RATIONAL PERSUASIVENESS OF ARGUMENTS IN DEBATE

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Abstract: Critical thinking is a fundamental skill for youth learners as the future generation of a nation. It is significantly important for them to be able to use the language to convey voices and ideas. The objective of this study was to assess the quality of arguments made by debaters in English Debating Society (EDS) of State University of Semarang based on the concept of rational persuasiveness. There were two basic data involved in this study. The first data is the audio of the EDS preparatory rehearsal for the Indonesian Varsity English Debate (IVED) 2011 and the second is the transcript of the speeches in the rehearsal. After the process of transcription was carried out, it was followed by the argument reconstruction, code creation, argument classification, and finally the outline of a basic procedure for the assessment of arguments represented in standard form. Some recommendations are given to the readers to improve the quality of their arguments. For educational purpose, debate activity should be promoted and encouraged among students. Further research concerning the same subject should be carried out to gain more knowledge about debate and about the study of critical thinking.

Keywords: Argument, Assessment, Rational Persuasiveness

Introduction

Critical thinking skills are reflected in debate. Quinn (2005: 1) states that “debating gives chance to meet new people and new ideas. Best of all, it gives the opportunity to stand up and argue with someone in public, in a stimulating and organised dispute about real issues.” Debating is all around us; on television, in the newspapers, and in our own homes. As a society, we debate about almost everything from the increasing fuel price until the presidential election. Debating is everywhere. In line with this, Trapp (2007: 9) states, “communication, rhetoric, argumentation, and debate are related concepts. Starting with communication and proceeding to debate, the concepts become progressively narrowed.” Most of all, debating stimulates and improves the skills and strategy to construct formal arguments.

In Indonesia, debate has become a part of the curriculum as one of the argumentative text which is given for senior and vocational high school levels. Even in some universities, debate has already been taught as a subject. Many college students who are involved in debate feel that the emphasis on tournament debating makes them argumentative in everyday life. For younger children, a focus on developing communication skills rather than on competition in debate fosters attitudes of open-mindedness, fairness, and tolerance for the viewpoints of others (Atwater, 1984).

From the above explanation, there should be adequate reasons for people, especially those who are interested in public communication, to begin thinking about making contributions towards the improvement of debating techniques. I am interested in being one of the contributors toward this issue. This is one of the reasons why the identification of arguments in debater’s speech is carried out in this research as well as the evaluation of the arguments on the basis of rational persuasiveness.

Structure of Arguments

According to Weston (1992: 9), an argument is constructed by two parts: (1) premises (statements which give reasons), and (2) conclusion (statement for which reasons are given). The arrangement of these two parts may be varied. Both Conn (2000: 8-11) and Hughes (1992: 80-85) agree that the easiest way to see the structure of an argument is to represent it graphically using what is called a tree diagram. A tree diagram is a schematic representation of the structure of an argument using letters (P1, P2, MP3, C, etc.) to present the premises and conclusion, and an arrow to present therefore. There are three basic argument structures.

1. Simple Arguments

The simplest component is a simple argument, i.e., where a single premise P supports a conclusion C. In such a case, we use the following diagram:

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P
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  ↓
  C
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2. T Arguments

When we consider arguments with two premises, there are two possible structures the argument might have, and it is important to be aware of how they differ. In the case of T arguments, two or more premises provide joint support for a conclusion. This argument has the following structure:

\[ \text{P1} \quad \text{P2} \quad \text{C} \]

In such cases the premises only provide support for the conclusion when taken together. T arguments may sometimes have three or more premises. The tree diagram for this argument is:

\[ \text{P1} \quad \text{P2} \quad \text{P3} \quad \text{C} \]

3. V Arguments

The final component is a V argument. In such cases separate reasons are provided in support for the conclusion. This argument has the following structure:

\[ \text{P1} \quad \text{P2} \quad \text{C} \]

4. Complex Arguments

The above are three basics structures out of which more complex structures are constructed. Large and more complex arguments can be constructed from these basic forms. In such cases each of the portions that are representative as a V or a T argument will be a sub-argument of the entire argument. Complex structure could be in form of the following:

\[ \text{P1} \quad \text{P2} \quad \text{P3} \quad \text{P4} \quad \text{C} \]

Research Design

To reach the objectives of this study, which are to identify the kinds of argument structures used by the speakers in their substantive speechess and its rational persuasiveness, I conducted qualitative research. This kind of research does not focus on numerals or statistic, but it gives more attention to the arguments in the speeches. Thus, many stretches of words were employed in order to analyze, describe, interpret, and explain it.

Miles and Huberman (1994: 1), state that “qualitative data yields data in forms of words, written, oral-not numbers, other than in comprehensive description”.

Here, most analyses were done with words to arrive at conclusion. Miles and Huberman (1994: 2) also state that “with qualitative data, there would be a chronological flow, and one could see precisely with events led to which consequences, and derives fruitful explanation”. They further explain that the findings from the qualitative studies have a quality of ‘undeniability’ since the words can create concrete, vivid, meaningful flavor that often proves far more convincing than the page numbers.

There are two basic data involved in this study. The first data was the recordings of English Debate Society (EDS) preparatory rehearsal for the Indonesian Varsities English Debate (IVED) 2011. The data were obtained by recording it in 2011. There was no particular requirement in order to be able to record it, I only needed to ask for permission to record it from the chief of EDS.

The second data was the transcript of the speeches in the English Debate Society (EDS) preparatory rehearsal for the Indonesian Varsities English Debate (IVED) 2011. I transcribed only the six substantive speeches and excluded the reply speeches from both the affirmative and negative team. It is based on the reason...
that the reply speeches do not contain new arguments and merely involves repetition and conclusion from the arguments brought in the substantive speeches.

The procedure of analysis gives a general picture of a set of actions in analysing the data. It involves the technique, unit of analysis, and steps of analysis. This study is mainly about conducting a vigilant scrutiny towards the data, the transcript of the six substantive speeches brought by the debaters of both the affirmative and the negative team in the English Debate Society (EDS) preparatory rehearsal for the Indonesian Varsities English Debate (IVED) 2011. The core of such investigation was putting on the identification, at the next phases, on the careful evaluation of arguments based on their rational persuasiveness. These chores, which consisted of reconstructing, identifying, classifying, and analysing, were therefore accomplished by applying the content analysis.

A sort of constructed units was carefully thought in order to ease the analysis of the arguments’ rational persuasiveness. It served as the basic unit of concern containing one ideological stance from relevant category.

The available transcript was presented completely with punctuation that marked sentences and paragraphs. Therefore, the data had been numbered in sequential order number according to the sentences. Moreover, the argument reconstruction which involved four stages was carried out. They were done by identifying the premises and the conclusion of the argument and identifying the structure of the argument. This would help the next step of analysing the data which was classifying them into either deductive argument or inductive one.

**Steps of Analysis**

The subsequent steps are to facilitate the content analysis as adapted from some sources (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Berg, 1989, and Creswell, 1994).

1. **Data Reduction**

   It refers to the process of recording the English Debate Society (EDS) preparatory rehearsal for the Indonesian Varsities English Debate (IVED) 2011, transcribing the speeches into a written form, and selecting, focussing, and simplifying the data that appeared in the transcription. The later process consists of:

   a. *Reconstructing argument.* It is the attempt of representing argument in such a way as to create a perfect match between the propositions upon which argument actually depends and the sentences which represent the argument in standard form (Bowell and Kemp 2002: 43). This argument reconstruction occurs in four stages: (1) identifying an argument’s explicit premises and its conclusion, (2) identifying the logical relationship which the author takes hold between these statements, (3) bringing the implicit elements of the argument into fore, (4) and summarizing this argument in a single, well written paragraph. In reconstructing the argument, two phases were involved: (1) identifying the premises and the conclusion, (2) identifying the structure of the argument.

   b. *Creating code.* Codes are established in the forms of tags or labels that are intended to enable the identification and the classification of data.

   c. *Classifying the argument.* This step is taken after the reconstruction of argument has been carried out. The classification is intended to classify the arguments found into either deductive or inductive argument, and whether the arguments have only one inference or more for the ease of further analysis.

   d. *Outlining a basic procedure for the assessment of arguments represented in standard form.* I first considered the arguments that had only one inference.

2. **Data Display**

   After the identification process had been completed through the data reduction, the results were later presented in a sort of content-analytic summary description containing argument reconstruction and commentaries.

**Discussion**

In their rehearsal for the Indonesian Varsities English Debate (IVED) 2011, the EDS debaters used the Australasian Parliamentary System. There were six debaters at the venue. Three of them belong to the Affirmative side of the house while the rest acted as the Negative side of the house. Each speaker spoke for eight minutes and Points of Information (POI) were not allowed. The two teams debated upon one motion: This House Believes That the US should launch a Military Intervention to Congo against the Lord’s Resistance Army. The Affirmative side of the house tried to provide arguments and persuaded the adjudicators and audiences by supporting the motion while the Negative side of the house negated their ideas. The arguments of each speaker are reconstructed in this study. The detail of the arguments reconstruction and the whole analysis of each argument are presented in the Table of Analysis below:

1. There were six debaters at the venue. Three of them belonged to the Affirmative side of the house while the rest acted as the Negative side of the house. Each speaker spoke for eight minutes and Points of Information...
The two teams debated upon one motion: This House Believes That The US should Launch a Military Intervention to Congo Against the Lord’s Resistance Army. The Affirmative side of the house tried to provide arguments and persuaded the adjudicators and audiences by supporting the motion while the Negative side of the house negated their ideas. The speeches did not merely contain arguments, but there were also responses, clarification, explanation, and the opening-closing remark which were integrated into one.

(2) There were twenty nine (29) arguments delivered by the EDS debaters in the preparatory rehearsal for the Indonesian Varsities English Debate (IVED) 2011. The argument structures that were used involved Simple Argument, T Argument, V Argument, and Complex Argument. Meanwhile, that which was excluded consisted of Explanation and Clarification. From the four types of arguments structures, V Argument was the one with the biggest magnitude. 13 were V Arguments, 8 were complex arguments, 6 were T arguments, and 2 were simple arguments. Both deductive and inductive forms of argument were used by the debaters. Out of twenty nine (29) arguments, eight (8) of them were deductive arguments while the rest were inductive arguments.

(3) To proof the rational persuasiveness of the arguments, the premises and conclusions of the arguments were analyzed. Three (3) arguments were defeated while the rest was not. Therefore, it is concluded that out of twenty nine (29) arguments, twenty six (26) of them were rationally persuasive and three (3) of them were rationally unpersuasive.

Conclusion

Every individual should start learning more details about debating techniques, especially about rational persuasiveness. They are also suggested to be aware that there are techniques and patterns that can be learned to improve and develop their critical thinking as well as supporting the materials they read from some sources during the debate materials research. Every individual should encourage themselves to rehearse and to broaden their view for the development of the latest issue in any aspect and scope.

For educational purpose, debate activity should be promoted and encouraged among students of State University of Semarang. Finally, I recommend that further researches concerning with the same subject be carried out to gain more knowledge about debate, and generally, about the study of critical thinking.

Bibliography