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Argumentative strategies and multimodality in oral business discourse: From theory to practice

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Abstract

This study looks into how the argumentative structure (van Eemeren et al., 2007) is enhanced by verbal and non-verbal modes (Kress, 2010) in oral business discourse. A close examination of a project management introductory training session has revealed that changes in argumentative moves are strongly reinforced by the repetitive use of certain gestures and metaphoric images rendering the training talk a highly effective communicative event. The results of the analysis have been exploited to design a Master's course module focusing on the interpretation and acquisition of multimodal argumentative strategies in academic and professional contexts.

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1. Introduction

Oral business discourse may adopt many different forms depending on the context. Meetings, negotiations, presentations, the telephone talk, as well as the training talk are just a few examples of oral business genres. The business presentation, which shares many features with the business training talk, has attracted little attention in the area of professional discourse studies. Bamford (2008) in her study of company performance presentations suggested that a combination of different rhetorical strategies is used to increase their persuasive effects: logos appealing to reason, ethos building up credibility and legitimacy, and pathos involving emotions. In the author's view, a business presentation consists in telling a convincing story, since the use of narrative helps the speaker increase credibility and establishes rapport with the audience. Yates and Orlikowski (2007), however, observed that a strong narrative line and the linearity of PowerPoint presentations, which leave questions to the end, reduce the spontaneous interaction between the speaker and the audience. PowerPoint presentations, in the scholars' view, show both constraining and enabling features with regard to the actions taking place in the workplace. They

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facilitate co-authoring of content, collaborative development of ideas, and encourage discursive focus and brevity, which sometimes might be constraining.

With regard to argumentation research, no study has specifically focused on business presentations or business training sessions. Palmieri (2012) and Zlatkova (2012) examined the argumentative structure of business discourse, but concentrated on written genres: takeover bids and financial news. The use of multimodality, on the other hand, has been explored with regard to computer-mediated business communication and its impact on companies' marketing and commercial activities (eg. Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris, 2006; Garzone, 2009). The business training talk, which is an example of an educational genre consisting in delivering an instructional speech to business practitioners in order to improve their management abilities, has not been researched from the point of view of argumentation and multimodality to the best of our knowledge. This study provides a qualitative analysis of a talk given by a well-known project management expert with regard to the use of argumentative moves (van Eemeren et al., 2007) and their correlation with the verbal and non-verbal modes (Kress, 2010). The results of the analysis have been further exploited in the design of a Master's course module dealing with the interpretation and acquisition of argumentative strategies in specific academic and professional contexts.

2. Argumentative strategies

The pragma-dialectical approach to argumentative discourse (van Eemeren et al., 2007) views argumentation as an attempt to resolve or present a difference of opinion by critically testing the acceptability of a standpoint that is in doubt. Argumentative discourse is considered as part of a communicative activity between individuals or groups. From this perspective, presenting a point of view, agreeing or disagreeing are perceived as socially motivated moves in a collective process of conflict management. The approach proposes the *ideal model of a critical discussion*, concerned with the positions that are verbally expressed, and thus with the speaker's or writer's externalized commitments that can be derived from discourse. The model (Table 1) serves as a guiding principle and a standard for assessment in the analysis of argumentative discourse. The critical discussion develops in four stages: confrontation, opening, argumentation and concluding, and is based on Searle's (1979) typology of speech acts: assertive, commissive, directive and usage declarative. These speech acts, considered as argumentative moves may fulfill different functions in the critical discussion. For instance, the assertive act can serve to express a standpoint, to advance in argumentation, to maintain or retract a standpoint, as well as to establish a result.

Table 1. The structure of the critical debate (based on Van Eemeren et al., 2007)

Speech act	Critical discussion stages	Verbal indicators (examples)
	CONFRONTATION	
Assertive	Expressing a standpoint	I think that.../I'm sure that...
Commissive	Accepting a standpoint or not	Who would think that?
(Directive	Requesting a usage declarative)	
(Usage declarative	Providing a definition, specification, explanation, etc.)	
	OPENING	
Directive	Challenging to defend a standpoint	So you mean that...?
Commissive	Accepting the challenge, agreeing on premises and the discussion rules	There are two reasons why....
(Directive	Requesting a usage declarative)	
(Usage declarative	Providing a definition, specification, explanation, etc.)	
	ARGUMENTATION	
Directive	Requesting argumentation	I can't see any reason for...
Assertive	Advancing argumentation	Because/ since/ due to....
Commissive	Accepting argumentation or not	I can see your point...
(Directive	Requesting a usage declarative)	
(Usage declarative	Providing a definition, specification, explanation, etc.)	

CONCLUDING		
Commissive	Accepting the standpoint or not	If that is the case, then...
	Repeating that the standpoint is not accepted	I still think that...
Assertive	Maintaining or retracting a standpoint	I can't say anything against that....
	Establishing the result of the discussion	So we agree on....
(Directive	Requesting a usage declarative)	
(Usage declarative	Providing a definition, specification, explanation, etc.)	

Even though the object of this study is a monologue, it can be considered as an implicit interchange of opinions between the speaker and the audience (van Eemeren et al., 2007). The speaker in addressing the audience mentions its standpoints, and relates them with his/her own views. In this way, not only an interchange of opinions does take place, but often a difference of opinion is resolved. The audience's role in such a situation is passive, but the speaker actively uses its arguments in his/her talk.

3. Multimodal resources

Discourse should be analyzed with regard to all signs used in its production, as they actively combine meaning and form, according to the social semiotic theory of multimodality (Kress, 2010). In this sense, multimodality refers to the use of different semiotic modes in the design of an event or a semiotic product, as well as to the way in which they combine, that is whether they reinforce each other, fulfill complementary functions, or appear in a hierarchical order, being one dominant and others secondary (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). Therefore, from the perspective of multimodality, signs such as image, color and other non-verbal modes should be given the same attention as verbal modes in written and oral discourse.

Regarding the non-verbal modes, multimodality draws upon the scholarly work on the use of gestures by Knapp (1980) and Poyatos (1994). The scholars provided a useful classification of gestures: *emblems*, which are equivalent to a verbal message; *illustrators*, with an emphatic and complementary effect; *regulators*, which help order interactions; *adaptors*, which provide additional information about the speaker's personality or mood; and finally, *expressive-emotional* gestures. Calbris (2001) points out that a gesture is used in its culminating movement in coordination with the emphasis that the speaker places with his/her voice on a particular discourse element, forming rhythmic-semantic groups with a marking function. A gesture can also express a mental meaning, like words do, and very often the expression of such content anticipates the words. Therefore, a gesture has two functions: expressing or illustrating for the speaker and predictive for the hearer, as it announces the message expressed verbally later.

With reference to images, their use seems to be more effective than that of words in terms of their retention in the reader's or hearer's memory, as they trigger off a process of personal evocation and identification with experience. The inclusion of symbolic messages in images allows for the use of rhetorical tropes, such as visual metaphors, hyperboles or similes, among others. The verbal message that accompanies an image fulfils a complementary function, and often facilitates its interpretation. The image analysis involves the interpretation of the image origin, its communicative objectives, its use and limitations (Eco, 1980).

4. Business training talk: results and discussion

The business training talk examined in this study was given by Rita Mulcahy, a worldwide known author of the best-selling books on project management and a successful educator in project management. The talk was addressed to business practitioners with some experience in project management. We focused on a 6-minute introduction, which was transcribed for an in-depth analysis of the argumentative structure, the use of images in a PowerPoint presentation and the speaker's gestures. The different modes were then analyzed for their relation with the argumentative moves identified.

The introduction to the talk shows the basic four-stage structure of the critical discussion (Table 2), but with the opening stage and the argumentation stage occurring twice: confrontation, opening 1, argumentation 1, opening 2,

argumentation 2, and concluding. In the confrontation stage, the speaker focuses on the difficulties in managing projects, and suggests a solution, consisting in learning the basics of how to manage a project. In opening 1, the speaker asks for more specific reasons to improve project management skills. In argumentation 1, she provides the answer and mentions inefficiencies producing the waste of money and time on the one hand, and the need for a professional success, on the other. In opening 2, the discipline of project management is addressed, and in argumentation 2, its practical features and applications are focused on. In the concluding stage, the speaker proposes to make a good start by writing the project charter.

Table 2. Argumentative moves and non-verbal modes in the business training talk

Stages	Argumentative moves Critical discussion	Argumentative moves Training talk	Non-verbal modes
Confrontation	Assertive – Commissive - (Directive - Usage declarative)	Assertive – Commissive – Assertive – Commissive- Assertive (6)	Emphatic gestures – Image preceding verbal discourse
Opening 1	Directive – Commissive - (Directive - Usage declarative)	Directive - Commissive	
Argumentation 1	Directive – Assertive – Commissive - (Directive - Usage declarative)	Directive – Assertive - Commissive- Assertive	Explicative and emphatic hand gestures
Opening 2	Directive – Commissive – (Directive – Usage declarative)	Directive-Commissive	
Argumentation 2	Directive – Assertive – Commissive - (Directive - Usage declarative)	Directive – Assertive – Commissive – Assertive – Directive – Commissive – Assertive – Commissive- Directive (2) – Usage declarative – Directive – Assertive – Directive- Assertive	Image preceding verbal discourse
Concluding	Commissive – Assertive - (Directive - Usage declarative)	Commissive – Assertive – Usage Declarative	Marked face and body gestures – Emphatic image

In general terms, the use of the argumentative moves in the introduction of the training talk replicates the distribution of moves in the model of a critical discussion. In the confrontation stage, the commissive moves consisting in accepting the speaker’s points of view are implicit and they are expressed through the silence that fills the pauses that the speaker makes after expressing her standpoint. Several assertive moves take place at this stage, as the speaker strongly emphasizes her views. Opening 1 and 2 start with the questions addressed to the audience, and again the commissive moves are implicit, as the audience is not supposed to engage in a dialogue with the speaker. Argumentation 1 and 2 are broadly similar to the critical discussion. The speaker’s monologue consists in requesting from herself the convenient argumentation for her standpoint, then she advances in the argumentation, and the repetitive implicit commissive moves allow the speaker to further advance. In the concluding stage, the commissive move is not implicit, as the presenter speaks on behalf of the audience and expresses their acceptance of the standpoint defended. The analysis conducted shows that even though the audience’s participation in the training talk is passive and its standpoints are assumed by the speaker, both the directive and commissive moves on the part of the audience do take place, and in an analysis like this, the audience’s role in argumentative exchanges can be reported.

With regard to the verbal mode, the frequent use of rhetorical questions draws attention. Such questions were most often used in the directive (eg. “Are you willing to make a change?”), and assertive moves (eg. “Do you feel a little bit like this?”; “How bad are your projects?”; “What is project management?”; “That’s not good enough for you, is it?”). This feature of the verbal mode points to the dialogical nature of the talk and is used to conveniently advance argumentation in a monologue. The simple sentence connectors expressing cause and result (“so”, “well”), as well as contrast (“but”), and which are frequent in informal oral interactions, were repetitively used by the speaker in argumentation sequences: “So what I want you to start with is to realize...” or “I’m gonna show you

some real-world tricks of the trade, some real-world things you can do without getting into the science of project management or the art too much, but realize there is a science and there is an art”.

The use of gestures also seems to be correlated with the argumentative structure of the talk. In the confrontation and concluding stages, the gestures fulfill an emphatic function and images are more frequent than in the remaining stages. In the opening and argumentation stages, the gestures assist in the introduction and development of new arguments. Most of the speaker’s arm and hand gestures can be identified as *illustrators*, while the expression of the speaker’s face and her body movements belong in the type of the *expressive-emotional* gestures. The basic gesture, repeated throughout the whole talk, which rhythmically marks pauses and an increasing intensity, is that of the speaker’s left hand moving up and down, showing two variants. The first (a *pyramid*), with a closed hand, straight fingers and the fingertips touching each other, adds emphasis, so that the more important the message, the more decisive and broader the movement is. This gesture is used in the assertive moves, when the speaker advances in her argumentation. In the other variant of this gesture, the hand is straight open and is used with the explicative aim, especially during repetitions in the commissive move. A combination of these two variants of the hand gesture often occurs and serves to reinforce an assertive move.

The speaker tends to move both hands when the argumentative intensity reaches its highest point, especially at the beginning and at the end of an argumentative sequence. On those occasions, the speaker replicates the *pyramid* gesture with both hands, or alternatively, points at the audience with her thumb and her index finger brought together, particularly when making a question in an assertive move. Another gesture, with the straight index fingers pointing up in front of her chest, is used to attract the audience’s attention to a specific aspect of the talk for a prospective purpose. The speaker uses this gesture in the assertive move of the concluding stage in order to confirm the final standpoint and to establish the result of the debate. This particular gesture increases emphasis and has a clear persuasive effect.

Other less recurrent gestures, such as the hands with the interlaced fingers or the open hands facing each other in front of the speaker’s chest are used to build up the audience’s confidence in the talk’s effectiveness. Some of the broad arm movements have a real or figurative deictic role. The horizontal movement of the speaker’s hands serves to emphasize the negative information in the commissive moves, when the speaker indicates the audience’s acceptance of her standpoints, exerting a strong persuasive effective with additional rhetorical questions and a frequent use of modality in the verbal mode. At such points in the talk, the expression of the speaker’s face and her body movements seem to be especially relevant, as the side movements of her head and body occur together with the horizontal movements of the hands, both expressing something negative.

The images shown in the PowerPoint presentation can be described as metaphoric and are usually preceded by the speaker’s silence, so that the audience is allowed time to understand the information transmitted. The images fulfill an identifying function for the audience, but also create a relaxing atmosphere by transmitting messages through hyperbole with comical effects. On the whole, the use of images (either drawings or photographs), which sometimes are distorted and become caricatures serves a number of functions such as introducing arguments, attracting the audience’s attention, helping identify common experience and emotions, and relaxing the atmosphere. As has been shown, the different modes in the talk examined are purposefully and effectively used in the development of the argumentative moves that make up the speaker’s strategy to convince the audience of the benefits of project management both for the business practice and the professional success.

5. Master’s course module

5.1. Context

The study conducted served to design a Master’s course module, understood as a short goal-oriented teaching-learning cycle with a time sequence (Vilà, 2005). The module was intended for post-graduate students enrolled in the Master’s course in Languages and Technology of the Polytechnic University of Valencia (Spain), in the subject dealing with discourse strategies in academic and professional communication. The Master’s course has one year of

duration and its contents are divided into three main parts: discourse analysis, terminology and translation, and teaching foreign languages. Students taking the course come from a variety of backgrounds: language studies, philology, translation, but also computing.

In the subject mentioned, which is taught in the second term, students learn the methods of quantitative and qualitative analysis of academic and professional genres, of both the written and oral type, and from the multimodal perspective. Previous to the activities proposed here, students become familiarized with samples of argumentative discourse produced in different contexts. The previous assignments completed in the subject allow students to approach the analysis of oral discourse with appropriate abilities and tools, but also with the sufficient knowledge of multimodal discourse and its non-verbal elements, especially those that might exert a persuasive effect on the reader/listener.

5.2. Objectives

The student competences aimed to be developed in the teaching sequence proposed here are:

- To be able to identify discourse elements that allow for advancing in argumentation (argumentative moves).
- To be able to identify the basic non-verbal resources used to build argumentative discourse (gestures, image, sound).
- To be able to choose the appropriate tools to organize and present the results of the analysis of a sample of argumentative discourse (conceptual maps, charts, tables, etc.)
- To be able to identify correlations between verbal and non-verbal modes used.
- To design a qualitative analysis of arguments in the sample examined and provide a description of the argumentative strategies used.
- To design and deliver a sample of argumentative discourse to an audience.

5.3. Methodology

The starting point for the activities proposed here is the analysis of a short videotaped talk in which the speaker uses a clear argumentative structure, and which can be easily interpreted in terms of the use of verbal and non-verbal modes. The students follow the model of identification and analysis based on the research reported here: they are asked to distinguish the different stages and moves in the argumentative monologue, as well as to classify the speaker's gestures and to describe the images used. Finally, they have to approach a more complex task and try to find the possible interrelations between the modes used. Even though the students are involved in a challenging task, an individual approach to the mode identification and analysis allows them to share and compare the data collected, as well as conduct a further analysis of the videotaped talk.

In more detail, the students complete the tasks mentioned in the following way:

- The students watch an 8-minute video twice in group.
- They discuss in group and agree on:
 - o the talk's objectives and context,
 - o the type of audience,
 - o the talk's structure,
 - o principal arguments and counter-arguments used by the speaker.
- The students watch the video for the third time and focus on the most relevant non-verbal modes.
- They discuss and agree on the modes used.
- The students conduct an individual analysis of the elements that were commented in a group. They are provided with the talk's transcript, so that they can examine in more detail the characteristics of the verbal mode (addressing the audience, rhetorical questions, modality, connectors, etc.).

- The students produce a table showing the argumentative structure of the talk, the argumentative moves, the main language uses related to argumentation, the non-verbal modes and their correlation with the changes in argumentative moves.
- In pairs, the students compare the results of their analysis.
- A group discussion of the results obtained ends the activity.

5.4. Formative assessment and results

In the teaching sequence proposed here, the students are being assessed throughout the whole process, both when they work individually (decisions taken in the analysis, progress made), and in their contribution to the group work. The student evaluation also allows for a metacognitive analysis of the research conducted in each step, the results obtained and the new knowledge acquired.

The final objective of the teaching sequence is to apply the results of the analysis in an argumentative talk produced individually by each student. The students are asked to choose a topic that would be especially motivating for the whole group. One possible theme suggested by the teacher is how to convince possible candidates to enroll in the Master's course. The students design, prepare and deliver the talk taking into account that the different verbal and non-verbal modes need to be used in combination with appropriate argumentation. The students then evaluate each other on the effectiveness and persuasiveness of their talk.

6. Conclusions

This study provides insights into how the argumentative strategies and the correlated verbal and non-verbal modes are used in the business training talk, an unexplored genre so far, in order to persuade the audience of the need to acquire business abilities and build up the knowledge of management practices. The results obtained have been further used in the teaching of discourse strategies in academic and professional contexts. The module proposed here aims to provide students with the knowledge and analytic abilities necessary for the advanced study of oral genres, which are normally neglected in similar educational contexts for the benefit of written genres. Students can develop a deeper understanding of argumentative strategies and a better command of multimodal resources. Such a combination of research and classroom practice has turned out to be especially convenient at the postgraduate level, where students can conduct research by themselves and apply its results later in their future workplace, while experiencing the transition from theory to practice.

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