

Book Review

Emotive Language in Argumentation

by **Fabrizio Macagno** and **Douglas Walton**

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This is a very important book and I predict it will be widely cited. However, one must understand that the book is not about emotion, but about emotive language and, more specifically about persuasive language. The sense of emotive language being used rests on, more than anything else, Stevenson's argument that we use language of approval and disapproval as a way of getting others to do the same (Stevenson 1937). Whether Stevenson and the emotivists were correct and this is the final bedrock of ethics is really immaterial insofar as no one denies that emotive language can and does influence people. Macagno & Walton explain that:

[Emotive] words are emotive because they trigger our emotions. They influence the way we regard the reality they represent. They affect our decisions concerning their referents. The emotive power of these words can make them extremely effective instruments to direct and encourage certain attitudes and choices. (5) [*All uncited quotes are to Macagno & Walton.*]

This has important consequences for argumentation. Put simply, their basic idea is that the use of an emotive word is an implicit argument carrying a value judgment and, *ipso facto*, requires an argument or justification. So, if one says "A good son would be carefully watching out for his sister," the idea that the goodness of a son is dependent on this activity requires an argument. "In Toulmin's (1958) view, [they write,] ethical judgments consist

in the attribution to a subject of a property, which might represent the opinion that the subject is desirable or praiseworthy, such as in the following sentence:

1. Jones is a good man.

In Toulmin's view, this attribution of an ethical property to a subject is always grounded on a factual reason" (33).

This begins an analysis of persuasive language that is almost a hyperbole of Waltonian systematicity. Macagno & Walton point out that a number of linguistic devices are central in the use of emotion and that persuasive devices can occur in a multitude of ways. The main tools for altering and using persuasion are reasoning, by way of categorization definition; defining, as an activity itself; and presupposition. They guide us through all the possibilities using a plethora of mostly political and legal examples which they analyze in order to underline the implicit arguments carried by the choice of words. They show how recent re-definitions of terms like 'secretary' to 'assistant,' 'janitor' to 'sanitary engineer,' 'rape' to 'sexual assault,' all carry within them value judgments and persuasive weight. When I, as Undergraduate Programme Director, state that "my assistant will be joining us for this meeting," that sounds more impressive than if I said my secretary would be there. More, it has also been argued that the change provides greater self-esteem and a greater sense of involvement and commitment.

There are far more problematic cases of definition and presupposition that are discussed. These include self-serving definitions of "democracy," "terrorist," "enemy," all of which can be re-defined to suit one's purposes and carry very strong presuppositions. By referring to a group as "terrorists" they are being painted with an emotively negative brush, as is a regime that is "totalitarian" and "anti-democratic." Use of these terms depends in no small part on the agreement of the audience, but a partial agreement can also be used to manipulate and pull the audience along using the emotive force of the words. Let me exemplify their approach by looking at an almost random quote from a Toronto Star editorial (July 10, 2014 p. A16).

Toronto Mayor Rob Ford insists his two-month stint in cottage country rehab has made him a new man. But a Star investigation has found evidence that he was the same disruptive bully as always while there, raising serious questions about his alleged recovery from substance abuse.

Looking at the terms used, it is very easy to find words that are not necessarily thought of as emotive, but still carry emotive force. Look at the quote again with persuasive terms emphasized.

Toronto Mayor Rob Ford **insists** his two-month **stint** in **cottage county** rehab has made him a **new** man. But a Star investigation has found **evidence** that he was the **same disruptive bully** as **always** while there, raising **serious** questions about his **alleged** recovery from substance abuse.

We could even have added more; “insists” immediately suggests opposition to his statement, whereas “said” would not have. Also, a “stint in cottage country” has a very different flavour to a “stay north of Toronto.” Of course, being the “same” carries the presupposition that he was a disruptive bully in the first place. Macagno & Walton provide the reader with the precise tools needed to analyze and categorize the persuasive moves being made in such writing, and most importantly shows where an argument is needed to support the implicit arguments.

As I said above, this book is a thorough collection of the forms of persuasion using persuasive words. I will not go through and try to describe all that is done since the only way to do so would be to repeat the entire undertaking. I do, however, need to reiterate that is not a book about *emotion in argument*. In fact, a better title would have been *Persuasive Language in Argumentation*. Both persuasion and definition receive far more index entries than emotion, and this is not merely a quibble. The approach Macagno & Walton take does pay more than lip service to context, but nowhere near enough. For example, the self-same words uttered by one person in role A may have an entirely different force from those words uttered by a different person in role B. The same words, e.g., “Do what you want,” uttered by a spouse can be a granting of permission or a severe warning. That difference is determined by emotion. Moreover, there is no discussion of gender or cultural issues that impact on persuasion and emotion. While Macagno & Walton do discuss context, and do acknowledge its importance, they do not go nearly far enough.

A second issue is that Macagno & Walton seem to imply a kind of realism that underlies language. They say things like, “Sometimes words are not simply used to select what

is important for the conversation, but to distort reality” (69). This pre-supposes that there is a reality to distort, and that language does not itself create reality. If the latter is the case, then language is inherently as emotive as it is descriptive, and the two cannot really be separated. In fairness, this does not at all mean that their point regarding the requirement of arguments being needed for persuasive terms is obviated, but the point is nonetheless worth mentioning.

My final issue may be seen by some as stylistic, but I must demur. Especially in a book concerned with persuasion and presupposition, I find it strange that Macagno & Walton use the generic “he” throughout. A majority of books and articles being released these days either use the awkward “she or he” or “s/he,” but most often switch back and forth by paragraph, section or what have you. Macagno & Walton only use female pronouns when they are using an example involving a female character. I find this both unfortunate and dated.

There is no question that this is an important book. Pointing out the myriad ways in which persuasive language is used, how it manages to create arguments without seeming to, is of vital concern to Argumentation Theorists. This makes *Emotive Language in Argumentation* a significant addition to the Argumentation Theory corpus.

Stevenson, Charles Leslie. 1937. "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms." *Mind* 46 (181):14-31.

Toulmin, S. E. 1958. *The uses of argument*. Cambridge Eng.: University Press.