuals, the text, or both, of the original advertisement in order to subvert the claims it makes. While the claim of the original could be formulated as "Buy product X" (assuming that product ads have such a generic standpoint, see Pollaroli & Rocci 2015), the claim of the spoof ad could be something more than the mere negation of it. After all, spoof ads, at least those by such activist groups as Adbusters (see Atkinson 2003), make a broader claim about consumerism and capitalism. It could therefore be formulated as "Do not be fooled / persuaded by brand X to buy their products / or to buy this product".

Subvertisements provide an excellent case for the study of multimodal argumentation for a number of reasons (see also Tseronis & Forceville 2017). They constitute a distinct genre which functions as a reaction to another, namely consumer advertisements, thereby creating a dialogical context where arguments are not only advanced independently but are also objected to. The study of a spoof ad can thus show not only which arguments are advanced multimodally but also which critical questions are raised against the argument of the original advertisement. The comparative study of the original and the subvertisement can thereby help us assess the contribution of the categories and distinctions relating to argument schemes for the study of multimodal argumentation in particular.

A spoof ad can be produced by manipulating any of the three constitutive elements of the original advertisement: the brand logo; the text; the image used in it; or all of the above. The examples discussed below are cases of manipulation of the text or of the image, taken from subvertisements produced as part of anti-tobacco campaigns. In section 3.2, I reconstruct the argument in two advertisements for Marlboro cigarettes. In section 3.3, I present the argument in two spoof ads. In section 3.4, I discuss some issues arising from the evaluation of these multimodal texts.

### 3.2 *Argument from values*

The image of the cowboy riding his horse or engaged in other outdoor activities has defined the advertising campaigns of Marlboro since 1955. As Goodman (2005: 338) explains:

So consistently was the message delivered, and for so many years, that, by the 1990s, a picture of the western desert landscape was all that was necessary to evoke images of Marlboro Country.

The two images below are examples of such advertising campaigns.

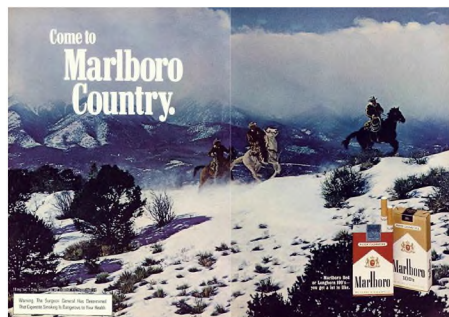


Figure 1

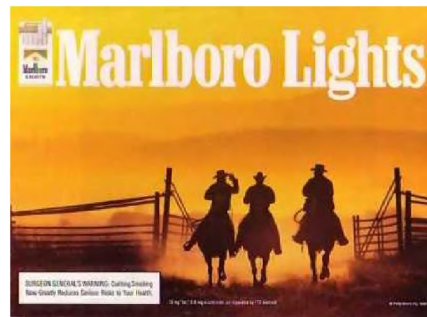


Figure 2

In Figure 1, the cowboys are barely visible, while the snow-cast mountain landscape is in the foreground. From up close, the image looks more like a painting rather than a photo. The choice of the verb 'come' in the text and the noun 'country' suggest that Marlboro is a sort of destination one can travel to. The image of the snow-cast landscape reinforces the association with posters for travel destinations, where the travelers enjoy nature, free from worries and other constraints of the city life. In Figure 2, the shadows of the cowboys riding their horses are in the centre of the image and clearly shaped against the light of the sunset, creating yet another idyllic image.

In both cases, the advertised product appears in the form of a pack of cigarettes in the right hand corner or at the top of the image as well as in the brand name 'Marlboro'. The image as a whole, however, does not show the cowboys smoking. It is the experience and positive feelings arising from the view of such landscapes that are foregrounded as reasons for buying the particular product.

Paying attention to the semiotics of the verbal and visual text in light of the above-sketched background information, the argument of these advertisements could be reconstructed as follows:<sup>1</sup>

1. Buy / Smoke Marlboro cigarettes
- 1.1. Smoking is associated with positive feelings / experiences of riding in nature / riding with friends
- 1.1' Engaging in activities that produce positive feelings is good for you

This reconstruction fits the scheme of an argument from positive values (Walton et al. 2008: 321), where the exact content of the values arises from the connotations conveyed by the imagery and the positive associations that the viewers can make when looking at these images.

### 3.3 Argument from negative consequences

Anti-tobacco information campaigns in the United States date as early as the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century. Since then the antismoking movement has known various phases (see information in Goodman 2005). Spoofing original tobacco advertisements was one of the forms that such anti-smoking campaigns took. In these anti-tobacco subvertisements either the image was replaced keeping the original text (see Figure 3) or the original image was kept but the text was replaced (see Figure 4).



Figure 3



Figure 4

In Figure 3, the idyllic images of wild landscapes from the original advertisements have been replaced by an image of a graveyard, with a

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<sup>1</sup> Admittedly this is a weak argument (see section 3.4).

number of the tombstones depicting the iconic Marlboro cigarette pack, and a horse without its rider standing in front. The text from the original advertisement 'Come to Marlboro Country' acquires a new meaning when combined with the image, presenting a negative experience altogether. Other versions of this subvertisement found on the Internet use black and white colour or depict gravestones from a low angle in a gloomy atmosphere that emphasize visually the negativity of the experience.

The image in Figure 4 is from one of the billboards that the state of California produced in 1990 as part of their Tobacco Control Programme (Farrelly & Davis 2008). In these series, the original iconic images of the Marlboro cowboys were accompanied by a different text such as "Bob, I've got cancer", "Bob, I've got emphysema" or "I miss my lung, Bob". Formulated in this way, the text was suggesting a reinterpretation of the iconic image of the cowboys as one in which one of them confesses their worries to the other regarding health problems, manifestly as a result of being a smoker.

Both subvertisements bring forward an aspect related to smoking that was backgrounded in the original advertisements, namely the deathly consequences of smoking. They are thereby effectively raising the critical question: "Aren't there any negative consequences related to the act of smoking?". The underlying argument can be reconstructed as follows:

1. Do not buy / smoke Marlboro cigarettes
- 1.1 Smoking leads to death / Smoking causes cancer<sup>2</sup>
- 1.1' You do not want to die of cancer

The spoof ads presented here, as well as other subvertisements of the tobacco industry, manipulate image and text to raise questions not so much about the argument from values that underlies the original advertisements but about the negative consequences (Walton et al. 2008: 101) of the act of smoking promoted in these. In the spoof ads where the image is manipulated, it is the content as well as the layout and colouring of the image that convey negative values and negative consequences. In the spoof ads where the text is manipulated, it is not only the content of the text that makes explicit the negative consequences but also the reinterpretation of the image in light of the new text.

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<sup>2</sup> For Figure 3, this premise could also be more accurately formulated as "A great number of deaths is caused by smoking".

### *3.4 Some notes on evaluation*

For the evaluation of the argumentation reconstructed from the original advertisements and the subvertisements presented above, recourse to the critical questions that accompany the respective schemes could provide a useful checklist to the analyst.

Thus with respect to the argument from values underlying the original Marlboro advertisements, one could ask whether the values addressed clash with other values that can be deemed of greater importance. One would then need to compare the value of leading a healthy life to the values of carefreeness and escapism promoted in these advertisements to decide. Admittedly, the iconic image of the Marlboro man and the idyllic images of the western wild landscapes have played an important role in masking that dilemma by foregrounding individualism and masculinity instead (White et al. 2012).

When assessing the argumentation reconstructed from the subvertisements, it is precisely the power of the image (combined with text) that gives presence to the negative results arising from the practice of smoking. The critical question one could ask with respect to the argument from negative consequences underlying the subvertisements would be about the strength of the causal link between smoking and dying of cancer. The first subvertisement (Figure 3) could be said to exaggerate the direct link between smoking and death, even though one should also note that the choice to replace only a number of the gravestones with the cigarette pack suggests an acknowledgement that statistically a great number of deaths but not all are caused by smoking. The second subvertisement (Figure 4) takes a different strategy that focuses on the story of the individual cowboy suffering from health problems as a result of smoking. This is achieved not merely by the manipulation of the text but also by the use of the same image of the cowboy appearing in the original advertisements, leading the audience to conclude that even the Marlboro characters have suffered the consequences of smoking.

Following the above sketch of an evaluation of the advertisements and the subvertisements guided by the critical questions, the question, however, remains whether answering these captures all there is to be captured when evaluating visual and multimodal arguments. Blair (2015), who is among the first who focused on issues regarding the evaluation of visual and multimodal arguments, raises the following interconnected questions:

When one assesses the probative merits of visual arguments, are the criteria used for purely verbal arguments readily employed? Does it seem to require distortions of what is

expressed visually in order to apply them? Do other factors suggest themselves that are not captured by these criteria? How well, if all, do the criteria and standards appropriate for judging the cogency of verbal arguments apply to visual arguments? (p. 219)

Interestingly, when evaluating a number of visuals in his paper, Blair does not make any explicit reference to argument schemes or critical questions accompanying them. Instead he has recourse to the standard questions regarding sufficiency, acceptability and relevance (ibid: 221). These are generic enough to allow the analyst to use them as a basis for evaluation of argumentative discourse be it verbal, visual or multimodal. They are also flexible enough to allow the analyst to come up with more specific sub-questions if needed.

In my view, the problem with the critical questions (whether those accompanying specific argument schemes or the more generic ones) is that they assess only one aspect of what it means to argue, namely the reason-giving relationship. I take Godden and Walton (2007) to make a similar point when they write:

the evaluation of any defeasible argumentation scheme can never be closed in any final sense, but can only be closed in some local sense, in relation to some specified body of information. [...] while the questions contribute to the assessment of schematic argument, they are not exhaustive of it. (pp. 281-282)

Features of the context, the genre, the mode or the medium, in which and through which argumentation is conveyed, do not come forward when evaluating arguments based on the critical questions relating to the scheme. While this abstraction remained unquestioned until now in the study of monomodal verbal argumentation,<sup>3</sup> it may need to be reconsidered when the focus shifts to the study of visual and multimodal argumentation.

In this light, one could also ask the question whether and to what extent the visual form (choices made regarding the presentation of the visual content) can be shown to obstruct the viewer from the critical

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted here, however, that the view of argumentation as a social and communicative activity that Pragma-dialectics assumes allows for a more encompassing procedure of the evaluation of argumentation, which focuses not only on the validity of the argument or the testing of the scheme but also on procedural aspects that can affect the quality of argumentation. Also the concepts of strategic manoeuvring and of activity types allow more factors to be weighed when assessing the quality of (multimodal) argumentation (see Tseronis 2017).

testing of the standpoint (that is, from asking the relevant / appropriate critical questions; from identifying the correct type of argument, etc.). Take the example of the schematic image of a domino that Dove (2016) uses to illustrate a visual slippery slope type of argument, and compare it with a more realistic visual representation of a domino that Groarke (2019) uses. One could say that choosing to depict argumentation about a situation (e.g. the Vietnam war, the Iraq war or the Brexit) as a line of dominos and choosing to make this representation more or less realistic (depicting actual pieces of domino or personified ones, etc.) are all choices that could be said to play a role in making it harder for the viewer to pose the right critical questions, to overlook the simplification of the situation and forget about the complexity of the problem. For example, choosing to depict some connection in terms of a domino game suggests that there is an unavoidable causal connection between one event leading to another; once one piece falls there is no stopping. While that may be an appropriate depiction for some causal connections it may obscure the causality in some other cases (as was indeed the case with the domino effect depiction in the Vietnam war cartoons).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

If argument schemes describe more or less fixed patterns of inference, there is no reason why they cannot be said to underlie the argumentation that is conveyed partly or wholly in other semiotic resources than the verbal means. After all, inferences can be triggered by any semiotic means of communication not just by (spoken or written) language. It is the questions raised about the analytical and evaluative function of identifying schemes and accompanying critical questions that need to be addressed when schemes are applied to the analysis and evaluation of verbal, visual or multimodal instances of argumentation. In this paper, I have tried to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the analytical and evaluative tools provided by argument schemes when these are applied to the analysis and evaluation of multimodal argumentation. As a case in point, I have compared the subvertisements of tobacco products, namely Marlboro cigarettes, with the original advertisements.

Regarding the analysis of multimodal argumentation, recourse to argument schemes can prove useful in at least two ways. Firstly, it can provide a heuristic tool that guides the analyst in the search for the relevant elements from the discourse. As Godden and Walton (2007: 272) put it:

argument schemes serve as models of comparison during the initial identification of the type of reasoning at work in an argument, and further provide a complete profile of all the

required components of the argument once such an identification is made.

Secondly, the scheming of a visual or multimodal argument can provide a handy placeholder, as it were, for presenting the argumentation conveyed in a multimodal text. Just as the verbal paraphrase is a 'placeholder' as Blair (2015: 220) has put it, for the visual argument, so is the scheme a 'placeholder' for the argumentation (whether conveyed verbally or non-verbally). It captures a part of the interpretation process and provides a certain basis for the evaluation of the argument, but it does not tell the whole story. From the brief analysis of the original advertisements and the spoof ads it became clear that there are aspects of the visual form besides the visual content, which lead to inferences that can inform the procedure of scheming the multimodal argument in different ways, when interpreted against background knowledge and genre expectations.

As far as the evaluation is concerned, the critical questions accompanying argument schemes can at best be understood as providing a checklist to the analyst but they can by no means exhaust the task of the evaluation. More questions beyond those pertaining directly to the scheme are required in order to assess the ways in which the semiotic mode may affect the evaluation of the argument.

Relating to both the analysis and the evaluation is the question about a certain typology or classification of argument schemes. For the analysis of multimodal argumentation, a classification of schemes based on some generic characterization of the inference pattern may prove more useful than a detailed list of specific instantiations and subtypes. Applying the same criteria for the distinction of different schemes and clustering those that share certain characteristics will help one to better compare between those schemes that apply exclusively to arguments conveyed in a certain semiotic mode and those that can characterise argumentation regardless of the semiotic mode in which it is conveyed.

A direction for future research would be to make the most of computational methods for identifying patterns bottom-up in concrete genres of communication rather than start from existing typologies of schemes and annotate discourse based on these categories. Parallel to search for scheme specific features in verbal discourse (see Feng & Hirst 2011), one may seek to identify configurations of image and text relations, as well as configurations of choices made in the visual mode (regarding composition, colouring, etc.) that co-occur with certain schemes and not others.

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